Rethinking the Role of Folklore in Museums: Exploring New Directions for Folklore in Museum Policy and Practice

A White Paper prepared by the American Folklore Society Folklore and Public Policy Working Group on Folklore and Museums

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Introduction

The American Folklore Society’s working group on Folklore and Museums Policy and Practice has taken its cue from the growing number of folklorists who are working in and with museums to foster a greater presence for folklore in museum theory, practice, and policy. This work emerges from formal and informal conversations already underway among museum-minded folklorists. The Folklore and Museums Policy and Programs working group has been committed to synthesizing and extending these discussions through its activities and publications. Building upon past contributions by folklorists, the working group has held a series of regular phone conferences; a convening in Santa Fe in the fall of 2013 and a second convening in conjunction with the 2014 American Alliance of Museum’s Annual Meeting in Seattle; initiated a series of professional activities; conducted a series of sessions and tours related to folklife and museums for the 2014 American Folklore Society Meetings in Santa Fe; created a new Folklore and Museums Section of the Society; developed a working e-list of folklorists interested in a listserv on folklore and museums; and initiated or completed reports/publications to examine arenas where folklore can contribute to public and museum practice policies. A series of articles will be forthcoming on folklife and museums in Museum Anthropology Review (ed. Jason Baird Jackson). In addition, two new books are in development: 1) New Directions for Folklife in Museums (Patty Hall, C. Kurt Dewhurst, and Charlie Seemann, eds., which builds on the earlier book, Folklife and Museums, eds. Hall and Seemann); and Curatorial Conversations: The Smithsonian Folklife Festival (eds. Olivia Cadaval, Sojin Kim, Diana N’Diaye).

In his 2010 AFS Presidential Address, Kurt Dewhurst traced the long history of museums as sites of folklore scholarship [published in Journal of American Folklore 127 (2014)]. While folklorists have served in virtually all areas of the museum sector, and contributed to the museum field as guest curators and consulting scholars, recent generations of graduate students in folklore programs have shown unprecedented interest in museum careers. This increased interest is evident from the many museum-themed sessions and activities held at the 2014 AFS annual meeting, as well as by the high attendance of museum professionals. Considering global economic pressures on state and federal agencies in the public sector, and on colleges and universities in the academic sphere, it is not surprising that young folklorists are looking to museums and community centers as appealing sites for employment.

Folklorists have much to bring to the realm of policy and programs at museums in the United States and beyond our borders. “Community engagement” has become a driving force for 21st century cultural institutions. Museums are increasingly being called upon to use their facilities, collections, and staff skills to address the needs of their constituent communities in new and creative ways, crafting unique experiences based on sustained collaborative engagement with those communities—real and virtual, national and international. Folklorists working in museums are drawing on their unique skills to work with diverse communities in an equitable, respectful, and informed way. Our training and experience helps us effectively identify cultural assets, engage community members, and
facilitate critical dialogue in order to build new bridges between museums and their communities.

Beyond community engagement, folklorists need to be at the table for a growing number of public policy issues emerging in the museum field. In recent years, folklorists like Bill Ivey have called for a deeper understanding of what it means to live “an expressive life.” Ivey proposed a *Cultural Bill of Rights* that is grounded in his training and understanding of folk expression, vernacular culture, and more importantly, cultural democracy. There have been ongoing discussions about the value of our federal, state, regional, and local cultural agencies and their responsiveness to changing demographics, shifting priorities for philanthropy, movement toward a more participatory culture, and the related changes associated with the digital world. Folklorists have been involved on an individual level in some of these dialogues, producing both innovative approaches to community documentation, community engagement, shared authority, and creative presentation strategies, but not enough coordinated thinking has been done to shape museum policy and practice.

This report is designed to build on the important work that has been done over the past few decades and to identify a series of settings where folklorists can contribute to the shaping of policy and practice for the 21st century museum. Drawing on discussions over the past three years with folklorists whose careers have been based wholly or primarily in museums, we want to offer some observations on how folklore training has prepared them for this work and how their unique efforts have augmented positive changes within their respective institutions. Lastly, we explore some of the challenges and opportunities that folklorists have faced in their museum-based careers. In this paper, the working group explores six topics central to the future of museums. Each topic section includes a general overview, two to three case studies, and in some sections, a few, but not comprehensive, suggestions for further reading. We conclude the report with a series of recommendations.
History: A Rich Legacy of Folklore Activity in Museum Policy and Practice

C. Kurt Dewhurst

There is a rich and distinguished history of folklorists working in and with museums in the United States and around the world. This history was shaped early on by cultural policy decisions made at the national level. Beginning in the late 19th century an intellectual shift within the museum world impacted what was collected, why it was collected, who did the collecting, and how collections were interpreted and used. During this time, as seen with the founding of AFS in 1888, folklore and museum practice converged in certain sectors of museum practice involving living history and cultural traditions, and flourishcd in this fertile landscape of changing ideas.

One of the first major developments was the emergence and growth of open-air museums and living history programming. In 1872, Swedish teacher, scholar and folklorist, Artur Hazelius established a museum in Stockholm for Swedish ethnography, now called Nordiska museet, to house the material culture of peasant life he had acquired from all over Sweden and other Nordic countries. Inspired by the open-air displays of King Oscar II’s collection of buildings near Oslo, Norway, Hazelius began to collect entire buildings and farmsteads. In 1891 he opened the open-air museum Skansen in Stockholm. Skansen became the prototype for a new kind of museum. Open-air museums modeled on Skansen sprang up first in Northern Europe and then around the world.1 In the United States, the Skansen model informed the development of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Old Sturbridge Village, Williamsburg, and scores of others. With each iteration, the open-air museum typically consisted of “traditional homes, farmsteads, and community buildings relocated into a unified setting where regional differences were contrasted.”2

In an effort to animate the buildings and enhance understanding of the cultures, time periods, and experiences associated with the individuals who lived in the buildings, these open-air museums used “living history” techniques to recreate the historical work and daily life associated with the buildings. The buildings became a virtual theatrical set for demonstrations and presentations of traditional lifeways and expressive culture.3 The open-air museums served as laboratories for developing new interpretation strategies, and they led to living farm museums and living history museums in the years that followed.4 The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums explicitly includes folklife in its mission statement, i.e. “to serve those involved in living historical farms, agricultural museums and outdoor museums of history and folklife.”5

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1 A comprehensive history of the open-air museum as idea and institution can be found in Swedish museologist Sten Rentzhog’s 2007 book Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea.
2 For more information, see “Living History” at Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM). http://www.alhfam.org/?cat_id=153&nav-tree=153.
4 See “Living History” on the ALHFAM website link cited in footnote 2.
More recently, the eco-museum movement emerged in the closing decades of the 20th century. Like open-air museums before them, eco-museums reflect the intellectual interests of folklorists. The concept of an eco-museum is more one of process than a type of museum; it relies on an agreement with the community to preserve, interpret, and manage local heritage resources for “sustainable development.” The goal is to foster a dynamic process for broader community involvement and shared responsibilities, conceptualizing heritage as tied to an idea of “place” where the history of the inhabitants and the physical objects, buildings, and environment are infused with the intangible, such as memories and aspirations. It is a strategy for place-based development that honors local networks and relationships, and it plays a role in fostering social capital at the local level. Eco-museums have been developed around specific immigrant or ethnic groups, occupational culture, and regional traditions. Many serve as centers for community activity. Eco-museums in Western Europe have become a hospitable work setting for some folklorists.

While new museum models continue to emerge, perhaps the most widespread shifts have centered on transforming the way we think about existing institutions and how they engage with society. Museums in America have been challenged by cultural activists, community members, the American Alliance of Museums, and funding agencies to become more engaged in civic life. Cultural researcher Ellen Hirzy describes this engagement:

> Civic engagement occurs when museum and community intersect—in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural way of doing business. The museum becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collaborative problem solving. It is an active player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change...Power and decision-making are shared more broadly than ever before, giving citizens both expanded obligations and unparalleled opportunities.

