

AMA 50th Anniversary Celebration

Keynote Speaker – Carol Harsh

30 March 2016

Do you like Jackson Pollock's paintings? I remember seeing a video while I was in graduate school of him splattering paint on a canvas and was mesmerized by the energy and force with which he created his art. *Convergence*, one of his most famous paintings is a collage of colors splattered on a huge canvas-- about 8 x 13 feet long. It is the embodiment of freedom of expression.

Like Pollock, I am going to splatter you with some random bits of information that is seemingly unrelated and then try to make sense of it.

Truth #1: History is crucially important to the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the future of our nation.

The History Relevance Campaign is a diverse group of history professionals posing questions about what makes the past relevant today. The Campaign serves as a catalyst for discovering, demonstrating, and promulgating the value of history for individuals, communities, and the nation. History is essential because it:

- Nurtures personal identity
- provides a legacy
- inspires leadership
- fosters engaged citizens
- stimulates economic development
- helps provide vital places to live and work
- teaches critical skills

It is an evolving effort. It began informally in late 2012 with a series of conversations about why history - both knowledge about the past and the practice of researching and interpreting the past - was marginalized in our country. Children are not expected to learn it in schools, community leaders rarely look to it to inform today's decisions. Sure, some people visit historic sites and history museums; and many more watch history-based movies. For them, engagement in history seems to be an occasional pleasant pastime, not something especially relevant to their lives. In contrast, those who are active in the practice of history - whether as professionals or amateurs - believe that history is central to their lives, and that it ought to play a greater role in the lives of our communities and nation.

Truth #2: Museums provide a tangible connection between the arts and humanities with the lives of Americans.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences have been collecting data about how the arts and humanities are faring in American society. By collecting comprehensive, up-to-date statistical

information, these Humanities Indicators provide a nonpartisan, objective picture of public participation in arts museums historical sites.

- According to a survey of public participation the rate of attendance at art museums has been declining since the early 2000s.
- Visitation at historic sites by Americans age 18 or older had declined 13% in 30 years (from 37% in 1982 to 24% in 2012)

This data comes from what visitors say about their own behavior, rather than from data provided by sites themselves. In as much as museums and historic sites provide an important arena for contemplation, education, and public discourse, these trends should cause us to pause and think about what it may mean.

And, according to Reach Advisors, Millennials (age 18-34) represent

- 10% of visitors to art and history museums (1 in 10 visitors)
- 25% of visitors to Science Centers (1 in 4 visitors)
- 33% of visitors to Children's Museums (1 in 3 visitors)

Interesting to consider how these percentages are down from previous generations.

Elizabeth Merritt, head of the Center for the Future of Museums, recently issued her annual TrendsWatch report highlighting developments that are likely to have a large impact on the Museum sector. TrendsWatch 2016 focuses on social changes-- how we work, and how we define and measure happiness--all wrapped around the concept of leisure.

Increasingly we see people who had worked full time jobs are now picking up pieces of work-- called "work-life blending." (People who drive for Uber or specialist who do contract work and thrive in the new "gig economy". The work week with two days of downtime is a thing of the past. Lack of leisure time is a big concern. A recent NEA report, "Barriers and Motivations Affecting Arts Attendance" concludes that lack of time was the most commonly reported barrier to attending the arts.

The question for us in the Museum field is what do these trends mean and how should we react?

Merritt references organizations such as the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, that uses their historic connection to progressive values to promote a progressive agenda through programming, exhibitions, and alliances with other groups. She notes that museums can thrive by being attendant to the needs of the community they serve. "If you become an agent for equity in your community, you become an embedded player."

Truth #3: Local history matters to people.

I have the privilege of directing a program at the Smithsonian called Museum on Main Street.

The Museum on Main Street (MoMS) program is the Smithsonian's key initiative that directly engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities through their own Main Street museums, historical societies and other cultural venues. In the past 21 years we have worked in close collaboration with state humanities councils and more than 1400 cultural organizations in rural towns across the nation.

For these communities (with an average population of 8,000), hosting the Smithsonian provides an opportunity to focus on their own local history and culture in complementary exhibitions, public programs and educational activities.

Through highly targeted community programs and creative activities, MoMS exhibitions become a hub for dialogue and local pride. Residents enthusiastically engage with exhibition content, as diverse community members come together to share and celebrate their heritage.

Results are broken attendance records, new partnerships are developed, and there is an enhanced pride of place. Sometimes students get involved. Research shows that youth in underserved rural regions often lack meaningful connections to and/or a deep understanding of their local histories and traditions, fueling youth sentiments such as a lack of belonging and an absence of purpose within their communities. Youth development research supports the fact that community engagement programs for rural youth foster a sense of ownership and community pride and ignite a desire to connect with and contribute to their communities, as well as strengthen youth's academic skills, confidence in themselves, and their life and leadership skills.¹Local History Matters!!

Advertising! ----- The MoMS exhibition, Hometown Teams: How Sports shape America, will travel in Arkansas from April 22, 2017- January 27, 2018 to Fordyce, Blytheville, Wynne, Helena, Arkadelphia, and Batesville. Plans are underway now to explore Arkansas's rich history related to sports that will be presented by local exhibitions, public programs, and educational activities.

Truth #4: Museums are forums, not temples

The role of museums has changed over time and never more so than in the past 10-15 years. As well as their traditional role of collecting, preserving and sharing rich collections, museums now find that they play an increasing role in supporting the development of communities. Museums can be a place to help share community identity and bring different community groups together, a catalyst for regeneration through the creation of new venues and civic spaces, and a resource for developing the skills and confidence of members of those communities.

Museums are using their unique collections and services to address social issues. They are striving to be places where all sections of the community can have a voice and be reflected in a museum's collections and exhibitions.

¹ A Theory of Change developed from Rural Youth Development, www.ruralityouth.org, an organization developed by the US Congress to assist 4-H, FFA, and Girl Scouts in strengthening involvement of youth in rural America. See References for additional sources of youth development research.

Conclusions

Museums can provide the glue that binds communities together. Stakes are high. Need for civic engagement, inspiration, civil discourse, and participation has never been higher. We must do what we do well in order to inspire change and to strengthen the health and well-being of our communities and our country.

The work that we do in the museum field is critically important and increasingly more challenging, due to decreased attendance and the marginalization of history. Yet we know that we have the ability to inspire a new generation of enthusiasts. History and culture does, in fact, inspire people. We need to strive to new heights of ways to use our collections, storytelling in exhibitions, and new technologies to inspire a new interest in museums.

I am inspired by the awards we will give tonight. These individuals are being recognized for outstanding achievement in their fields—education, public history, media, exhibit design, conservation. In order for museums to continue to impact our communities, we need to continue to aspire to these highest levels of achievement. Let's let this evening, and their recognized talents to raise the bar for all of us as we move forward.

So, to our awardees, congratulations and thank you for the way you have inspired all of us.