Museums are increasingly being expected to proactively address the needs of their communities and thus build a civil society. For instance, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency, recently issued a report entitled *Museums and Libraries, and 21st Century Skills* that identifies the skills necessary to develop 21st century

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8 In 1999, the author participated along with three other folklorists/museum directors in one sponsored by the French-American Foundation in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Arts that involved site visits to French Eco-Museums with the desire to share folklore expertise between the U.S. and France to foster academic and professional discourse on Eco-Museums. The other folklorists included Joyce Ice, then Director of the Museum of International Folk Art; Tim Lloyd, then Director of City Lore; and Hope Allswang, then Director of the Shelburne Museum.

communities, citizens, and workers. The authors call for museums and libraries to take a more active role in helping community members attain those skills.10

Despite the perceptions and realities of museums as agents of authoritative knowledge, as reservoirs of social capital, and as sites of civic engagement, museums are rarely at the center of community life. Maria Rosario Jackson, a researcher specializing in studies of community cultural assets, has analyzed the potential and challenges for museums attempting to play more meaningful roles in civic life. She argues that, “Too often, they are on the sidelines of civic life...the museum field [faces] a noble challenge—to stretch its boundaries, step away from the sidelines, come to the center of civic life, and become a more active participant and even a leader in social-capital and community-building processes.”11

Folklorists, especially those working in the public sector, have the skills to conduct community cultural assets inventories, to map and describe those assets, to develop strategies to present those assets in public contexts, and to engage community members in dialogue. Folklorists who work in and with museums often serve as critical bridge builders between institutions and communities. Folklore training enables one to acquire deep understanding of how to work with diverse communities in an equitable, respectful, and informed way. Folklorists can also assist libraries and museums in their new mission to cultivate a 21st century workforce, especially by lending their expertise in visual literacy, social and cross-cultural communication, and cross-disciplinary thinking.

Corinne Kratz and Ivan Karp have argued that museums in general need to forge community well-being by becoming sites for confronting social challenges and divisive issues through dialogue and critical discourse. They state,

\[\text{Museum work is not without strife and conflict. Many in our field seek to avoid engaging in the issues that occupy their community and choose to be sites of only reflection and reverence. While museums do play a valuable role in these ways, today, museums are finding themselves more marginalized due to global forces and we are just beginning to understand the intensity of the challenge that lies ahead if indeed we want to be players in our civic landscapes and to be a central force in the cultural commons of our communities.}^{12}\]

This idea—to reinterpret museums as sites of conscience where subjective experiences and contested histories can be openly addressed—has gained great momentum in the field. In 1999, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience was established. Its over 260 member organizations are “specifically dedicated to remembering past struggles for justice and addressing contemporary legacies.”13 These museums aim to “assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and the contemporary implications. We view

\[\text{\footnotesize 10 Libraries and Museum Twenty-First Century Job Skills, Institute of Museum and Library Services Report, 2010.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 12 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 13 See the International Sites of Conscience website for the history and growing role of this organization, http://sitesofconscience.org/.}\]
stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.”

Folklorists have long considered it a disciplinary imperative to give voice to those individuals whose stories and life experiences are under-represented in the scholarly record or in public discourse. American museums with folklorists on staff have a strong track record of advancing missions that highlight important, but challenging, social issues from multiple perspectives. The Michigan State University Museum, for instance, has developed a number of exhibitions on human rights and social justice, including one in tandem with the Vermont Folklife Center and City Lore. The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico now has a dedicated Gallery of Conscience. And, of course, the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, with the largest concentration of museum-based folklorists, has brought many previously untold and difficult histories to public attention, most notably through their festival programs and Folkways recordings.

In recent years much has been made by folklorists, and others around the globe, of the critical need to document and preserve our intangible, as well as our tangible, cultural heritage. In 1989 the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Recommendations on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore. A little more than a decade later, on May 16, 2001, the Report on the Preliminary Study on the Advisability of Regulating Internationally, Through a New Standard-Setting Instrument, the Protection, of Traditional Culture and Folklore significantly shifted the terms of the 1989 document. First, rather than emphasize the role of professional folklorists and folklore institutions in generating and managing records on endangered traditions, it focused instead on sustaining those traditions by supporting the practitioners themselves. This entailed a focal shift from artifacts (tales, songs, customs) to people (performers, artisans, healers), their knowledge, and skills. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in light of these changes, asks a central question for contemporary museums, but one familiar to folklorists: “Under what circumstances does the substance of the object matter? The conception of intangible heritage guiding UNESCO’s preservation program is directed to supporting practitioners and the transmission of what they know—so that what is preserved is the ability to continue to make and

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14 Established originally in 1999, the District Six Museum (South Africa); Gulag Museum (Russia); Lower East Side Tenement Museum (SUS); Maison Des Esclaves (Spain); National Park Service (USA); Memoria Abierta (Argentina); Terezin Memorial (Czech Republic); and the Work House (United Kingdom); founded the Coalition with the following statement: “It is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and the contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.” Currently, the Coalition has 17 Accredited Sites of Conscience and more than 260 Individual and Institutional members from around the world. See http://www.sitesofconscience.org/.


do things in ways that continue to be meaningful and valued.”17 Experts in preserving material culture (i.e., objects), museums must now document, collect, provide stewardship for, and present intangible heritage. As the intangible becomes a stronger priority for cultural heritage work, and as museums increasingly address intangible heritage needs, folklorists will be well-positioned to play vital roles.

Museums are now considered critical to cultural tourism and cultural economic development, movements that inherently depend on identifying, marketing, and connecting local cultural assets to global audiences. In this realm of activity, folklorists have been active agents, not only by identifying assets, but also by trying to triage the impacts of these larger movements in ways that are positive for traditional artists and their communities. Only a few years ago, a group of folklorists convened at an annual meeting to discuss reactions to Lucy R. Lippard’s book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, in which she stated that, “All places exist somewhere between the inside and the outside views of them, the ways in which they compare to, and contrast with, other places. A sense of place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in the traditional educational fields.” From Lippard’s viewpoint, “Place-based work demands extensive visual and historical research, a great deal of walking ‘in the field,’ contact with oral tradition, and intensive knowledge of both local multiculturalism and the broader context of multicenteredness.”18 Lippard’s concepts resonate soundly with our field’s deep interest in describing and understanding what defines the local and a sense of belonging to place. As we consider the future museum landscape for folklorists, we obviously have much to contribute to a more intellectually rigorous sense of place and ethical approach to cultural tourism in a world shaped by transnationalism and multicenteredness.

Museums, libraries, and folklore archives are rapidly developing initiatives for digital preservation of and access to collections. Scholars now have unprecedented access to primary materials, including folklore collections. For many years museum collections have been stored separately from relevant fieldwork notes, oral recordings, and photographic documentation, but today, with the advent of digital tools and a shift in philosophy, tangible collections are being reunited with their intangible resources in remarkable ways. Collaborations between folklorists and information and collection specialists in museums, libraries, and archives are resulting in new digital tools (the Ethnographic Thesaurus), projects (the National Folklore Archives Project, Open Folklore, and Oral History in the Digital Age), and digital repositories of traditional material culture (the Quilt Index). These resources are serving museums and the folklore field in ways we are just beginning to appreciate.

Before looking forward to the 21st century, we should acknowledge some of the notable intersections between museum practice and folklore studies that occurred in the 20th century that have led to increased opportunities for folklorists. Here are four that have been critical.

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1) Linking Folklore and Museum Graduate Training

The emergence of graduate programs that purposefully linked folklore and museum studies has had a deep and lasting impact on the number of cultural heritage professionals who have been engaged in both folklore and museum work. “In the 1960s, [folklorist] Dr. Louis C. Jones, then Director of New York State Historical Association, lamented the lack of training for museum professionals. He wondered who would staff the growing number of museums, and preserve the objects of our nation’s heritage.”19 Jones hired folklorist Bruce Buckley as the first Director of the Cooperstown Graduate Program, a program affiliated with the State University of New York at Oneonta and the “two men set about the task of creating museum and folk culture programs that focused on community study, documentation, and cultural preservation.”20 Subsequent graduate programs at universities such as Western Kentucky University have also been able to bring together their folk studies, anthropology, and museum studies programs to foster graduate training for students who have entered the workforce in many museum and/or folklore positions.

2.) The National Endowment for the Arts Folk and Traditional Arts Program

In 1974, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) established a Folk Arts Program to underwrite grants to place folklorists in state arts councils and other state agencies across the country to conduct projects that would document and present traditional arts, increase public understanding of our country’s folk and traditional arts, and, hopefully, encourage those agencies to provide ongoing support for both a folklorist and a folk arts program.21 Among the first grants awarded in this new program were ones to support statewide surveys of folklife/folk arts and then to present the collected data to the public in an accessible form. Many of the projects funded by the NEA program resulted in exhibitions accompanied by published catalogues and public programs in which traditional artists were brought into museums to do workshops, performances, and demonstrations. In the process of fieldwork and documentation, the folklorists working on these projects often inventoried what historical materials were held in their state’s public and private collections. Fresh attention to collection holdings resulted from this work and helped to forge new interfaces between traditional artists, museums, and state agencies.

3.) Material Folk Culture Studies in Graduate Folklore Programs

The addition of material folk culture specialists to some of the major folklore graduate programs—like Indiana University, University of Pennsylvania, UCLA, University of North Carolina, University of Texas, and Memorial University—fostered interest in the material culture forms of traditional expression. These university-based scholars have been

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21 Today the program is known as The Folk and Traditional Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. This program has played a major role in funding the documentation and presentation of the many forms of folk expression in the United States. For more information, see http://www.nea.gov/.
instrumental in expanding the numbers of students specializing in material folk culture studies, and by extension, museum-based work.

4.) The Smithsonian Folklife Festival

In 1967, the Smithsonian Institution staged its first folklife festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The sustained presence of the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival has not only provided a high-profile, annual, living exhibition of traditional culture on America’s front lawn, but it has also served as a field school/training experience for the presentation and interpretation of living traditional cultures. The planning and implementation stages of each festival program have drawn together diverse folklorists and museum practitioners whose skill sets and expertise become enmeshed to produce ground-breaking interpretive programming. For some folklorists, their experience contributing to the festival compelled them to pursue further collaborations with museums over their careers.

Today, folklorists are employed in American museums in a variety of staff and consultative capacities. Folklorists have helped build a body of published scholarship that has described and critiqued folklore and museum history, practice, and policy. Their engagement in museum work has helped museums meet the challenges demanded of them by a changing society, as well as by new international standards of practice. Folklorists have contributed to the growing expectation for a “proliferation of voices” in the re-shaping of the museum experience in the 21st century.

Today, according to the American Alliance of Museums, there are over 17,500 museums in the United States; the International Council of Museums estimates there are 55,000 museums in 202 countries, and the number and variety of museums continue to grow. This includes a dramatic growth of ethnically-specific museums. Folklorists can and should be part of this phenomenon. They have and can “make a difference” in helping museums become more effective agents for creating a civil and inclusive society: as sites of more effective informal learning for birth-to-gray audiences; as neutral places to explore differences; as institutions that embrace and take responsibility for both the tangible and intangible aspects of our cultural heritage; and as socially responsive forces that embrace the evolving diverse traditions and expressive culture in America. Because our field is small, we need to formalize emerging connectivities and synergies in order to forge new alliances between museums and folklore studies.

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22 To learn more about the festival, see Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Culture Of, By, and For the People. Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage: Smithsonian Institution, 1998.
23 See Museums for a New Century, American Association of Museums.
24 ICOM is not aware of the accurate number of museums in the world. However, in its 17th edition (2010), the most comprehensive directory Museums of the World, published by De Gruyter Saur, lists 55,000 museums in 202 countries. ICOM web site, accessed October 10, 2011.

Note: Special thanks to Marsha MacDowell for her valued counsel and contributions to this article.
Case Studies

Museums as a Force for Community Building: Smithsonian Institution and the Inauguration of President Obama

![GeoEye satellite image of the National Mall](image)

GeoEye satellite image of the National Mall taken at 11:19 am during the inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009.

One example of the ways in which museum-based folklorists are helping their institutions become active forces for convening, community building, and social cohesion can be seen in the new uses that were made of Smithsonian facilities for the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009. Since the inauguration of President Lincoln, the Smithsonian has served as a host site for many official presidential inauguration activities—which were typically reserved for an exclusive set of attendees. In 2009, folklorist Richard Kurin, then the Smithsonian’s Acting Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture, decided that all of the museums on the Mall should be open for all individuals coming to Washington for the inauguration. The Smithsonian also offered free exhibitions, programs, and support for the overflow crowds of visitors. It was an inspiring moment where many folklorists and museum workers took action, putting their training, perspective, and values to work. (C. Kurt Dewhurst and Richard Kurin)
Extraordinary Ordinary People: American Masters of Traditional Arts

In every community, individuals contribute, with excellence and authenticity, to the rich artistic and cultural legacies of America. Every year since 1982 the National Endowment for the Arts has recognized and honored a small number of the best by awarding these individuals National Heritage Fellowships. http://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/index.html

The exhibition "Extraordinary Ordinary People: American Masters of Traditional Arts," developed and curated by Documentary Arts, Inc. and Michigan State University Museum, demonstrates the diversity of their cultural contributions. The show challenges viewers to reflect on those individuals who are contributing to the cultural legacies within their own lives and communities.

This traveling exhibition was made possible by the financial and in-kind support of the National Endowment for the Arts, Documentary Arts, Inc., and the Michigan State University Museum/Traditional Arts Exhibition Endowment. (Alan Govenar and Marsha MacDowell)
Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory

War Rug, artist unknown, Turkmen, Pakistan c. 1988 52"x52" Michigan State University Museum. Photo by Martha Cooper.

The exhibit “Weavings of War” testifies, eloquently and powerfully, to the impacts of modern warfare in our world and to the relevancy and resilience of folk arts in contemporary life. The exhibit showcases textiles made in a variety of techniques by artists—mostly women—who incorporate pictorial imagery to communicate their personal and collective experiences with war. The objects encompass powerful contradictions: individual artistry versus community aesthetics; global versus local impacts of war; individual versus universal experience; and assumptions of folk arts as unchanging, rural and complacent. The exhibition and publication were produced by City Lore (New York City), Michigan Traditional Arts Program/Michigan State University Museum, and the Vermont Folklife Center—organizations committed to documenting and presenting traditional arts, in their immediate geographical areas, and beyond. Funding was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, Coby Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. (Ariel Zeitlin and Marsha MacDowell)
Suggested Readings


Intangible Cultural Heritage

C. Kurt Dewhurst and Daniel Sheehy

Museums and Intangible Heritage: Connecting the Tangible with the Intangible

The museum field, both in the U.S. and internationally, is beginning to embrace new approaches to community involvement that are fundamentally changing the work of museums worldwide. The acceptance by museums of the need for community perspectives, repatriation, and immigration are changing the faces of art, historical, and ethnographic museums—and growing interest in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is playing a central role in new policies and approaches by the museum community. Special attention is being given by museums to new strategies for connecting the tangible to the intangible, and folklorists are playing leading roles in this work. This includes the use of an artist-centered ethnographic approach to material culture that focuses on the voices of the artisans/tradition-bearers, and the underlying knowledge and intentions that inform their craft/cultural traditions in today’s world.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has emphasized the important role that museums have to play in documenting, collecting, presenting, and preserving intangible cultural heritage in their communities. ICOM has defined the challenge in this way:

"The intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, and is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. It provides people with a sense of identity and continuity, and promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines the intangible cultural heritage as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills (including instruments, objects, artefacts, cultural spaces), that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. It is sometimes called living cultural heritage, and is manifested inter alia in the following domains:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- Performing arts;
- Social practices, rituals and festive events;
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- Traditional craftsmanship.

Folklore Skills and Museum Practice: A Challenge

Folklorists have a deep understanding, appreciation, and the skills necessary for documentation and collection development of ICH. Folklorists also understand that ICH is
dynamic, plural, and powerful. The special role and potential for expanded involvement of folklorists has been highlighted in professional meetings, publications, academic training, and workshops/institutes. This was most visible at the American Folklore Society’s 2007 Joint Annual Meeting with the Association canadienne d’ethnologie et de folklore/Folklore Studies Association of Canada: "Le patrimoine immatériel: Problématiques, enjeux et perspectives"/"The Politics and Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage" (October 17—21, Québec, Canada).

Over the past decade, folklorists around the world have become more visible in their support of the documentation, preservation, and presentation of ICH, especially in museum settings—through exhibitions, educational programming, and community engagement. They also are benefiting from the work of folklorists and other cultural specialists working in other countries, most notably in Asia. Historically, museums have collected the tangible expressions of cultural knowledge but today folklorists are playing a growing role in many museum contexts in documentation of tradition bearers through fieldwork and more in-depth collecting practices, often using new digital technologies that lend themselves to more effective exhibitions and educational programs.

In many parts of the world, especially in China, new models are being explored to create strategies to sustain cultural traditions during a time when tradition-bearers are moving from rural to urban settings where traditions are lost or under stress. Folklorists are becoming an ever more active force in advocating new cultural policies and practices to create sustainable educational environments—cultural spaces—to assure the transfer of ICH from one generation to another and from master tradition-bearers to a new generation of the keepers-of-tradition.

Folklore/ICH and Museums

The challenge for museums has been clearly stated by the International Council of Museums by emphasizing that:

ICOM serves society and its development and is committed to guaranteeing the protection, conservation and transfer of cultural goods. Museums can contribute significantly to the protection of intangible cultural heritage by means of recordings and transcriptions. Thus, ICOM commits itself to protecting the intangible heritage identifying and managing resources along with UNESCO who adopted in 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This Convention represents a milestone in the evolution of the international policies on cultural diversity. For the first time, the global community has recognized the importance of supporting this kind of cultural expression that had not benefited from any legal framework until then.\(^\text{25}\)

Folklorists can play a role in the ethical issues surrounding the collection and display of ICH. And yet, beyond the skills that folklore training currently provides, folklorists would

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benefit from learning additional skills such as how to curate and how to build more fully documented collections for museums.

**ICH: Connecting Heritage, Sustainability and Resilience**

There is emerging interest in connecting heritage, sustainability and resilience, drawing from conversations on infrastructural vulnerabilities and folklore in disaster contexts (see the work of Carl Lindahl and Pat Jasper’s work on Hurricane Katrina). Dorothy Noyes has written perceptively about ICH and the complexity of ICH work for folklorists, cultural specialists, community scholars, and museum practitioners:

*The vitality of cultural forms, the viability of local lifeways, the ductility of group identities, and the dignity of peoples are complex effects of social, economic, and political interactions. There is no question that these interactions have become ever more thickly mediated and inflected by institutional procedures and ever more globally networked. While these ever-denser imbrications heighten the demand for general instruments to help local actors retain (or gain) control of their forms of life, they also exacerbate the inevitable violence of generalization itself. Such instruments, that is, are necessarily blunt.*

*The most worrying aspect of this bluntness is that such instruments institutionalize an old ideological divide between the traditional and the modern. They conceal genuine commonalities in cultural process. They naturalize a discredited discourse and confer upon it the immortality of bureaucracy. They create incentives for well-placed local actors to confine their less well-placed fellows in picturesque identity jails. They weaken incentives for new coalitions to rethink overall logics of intellectual property law, economic development, and environmental sustainability.*

*There is no doubt that the rapidity of global economic and environmental transformation in the present has created radical instabilities in local lifeways. We should recognize this as a temporally specific situation calling for specific remediations intended as transitional and temporary. This should be the focus of policy efforts. To rescue subaltern actors from the violence of history by enclosing them in the crystalline eternity of culture may count as protection, but it is not justice.*

**Cultural Expression, the Public and “The Great Story”**

Perhaps the challenge and opportunity for folklife and museums comes down to a more basic premise. Dan Sheehy has written:

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My own philosophy as curator is to prioritize recordings with great music and a great story. What do I mean by great music and great story? By “great music,” I mean music performed at a high level of standards determined by the culture of which it is a part. By “great story,” I mean music that has a compelling extra-musical role—for example, bringing to public attention a culture with a future threatened by globalization, countering cultural inequities by reinforcing a minority culture’s identity, adding momentum and meaning to a cultural movement, bringing people together across cultural barriers, or amplifying a little-known cultural story that needs to be told.28

Folklorists are well positioned to offer a deeper understanding of engagement with traditions and keepers of intangible cultural heritage, in our own nation and around the world. To the museum, our presence brings deep and active engagement with communities in safeguarding their traditions of intangible cultural heritage and in adding new meaning and value to those traditions. To the public, our position in the museum underscores and reinforces our role as something more than a mere exhibition, record label, or educational outreach program. Folklorists working with museums can be a driving force intent on bringing the work of the museum more into civic life and doing what it can, in collaboration with community members themselves, to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

Case Studies

¡Soy Salvadoreño! Chanchona Music from Eastern El Salvador: Documentation and Presentation of Salvadoran Musical Tradition

The civil war in El Salvador (1986-1990) battered the impoverished eastern provinces of Morazán, San Miguel, and La Unión. Hundreds of thousands fled to the United States. As refugees in Leesburg, Virginia, members of the Lovo family from Morazán use their chanchona music to create a sense of “being at home” in an unfamiliar culture. To bring them, their story, and their music more into civic life, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings documented Lovo family musicians both in Virginia and in their rural Salvadoran village, publishing the CD ¡Soy Salvadoreño! Chanchona Music from Eastern El Salvador, posting videos on the www.folkways.si.edu website, and presenting the group at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.
The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering: Celebrating and Perpetuating the Oral Traditions and Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Ranching West

Wally McRae, National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellow, at the 2009 National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Photo by Sue Rosoff.

The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, a project of the Western Folklife Center (www.westernfolklife.org), and now that organization’s flagship event, was started in 1985 by a partnership of folklorists and working cowboys, ranching people, and tradition bearers. The purpose of the first Gathering was to locate and bring together cowboy poets, bearers of a tradition of occupational poetry dating back to the cattle droving trail drive days of the late 1800s, for public presentation at a gathering in Elko, Nevada. Seeded with funds from the NEA the event was to be a one-time affair, but was so enthusiastically received by the ranching community and the general public NCPG has sparked a renaissance in cowboy poetry and song, inspiring many to take up the art form and inspiring several hundred similar spin-off events throughout the ranching West. (Charlie Seemann and C. Kurt Dewhurst)
“Go Ahead, Speak Dena’ina”: Exhibiting the Unexhibitable

Dena’inag’ Huch’ulyeshi is the first major exhibition ever presented about the Dena’ina Athabascan people. Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum.

In a recent exhibition at the Anchorage Museum on the history and culture of the Dena’ina Athabascans, Dena’inag’ Huch’ulyeshi: The Dena’ina Way of Living, the curators faced a number of challenges in bringing the Dena’ina story “to life.” In particular, the Dena’ina Advisory Committee had asked that the exhibition emphasize the Dena’ina language. The resulting exhibition encouraged visitors to experience the Dena’ina language, and looks at the ways in which other aspects of intangible heritage such as a cultural landscape, foodways, storytelling, and the cultural knowledge associated with objects are effectively conveyed in an innovative 3-D medium of a museum exhibition. (Suzi Jones)
Suggested Readings and Resources

What is intangible cultural heritage? UNESCO


http://icom.museum/programmes/intangible-heritage/

http://www.academia.edu/2236867/Intangible_Cultural_Heritage_Museums_and_Education.Focus_Issues_Paper

Seoul General Conference and the International Journal of Intangible Heritage “Museums and Intangible Heritage” was the theme of ICOM’s General Conference in Seoul, 2004. The International Journal of Intangible Heritage, an academic and professional journal dedicated to the promotion of the understanding of every aspect of intangible heritage worldwide, is one of the results of this Conference.
Education, Folklife, and Museums

Marsha MacDowell

At one time in history, museums—at least those with roots in Western European cultures—were considered repositories of cultural objects and natural history specimens that reflected the collecting interests of the religious, financial, and academic elite. Collectors also displayed their cabinets of curiosities for the benefit of elite audiences. By the end of the 20th century, the mission and function of museums had dramatically shifted from being repositories to being active agents of learning. Good museum practice today—aligned with the standards set by international museum professional associations—demands that collecting practices and interpretive programs are rooted in museums that are essentially centers of education and meet the needs of both local and global audiences.

Today, museums hold unique and powerful places in contemporary society. According to data on museums just in America, they preserve and protect more than a billion objects, have approximately 850 million visits a year (more than collectively attend sporting events and theme parks), employ more than 400,000, and are viewed as one of the most trustworthy sources of historical and objective information. And, the numbers of museums are astounding. In the US, for instance, there over 35,000 museums, and currently in China a new museum opens every day.

With the shift to being agents of discovery and learning, museums also realized the power they hold for encounters with the authentic, as unique sites of informal learning and object-based inquiry, as laboratories for research on teaching and learning, and as facilitators for inclusive engagement with their resources. Museums now strive to reflect current pedagogical trends, comply with mandated K-12 curriculum standards, meet the needs of specialized communities of learners, and develop skills for the 21st century. Museums spend more than $2 billion a year on education activities; the typical museum devotes three-quarters of its education budget to K-12 students and receives approximately 55 million visits each year from students in school groups.

In addition to long-standing practices of experimenting with hands-on learning or discovery galleries, presentation of artists in galleries, docent-led workshops, first-person presentations, educator workshops, K-gray in museum classes, and lectures, museums are now using an array of strategies to engage learners—from offering digital badges for lifelong learning and skill acquisition and programs for those home-schooled to even

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30 Museum Universe Data File, Institute for Museums and Library Services

The Museum Universe Data File contains information about over 35,000 museums in the United States including aquariums, arboretums, botanical gardens, art museums, children’s museums, general museums, historic houses and sites, history museums, nature centers, natural history and anthropology museums, planetariums, science and technology centers, specialized museums, and zoological parks. http://www.imls.gov/research/museum_universe_data_file.aspx
establishing K-12 schools within museum walls.

Museum-based folklife and education programs invariably reflect the intellectual history of the museums in which they reside as well as the mission of their institution. Museums entirely or substantially devoted to folk art and folklife have had some of the most extensive programs, but many other museums, especially those that focus on the cultural heritage of specific indigenous, racial, and ethnic communities, have also had sustained and/or notable folklife and folk arts programs. Some museums now work closely with state or regional arts and humanities programs to support the state or regional folklife programming or to house the archives and collections generated by those programs.

Folklorists have been engaged in both traditional and more innovative strategies to facilitate inclusive learning in museums and to connect museums with audiences historically not served by museums. They have worked closely with members of diverse communities to develop, preserve, and interpret collections, create programs with partner organizations of mutual benefit, and to document and present historical and living intangible heritage. Examples of museum-based folklore and education programs and activities include: internships in ethnomusicology, folk arts, and folklife; community scholars programs; partnerships with youth programs such as 4-H or Girl Scouts; object-based curriculum related to traditional material culture; and annual folklife festivals.
Case Studies

FOLKPATTERNS, Michigan State University

FOLKPATTERNS, begun in 1978, was a 30-year statewide partnership program of the Michigan State University Museum (through its Michigan Traditional Arts Program) and Michigan 4-H Youth Programs to engage youth in learning about cultural heritage beginning with the youth’s own history and traditions, learning basic skills necessary to research and document that history, learning how to report or summarize their findings and share it with others, and learning how to preserve their records through archival and museum practices. The program was downsized along with the overall downsizing of Michigan 4-H in the early 2000s, but it continues to live on primarily through print and online curriculum resources as well as FOLKPATTERNS categories at several county fairs.

Smithsonian Folkways Tools for Teaching, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

Free downloadable lesson plans and activities to introduce students to a variety of music and culture are developed as companion resources to recordings in the SI Folkways collections. Folkways music can also be streamed into schools and Smithsonian Folkways Institutes offer intensive training and certification for musicians and educators.
http://www.folklife.si.edu/education_exhibits/resources/

Heritage Spotlight Series, HistoryMiami

The South Florida Folklife Center (SFFC) at HistoryMiami, produces an annual artist-in-residence program that highlights Miami-area traditional artists and cultures. Each year, the series showcases three individual artists or ensembles and their traditions. Participating artists share their art through public events, school programs, and multimedia products.
http://www.historymiami.org/visit/south-florida-folklife-center/
Suggested Readings and Resources


MacDowell, Marsha and LuAnne Kozma. 2008. *Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Book II.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum. [contains examples of materials from several museum-based folk arts programs]

Museum Education Roundtable
http://museumpedication.info

Folklore and Education Section, American Folklore Society
Has sponsored sessions at annual meetings that, while primarily focused on K-12 public school education, often address wider folklore and education topics including those affiliated with museums.
http://www.afsnet.org/?page=FolkloreEd

Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education
www.locallearningnetwork.org

C.A.R.T.S. Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students
http://citylore.org/education/resources/newsletter/
New Directions at the Intersection of Museums and the Marketplace

Suzy Serif

American folklorists have long had an uneasy relationship with the global marketplace and with the ways in which museums, festivals, fairs, heritage sites, and other exhibitionary complexes (Bennett 1988) have intersected with that sphere. For much of the discipline’s 125 year history, we have positioned ourselves as ethical standard bearers and advocates on behalf of the folk, folk arts, and folk tradition, and as watchdogs against the damaging effects of treating both the arts and artists as “capital, something that can be manipulated and fashioned into a commodity for economic gain” (Wells 2006:7). Museums, in particular, have been the target of folkloristic critique, because of their seemingly unwitting, and often contested, role in affecting the status of traditional arts in the art marketplace. As folklorist Patricia Atkinson Wells points out, if museums are not primarily in the business of “selling” the art of the folk (museum gift shops not withstanding), they are certainly in the business of “marketing,” or “adding value” to it through the very acts of collection, documentation, preservation, interpretation and display. And the “value” that is added, as folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and others have noted, is more often than not the troublesome ideological value of pastness, primitiveness, difference, exoticism, and indigeneity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995).

The insights of scholars such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and others comprise one of the most important contributions that folklorists have made, and will continue to make, to our critical understanding of the complicated roles museums play in the commoditization of culture and the heritagization of traditional arts and artists. Indeed, one of the esteemed founders of the American Folklore Society, Franz Boas, used his dual platform as university professor and museum curator to critically decry the racist, evolutionary trope that governed the displays of non-Western peoples, artworks and artifacts at world fairs, festivals and ethnographic museums at the turn of the 20th century (Conn 1988: 80). With the “flowering of American folk art” at the hands of museum curators and collectors in the 1920s and ‘30s (Cahill 1932), and the “discovery” of a new genre of so-called “outsider” / “visionary” arts and artists over a generation later, academic folklorists were again at the scene to offer their insightful critique of the often racist and classist underpinnings of this market-driven commoditization of the arts of the rural poor, and people of color, for a largely wealthy, white art patronage (Ardery, Dietz, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Metcalf).

Folklorists’ sense of their role in upholding the welfare and dignity of the folk they studied—including their involvement in the marketplace—was reinforced in a 1988 Statement of Ethics from the American Folklore Society which states, in part, that “Folklorists must do everything in their power to protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare of their informants and to honor the dignity and privacy of those studied. Where research involves the acquisition of materials and information transferred on the assumption of trust between persons, the rights, interests, and sensitivities of those studied must be safeguarded.”
This disciplinary mandate—which may read as somewhat paternalistic through our 21st century eyes—was particularly important in the last quarter of the 20th century at a time when increasing numbers of professional folklorists were entering the public sector to work directly with arts agencies, museums, and other public presenting institutions, and cautionary tales were surfacing about the monetary and psychological exploitation of folk artists for personal and professional gain—even in our own ranks.

In this arena, folklorists began to carve out a new role for themselves, not just as critical academic watchdogs, but as “culture brokers” in the public sphere—professionals who successfully translate for the public a culture that is not their own (Kurin 1997: 1-25). Among the important tasks of a culture broker were those which applied directly to transactions in the marketplace: making sure the voices of the folk are represented and heard; advocating for fair wages, inclusive treatment, and other compensations; documenting and authenticating the value of place-based and vernacular arts and traditions; mediating among multiple stakeholders to effect consensus or compromise; valuing multiple modes of knowledge, and multiple definitions of what is considered art; and navigating the delicate balance between innovation and tradition in the marketplace. Equally significant for museums was folklorists’ commitment to recognizing and documenting the long-term effects of marketplace transactions, commercial sponsorships, blockbuster exhibits, and heritage designations on the artists, traditions, and communities involved.

With the 21st century’s global rise of a multi-billion dollar industry of culture-tourism and heritage-tourism, folklorists are once again taking the lead as policy makers, organizers, activists, mentors, platform providers, resource connectors, and collaborators with the communities in which they work, especially regarding their encounters in the global marketplace. Yet in a significant if subtle break from the “culture broker” model of the 20th century, these more recent endeavors draw strength from a fundamental commitment to advancing artists’ and communities’ own engagement, self-determination, agency and empowerment in the marketplace of ideas, artists and art. Their strategies start from a commitment to working with rather than for artists, audiences and entrepreneurs in mutually beneficial transactions in the marketplace. Folklorists no longer see their role so much as “protectors” than as collaborators or facilitators. Innovative models in which folklorists are playing, and could continue to play key roles include:

- New kinds of community-driven social entrepreneurship enterprises, especially in the domains of immigrant and refugee arts;
- Community-created gathering spaces, eco-museums, and cooperatives that combine the educational motives of collection, research and display with the social entrepreneurship goals of capital and cultural gain;
- Multi-sited networks for capacity-building, resource sharing, and social justice advocacy work among museums, artists, and entrepreneurs;
- Collaborative curation and repatriation efforts among ethnic, native, and neighborhood communities and those larger cultural institutions initially involved in their arts’ appropriation, sale, and commoditization;
- Innovations at the level of public policy which govern how communities will be
involved in museum exhibit design, development, and product marketing of their own tangible and intangible cultural heritage;

- Other innovative peer-mentorship, marketing, fundraising, cultural sustainability, poverty alleviation, and policy-making programs within and across communities.

These strategies come at a perfect time in the history of museum policy and practice as museums are themselves shifting, “from being about something to being for somebody” (Stephen E. Weil, 2002)—a core principal that folklorists have held—both in and out of the marketplace—all along.
Case Studies

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Repatriation Project, Smithsonian Institution


Smithsonian Folkways Recordings—referred to in the 1980s as a “museum of sound” by founding director Anthony Seeger—is both an archival collection of global traditional music and recorded sound and a nonprofit record label housed in the U.S. national museum. The Smithsonian Folkways’ evolving repatriation practice offers useful ways of thinking about museum obligations with intangible heritage returns and several ways of redistributing artists’ rights and their communities’ rights to control use of their music, even when legal rights of ownership remain with the museum.
The Global Folk Art Network, Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe

The Global Folk Art Network Launch, October 2014. Photo by Tara Trudell.

The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM has been instrumental in breaking new ground in the ways museums learn to collaborate with community partners by forming a strategic coalition with the International Folk Art Alliance (whose flagship enterprise is the International Folk Art Market/Santa Fe), and a group of ten folk artist and folk art representatives in ten countries around the world. The resulting Global Folk Art Network, conceived under the auspices of an Innovation Lab for Museums grant from the American Alliance for Museums, starts with an innovative idea: to harness the social entrepreneurial power of the marketplace with the educational authority of the museum and the local knowledge of traditional artists to share resources, build capacity, and create connections amongst all three constituents, and more effectively address the needs of our changing audiences and organizations alike. The network is collectively committed to working together to accelerate and deepen the positive impact of folk art in our own communities, countries, regions and across the world; empower folk artists to address the diverse array of conditions within which they make and share their work; and influence and advance the mission and work of our respective workplaces in ways that are consistent with, and responsive to, what we are learning through the network.
Canadian anthropologist Erica Lehrer provides a provocative model for an interactive museum exhibit, website, and publication which provides a platform for multiple and contradictory voices around issues of race, culture, and economy at the intersection of folk arts, museums and the marketplace. The projects explore a genre of Jewish figurines which have sprung up in post-Communist Poland thanks to the effort of the state to market Polish folk art. The handmade figures, which are available for sale at souvenir stands, gift shops, gas stations, and airport stalls, depict Jews in traditional poses of prayer and study, as well as “Jews with a coin” talismans. The exhibit provides multiple opportunities for visitors to weigh in on whether they feel these images are positive or negative, anti-Semitic or affectionate, divisive or inclusive. It also gives voice both to the craftsmen who make a living creating and selling these figurines and the tourists, curiosity seekers and Poles who purchase, display and collect them (www.luckyjews.com). Rather than skirt or avoid exploring the relationship between artists, art, museums and the marketplace, this project places this relationship at the center of its exploration, and provides a participatory, interactive platform for multiple voices to engage their opinions, thoughts, and responses, rather than an authoritative treatise or analysis from an outside scholar.
References Cited


Curating Community Engagement

Carrie Hertz

Recent studies reveal salient challenges and opportunities shaping the future of museums. Many of the concerns relate to trends emerging in the 21st century: demographic changes resulting in shrinking core audiences and growing demands for inclusiveness; increasing competition for leisure time, disposable income, and charitable giving; and technological innovations that nurture individual contributions and participation over other forms of involvement. These dynamics raise serious questions about the history of museums as arbiters and proponents of elite tastes and official narratives. Who do museums ultimately benefit? How do they remain relevant to an expanding list of stakeholders? Many critics have pointed out a general disparity in representation. American museum audiences and staff members poorly reflect the diversity of the nation, but even more troubling, of the cities and neighborhoods they claim to serve. In response, museum professionals today strive to better represent the concerns, experiences, and achievements of all segments of society by grappling with potential barriers related to race, ethnicity, income, age, and education.

In these ongoing debates about the need for improved community engagement, one of the most significant questions to emerge confronts the role of the institution. Nina Simon, in a post from her influential blog Museum 2.0, argues that we need a new metaphor for conceptualizing our work. “The metaphor for traditional art museums,” she writes, “is the temple. Beautiful. Sanctified. Managed and protected by a league of committed, anointed ones. What is the metaphor for participatory arts? Is it the agora? The town square? The circus? The living room? The web?” While museums have long been understood as content providers and educators, they are increasingly functioning as platforms for discovery and sharing through dialogue and self-presentation. Over the last few decades, museums have experimented with new methods for engaging diverse communities both as participatory visitors and as resources for co-creating content. This shift reflects a revised understanding of institutional authority by recognizing community members as potential experts and by valuing multiple perspectives, subjective histories, and more varied forms of knowledge.

Museums with folk art/folklife missions or embedded programs have a strong history of innovative forms of collaboration, especially in the development of ethnographic field collections, hands-on activities, artist-led demonstrations, master-apprentice education opportunities, and “exhibits-without-walls” style festivals, like the annual Smithsonian...

32 For relevant studies, see: 
Folklife Festival, that put audiences and cultural practitioners face-to-face. Residency programs, like the one hosted by the Philadelphia Folklore Project (http://www.folloreproject.org/index.php), can bring the voices and enthusiasm of committed community members into the organization where they are given professional guidance, institutional support, technical assistance, gallery space, and a wider audience for their perspectives. Folklorists could play pivotal roles in other styles of engagement currently developing in the museum world. One example is the move toward community dialogue programs. For the National Dialogues on Immigration, a project inspired in part by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s innovative “kitchen conversations,” twenty participating museums and cultural organizations across the United States held discussions with local communities centered on issues of immigration using their institutional resources (e.g., collections, exhibits, historic buildings) as catalysts for conversation (http://www.dialoguesonimmigration.org/). The community building and healing made possible by such programs should appeal to many institutions.

One of the primary and most visible activities for museums, however, continues to be the production of gallery-based exhibitions. Exhibit design now regularly includes interactive components inviting visitors to contribute opinions, drawings, or personal stories for others to view. Many institutions have implemented community galleries to host displays organized by local groups. In addition to the long-standing practice of forming advisory committees, museums are also finding new strategies for involving communities more deeply in the earliest stages of project planning and development to ensure that the interests, goals, and voices of stakeholders are integral. The Wing Luke Asian Museum, for example, is well-known for detailing step-by-step procedures for community-led exhibition projects with their freely distributed “Community Based Exhibition Model.” Folklorists have played key roles in modeling fieldwork-based exhibition projects that garner broad community support and participation. As we move forward, the challenge will be to make the boundaries between the museum and “the field” where communities live ever more porous. The continued incorporation of new technologies, especially those that support social media and online collections, can help by extending interactions beyond on-site visits and enable broader gathering and sharing of both scholarly and publicly-generated content.

Folklorists have the necessary training to speak cross-culturally, to collect in-depth interviews and oral histories, to connect objects with lived experience and cultural understanding. We have a deeply ingrained, disciplinary concern for inclusiveness, for looking to the overlooked, for prioritizing personal expressions of shared cultural value. These skills and principles are necessary for a 21st century museology. The turn toward community engagement in contemporary museums not only creates a more welcoming place for folklorists, it provides fertile ground for our unique abilities to flourish.
Case Studies

Gallery of Conscience (GoC), Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA)


The GoC, a dedicated space within MOIFA and a member of the Sites of Conscience, was conceived as a laboratory for experimenting with innovative styles of collaborative exhibition design and for engaging people in conversations about important social issues through the lens of folk arts and the experiences of folk artists around the world. From the outset, project goals and exhibition development are driven by interactions with artists, community advisors, and partnering organizations through dialogue and brainstorming sessions, as well as through programming and workshops that can produce new exhibition components. Installations are prototyped as “works-in-progress” and revised throughout their run based on community feedback. Because the primary mission of the GoC is to generate multi-perspective conversations around controversial issues, design strategies prioritize participatory elements in which visitors can respond directly to artworks by contributing comments, stories, and drawings that remain on display in the gallery.

http://www.internationalfolkart.org/about/about.html
http://www.sitesofconscience.org/members/museum-of-international-folk-art/

The Boyle Heights Project was designed to serve as a model for the collaborative research and documentation of community histories and experiences. The project and its programs are instructive for museums that want to work in partnership with the communities they serve and with other organizations.


The Boyle Heights exhibition was the result of a multiyear collaborative community research project, one designed to build sustainable relationships and to transform the way the institution interacted with surrounding multicultural neighborhoods. To capture the dynamic history of the Boyle Heights area in East LA, a project team worked with an array of organizational partners and community advisors to record oral histories and gather photographs, home movies, artifacts, and interviews through Collection Days and open Community Forums. Roosevelt High School students were trained in ethnographic documentation and contributed audio diaries. Rather than producing an authoritative history, the exhibition and programming highlighted subjective memories and interpretations that addressed patterns of racial and interethnic interactions within the neighborhood.

http://www.janm.org/exhibits/bh/index.htm
Osage Weddings Project: Sam Noble Museum, The University of Oklahoma, Osage Tribal Museum, and The Osage Nation


The Osage Wedding Project is an ongoing, long-term collaboration between two museums (the Sam Noble Museum and the Osage Tribal Museum), a university (the University of Oklahoma) and a native community (the Osage Nation). Working together, the project team is researching early 19th century Osage wedding traditions and tracing how practices have continued or been transformed in the present. Community members help “gather photographs, oral histories, film footage, scholarly papers and newspaper accounts.” At public events scholars, museum specialists, and community members come together to reclaim lost information, like the identities and stories pictured in collected photographs. In addition to face-to-face community work, the project team is maintaining a website (www.osageweddings.com) not only to inform visitors about ongoing efforts, but also to invite participation and gather information from community members who can comment on relevant collection items, share photographs and stories, or otherwise help shape the process.
Suggested Readings and Resources


McLean, Kathleen and Suzanne Seriff. 2013. “Museum Exhibit Prototyping as a Method of Community Conversation and Participation,” American Folklore Society Consultancy and Professional Development Program Report, available online: 


Center for the Future of Museums (AAM)  
http://www.aam-us.org/resources/center-for-the-future-of-museums

Innovation Labs for Museums (AAM)  
http://www.aam-us.org/resources/center-for-the-future-of-museums/projects-and-reports/innovation-lab-for-museums
Digital Practices in Museum Ethnography

Jason Baird Jackson and Marsha MacDowell

Ethnographic museums were among the earliest adopters of digital computing technologies to advance the public service and professional goals of the field. In the history of one key area of current digital activity—databases—American Folklore Society Fellow William Fenton, writing in the pages of *Curator* in 1960, called for the creation of a unified index of ethnographic museum collections information (Fenton 1960:347). By the middle of the 1960s, and in response to this call, experimental projects were underway using mainframe computer database systems as a means of aggregating and extending knowledge of ethnographic object collections (Ricciardelli 1967). Present-day multi-institutional collections database projects, such as the Quilt Index and the Reciprocal Research Network thus represent the flowering of long-standing professional commitments by ethnographically oriented museum professionals. In an era in which concern with the digital has become a ubiquitous obsession, folklorists and other museum ethnographers can be proud that their current work has deep roots and responds to needs long recognized.

While earlier museum engagements with computer technologies centered on the specialized challenges of museum cataloging, today digital tools, networks, and data are central to nearly every aspect of ethnographic museum practice. Digital practices have also been transforming fundamental assumptions about what the museum is and where its boundaries might lie. This section’s brief review cannot survey all of the areas in which folklorists, museums, and digital tools and techniques presently intersect. Such a survey, along with a more theoretical and overarching meditation on the current state of change generally, are needs that can only be highlighted here. In keeping with other sections in this sketch map of the current folklore museum scene, a few key areas are described with accompanying case-study introductions. Examined here are several prominent and increasingly interdigitated realms of activity: digital exhibitions, collections-focused databases, and collaborative tools along with digital aspects of museum research and education. Social media, video production, open access scholarly communication, and the everyday use of general and specialized software, including open source software, are all topics deserving of attention in future surveys of digital practice in folklore, and other ethnographic, museums.

Digital exhibitions are no longer a new genre of scholarly communication. We can see this in their proliferation as well as in our growing ability to chronicle the history of change within the genre (Jackson 2006). Earlier internet-based digital exhibitions were built—as were other websites following the birth of internet browser software—out of computer code and digital assets (such as object photographs) assembled on what amounted, metaphorically, to blank sheets of (digital) paper. To take one typical example, in 2001-2002 then-museum graduate assistant Rhonda S. Fair was charged with creating a simple digital exhibition presentation of the Sam Noble Museum’s collection of Mayan clothing. In response, she built *The Fabric of Mayan Life: An Exhibit of Textiles*, a website that
combined text and digital photographs that was built using the HTML editor Dreamweaver. While digital exhibitions—some very simple, some very complex—are still built “by hand” in this way, the current norm is to construct digital exhibitions using a general purpose content management system such as WordPress or Drupal or a special purpose tool, such as Omeka, that has been designed to (among other tasks) facilitate the production of digital exhibitions. Illustrating this later case is an exhibition developed with Omeka by folklore graduate students at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures in 2014—Ojibwe Public Art, Ostrom Private Lives. Content management platforms such as those increasingly in use, provide digital exhibition builders the means by which projects are more easily accessed on mobile devices (=responsive design), are more easily updated, are better able to connect with users (via social media), and are able to be linked to, or incorporated into, other digital projects (=interoperability). While the exhibitions just cited as examples are relatively modest undertakings, folklorists have been central to many major digital exhibition projects. A relatively-early example (see sidebar) is Dane Wajich | Dane-zaa Stories and Songs: Dreamers and the Land, an award winning Virtual Museum of Canada exhibition co-curated by folklorist Amber Ridington.

Digital resources and tools are also impacting design of physical museum exhibitions and video recordings of fieldwork documentation now typically associated with new ethnographic field collections which enables the presentation of first-person narratives about objects as well as the contextual processes and uses of objects.

Parallel to the changes in associated technology are new curatorial choices. Many digital exhibitions relating to ethnographic collections were online spinoffs of physical exhibition projects, but increasingly digital space is a co-equal realm and digital projects increasingly unfold unmoored to associated gallery exhibitions or programs. This dynamic has many contextual features, but includes a desire to explore the unique affordances of digital media for ethnographic representation, collaboration, education, research, and outreach. Digital exhibitions pursued independently of physical ones in turn point to new questions about the institutional underpinnings of exhibitions activity overall. Museum-relevant projects based on a museum’s content may be produced by agencies outside of the collecting museum. For instance, the multifaceted Inuvialuit Living History project is deeply focused on Smithsonian Institution collections, but Smithsonian staff are modest participants in an effort led by a consortium of First Nations cultural workers and non-native, non-Smithsonian scholars. The Osage Weddings Project, another exhibition project at the Sam Noble Museum, exemplifies the way in which digital tools are changing the very nature of how museums engage with communities in ethnographic research. Knowledge is contributed in digital space and museum activities—collection preservation, exhibition, publications educational programs are intentionally and openly derived from this public interface. New digital technologies are increasingly central to the fruitful decentering of, and democratization of, museum authority structures, opening up new possibilities for cultural collaboration and innovation.

Increasingly, digital exhibition projects (and other cultural heritage-related, website-based projects) sit atop and integrate richly with, rather than simply draw content out of, associated collections databases. The Inuvialuit Living History project just mentioned, for
instance, is dependent first on the collections databases of the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, but more importantly and directly, upon collections data that has been placed within an exemplary resource aggregating ethnographic and archaeological collections data from a large number of partner institutions—both museums and indigenous governments. The Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) is one of a number of such multi-institutional collections databases. The RRN was developed jointly by the Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lô Nation/Tribal Council, the U’mista Cultural Society and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. The RRN lets users research cultural items held at twenty-two institutions. It is also structured technically to allow for a range of additional uses above and beyond accessing core collections data. Some of these will be highlighted below, but among them are the ability for related and unrelated projects to draw data out of the RRN system for use in endeavors such as Inuvialuit Living History. Other new digital resources born of an effort of linking and making accessible ethnographic collections in geographically dispersed archives, libraries, and museums are the American Folklore Society’s National Folklore Archives Initiative, the American Memory Project at the Library of Congress and Open Folklore, a partnership of the American Folklore Society and the Indiana University Bloomington Libraries. Similarly, the Quilt Index is continuing to move from being a dynamic, multi-institutional database to being a wider resource that can also feed content into digital exhibitions, that hosts scholarly essays, and that provides lesson plans and other resources (MacDowell et al. 2013).

Multipurpose collections platforms such as the RRN and the Quilt Index point to another newer development among digital practices within the museum ethnography realm. Such sites not only integrate or further collections documentation and collections interpretation goals, they also constitute examples of the phenomena known as collaboratories. Collaboratories are more than collections of information and communication technologies, they are new modes of social organization that foster new social practices, collaboration techniques, norms, values, and rules (see Wikipedia 2014 and sources cited therein). While general users encounter core collections information when consulting the public face of the RRN, registered users have access to additional collaboration tools that can, for instance, facilitate object selection for a gallery exhibition or provide discursive space for weighing competing interpretive claims regarding a collection. These tools are an especially powerful means towards the widely shared goal of including source communities more fully in the curatorial and interpretive work of ethnographic museums. They also further the longstanding scholarly and outreach mission of collecting institutions, facilitating otherwise impossible collaborations on distributed collections by distributed partners.

The rise of the fields of digital humanities in higher education and the proliferation of digital humanities centers are fostering new strategies for documenting, preserving, and using collections. Digital tools with possibilities for use in humanities and social sciences are being developed at an amazing speed and being employed in creative ways with collections. For instance digital tools such as StoryMap JS, Timeline JS, and Tableau Public, for geo-referencing, visualization, mapping, and creating timelines with museum collections are seeing collections used by new audiences in diverse ways. Massive collections of systematic data—now referred to as big data—are affording new
opportunities for inquiry and portend new uses of museum collections in ethnographic studies and other disciplinary arenas. As but one example of the use of digital tools in research can be seen in The Runaway Quilt Project, a recent study of quilting during slavery.

It also might well be noted that digital tools allow for individuals to curate their own collections of images, text, music, and videos they own or make as well as connect to data made and or owned by others, including by museums. Tools like Pinterest and Spotify increase the ways in which individuals create or curate digital collections. A growing number of museums are providing tools for users to create personal digital albums of objects owned by the museums. The lines between collections built and held by museums and those built and held by individuals blur as the digital environment allows for connecting and sharing these personally and institutionally held materials. This realm of connectedness comes with new issues of curatorship, authenticity, intellectual property, and copyright but by tapping into expanded pools of expertise and information, this sharing provides a means by which our understanding and knowledge about objects and their place in human experience can exponentially increase.

Another realm of museum-based activity impacted by growth of digital technologies is in education. Educators are using digital tools to engage K–gray audiences in using collections in multiple physical and online learning environments and activities. Local Learning, an informal “network of people interested in engaging young people with their own traditional culture and with the local culture and folklore of their families, regions, and the larger world” recently published three online classroom modules designed to facilitate use of ethnographic collections. The Quilt Index has its own Quilt Index Wiki with a section devoted to suggestions and resources—including lesson plans and a serious game—that promote the use of the digital repository in learning.

Separate from more elaborate collaboratories, everyday digital technologies and platforms increasingly shape the ways that museum practitioners and museum communities more broadly interact with one another. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are the means by which museum people exchange news and announce publications, exhibitions, and other resources. More specialized professional forums such as Museums and the Web and Webwise offer increased opportunities for sharing new applications of digital tools in museum activities. As in other fields, museum professionals learn about new career opportunities in digital environments, apply for such jobs in digital environments, and—if hired—will do much of their work in them as well.

Museums and communities are being mutually transformed through their co-engagements with digital practices. Technology is blurring the lines between curator and visitor, between documenter and documented, and between collection managers and users. While museum ethnography began its digital journey in the age of mainframes and punch cards, the field’s digital work reached an important level of maturity in the era of web 2.0 when the internet shifted from being means of consuming information into a space with increased opportunity for users to contribute to, and not simply consume, museum-centered and collections-centered activities. In the present era, new mobile technologies
are presenting new opportunities and challenges in a voyage that is clearly a long-term endeavor.
Case Studies

The Quilt Index


The Quilt Index is a project of the [Michigan State University Museum](http://www.msu.edu), [Matrix](http://www.matrix.org), and [Quilt Alliance](http://www.quiltalliance.org) to preserve images and stories about quilt artists, quilts, and quilting activities and then to make this information searchable and freely accessible for research and education. The Index houses tens of thousands of images and stories of artists and quilts from private and public collections around the world. [www.quiltindex.org](http://www.quiltindex.org), accessed January 24, 2015.
Dane Wajich | Dane-zaa Stories and Songs: Dreamers and the Land


**Dane Wajich | Dane-zaa Stories and Songs: Dreamers and the Land** is a widely discussed and critically acclaimed digital exhibition and archive produced under the auspices of the Virtual Museum of Canada. The work of a large team of native and non-native participants, the project centered on work done over a month in summer 2005, when Doig River First Nations elders, youth, and leaders collaborated with ethnographers, linguists, and technologies to produce a documentary digital exhibition focused on place-based stories and traditions of the Dane-zaa people.
Traditional Knowledge Licenses and Labels

Icons Representing a Selection of Traditional Knowledge Labels as explained on the [localcontexts.org](http://www.localcontexts.org) Website, August 29, 2015

“Traditional Knowledge licenses and labels recognize that Indigenous, traditional and local communities have different access and use expectations in regards to their knowledge and cultural expressions. These different expectations of access and use depend heavily on the material itself and the local context from which it derives. These TK licenses and labels help identify this material and establish culturally appropriate forms of managing control and access.” [http://www.localcontexts.org/](http://www.localcontexts.org/), accessed September 22, 2014.
References Cited


Recommendations

Recommendations made by the Working Group operate at varied scales, with some more immediately actionable (one might say, shovel-ready) and others standing as broader principals that can provide the basis for further planning and projects by the American Folklore Society Executive Board, the American Folklore Society Folklore and Museums Section, museums, universities, individuals, and consortia within the field. The Working Group in particular charges the Folklore and Museums Section to address a lacuna in its own work—the formulation of policy recommendations addressed to government agencies active in the museum sector (Institute for Museum and Library Services, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, etc.) and to major museum organizations (American Alliance of Museums, International Council of Museums). Such higher-level policy recommendations could be added as a fourth “D” section to this collection of recommendations. It is hoped that the Section will assume responsibility for curating and acting upon these proposals as a living document, one that grows and changes as the Section and field does.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Careers, Training, and Educational Initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Folklorists have helped museums expand their definition of what should be collected, how they should be collected, and how those collections should be presented. The potential for folklorists finding work in museums is great but those seeking to work in museums should consider gaining additional museum training and skills that would better position them for employment in museums. (Work addressing A1 may begin with career-development workshops staged at the AFS annual meeting.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Folklorists are finding that museums provide sites for experimenting with new methodologies and research models. Folklorists need to prepare reflective scholarship that describes their theoretical and practical contributions to museum practice. (Work on A2 may begin with one or more special issues of, or sections within, the Journal of American Folklore.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>The work of folklorists in museums can, and should, enhance the museum’s responsibility to being an agent to foster a civil society. Folklorists can apply their activist sensibility to make a difference by creating more engaged community-centered museums. (The working group proposes to seek involvement from the Folklore and Museums Section in developing strategies for promoting and benchmarking the work evoked in A3.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>The field needs to provide more museum-based internship opportunities for folklore undergraduate and graduate students. (The working group proposes that the Folklore and Museums section and the AFS Executive Board work collaboratively to establish and fund internships opportunities such as those called for in A4. Compare the internship program of the American Anthropological Association.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>Support more folklore specialists in developing museum object-based educational</td>
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resources. (The working group proposes that the Folklore and Museums Section develop a project aimed to grounding and actualizing recommendation A5.)

### B Convenings and Publications

| B1 | (a) Convene a conference on folklore, museums, and education; (b) Produce a special issue of *Journal of Museum Education*. |
| B2 | Organize a global conference on the interface of museums and the marketplace with special attention to traditional arts. |
| B3 | (a) Convene a North American or International meeting on digital practices in museum ethnography that overtly brings together the parallel, but infrequently connecting, worlds of museum-based folklore and museum anthropology; (b) Publish case-study focused proceedings from such a conference; (c) Synthesize commonalities and differences found in museum-based folklore and museum-based anthropology. |
| B4 | Produce a special issues of *Museum Anthropology Review* dedicated to (a) museums and folklore and (b) to collaborative exhibition design / prototyping. |
| B5 | Advance the outreach goals of the field by planning a session on folklore and museums at annual meetings of American Alliance of Museums (AAM) or American Association of State and Local History (AASLH). |
| B6 | Convene a series of workshops of arts practitioners, scholars, agencies, and advocates that focus on specific strategies for museum/market interfacing, including cultural policy, social entrepreneurship, community-generated museum work, etc. |

### C Infrastructure, Networking, Planning, and Standards Setting

| C1 | Create a global digital resource-sharing platform at the intersection of artists, museums and the marketplace. |
| C2 | Build more professional resources for young scholars entering the field that specifically address the theoretical and practical implications of our global culture heritage tourism industry for museums and the marketplace. |
| C3 | Build a network of university-based programs for young folklorists and scholars working at the intersection of cultural sustainability, social entrepreneurship, museum education, and curation. |
| C4 | Improve networking opportunities for colleagues working in or with museums across disciplinary lines by creating new points of contact, such as on social media, listservs, or online forums. |
| C5 | Sponsor a dedicated survey of, and assessment of, current digital practice in museum folklore and in relevant areas of neighboring fields of museum practice. |
| C6 | Drawing upon emerging practices in the field and best practices research underway in neighboring fields, such as library and information science, develop technical recommendations for digital practice in museum-based ethnographic work. Such an effort might parallel *Oral History in the Digital Age* and be pursued under the auspices of the *American Folklore Society*, the *Council for Museum Anthropology*, and the *Digital Practices in History and Ethnography Interest Group* of the Research
| C7 | Using the working group framework of the [Research Data Alliance](#), set goals for, and pursue, standards development for digital practices relevant to museum ethnography. An early example would be working group (and community) discussion, and then potential acceptance of [Traditional Knowledge (TK) Licenses and Labels](#) as a standard tool for museum ethnography practice. |