**Nimble, Innovative, Special, Community Oriented!**

**New England Museum Association Annual Conference**

**November 2022**

*Speakers: Doria Hughes, Collections Manager, Rosemarie Beck Foundation, NY; Marieke Van Damme, Executive Director, History Cambridge, MA; Molly Veysey, Executive Director, Old Stone House Museum & Historic Village, VT; Facilitator: Laura Roberts, Principal, Roberts Consulting, MA*

**As we were preparing for this session, we were thrilled to see this letter to the editor of The Boston Globe, from Brian Boyles, executive director of Mass Humanities, on Sunday October 23, 2022.**

*Museums are vital to our democracy. In a polarized world, they provoke us to question our assumptions and embrace complexities. It is heartening to read the recent article on curators, and I look forward to learning from them (*[*“Museums in focus,”*](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/10/14/arts/4-museum-curators-who-are-shaping-what-we-see-next-how-we-see-it/?p1=Article_Inline_Text_Link)*Sunday Arts, Oct. 16). These perspectives are crucial to meeting our challenges, particularly in a field long dominated by white curators, white donors, and white audiences. The old approach will not attract new audiences nor inspire justice.*

*Yet the Globe’s focus on four elite museums whose total annual budgets surpass $200 million sells short the diversity and value of museums. The Commonwealth is rich with smaller, community-based museums doing exciting work. Many stake their survival on stories that were historically ignored and underresourced. They do this without the safety net of towering endowments or the attention of major newspapers.*

*Visitors seeking more inclusive representations of our history and culture could attend local institutions that need our support. The Mansfield-based National Black Doll Museum’s*[*exhibit at Wheaton College*](https://wheatoncollege.edu/event/what-only-you-can-make-the-art-of-the-african-wrap-doll/2022-10-25/#:~:text=The%20National%20Black%20Doll%20Museum%20is%20based%20in%20Mansfield%20and,and%20preservation%20of%20Black%20Dolls.)*showcases the country’s largest collection dedicated to the art and preservation of Black dolls.*[*Wistariahurst in Holyoke*](https://wistariahurst.org/events/gallery-open-hours-anthony-melting-tallow-3/) *currently exhibits the work of Anthony Melting Tallow, Bo’taan’niis, (Flying Chief), a*[*member of the Blackfoot Nation of Alberta, Canada.*](https://www.anthonymeltingtallow.com/about)*This month, the*[*Hull Lifesaving Museum*](https://www.lifesavingmuseum.org/)*welcomes a Smithsonian exhibit about changes facing rural America. These are but a handful of places where new visions are taking shape on shoestring budgets.*

*There are important conversations to be had about the future of museums. More people are walking into their local institutions and seeing themselves reflected in exhibitions, thanks to gifted curators. Placed alongside their colleagues at more storied museums, these professionals might even spark new ideas about how we live together. That is, after all, a key role of any museum.*

**This session argues for a new definition of small museums, focused not are what they lack but what they have.**

The metrics of excellence commonly used by large museums are often the wrong way to assess a small museum because they focus on the museum’s shortcomings or deficits – small budget, few staff (and reliance on volunteers), and limited collections (and often in less than ideal conditions). This session offers a new way of defining - and potentially assessing – small museums, based on four specific characteristics identified by panelist Doria Hughes. Successful small museums can be described by the acronym “COINS…”

* Community-Oriented
* Innovative
* Nimble
* Specialized.

Community-Oriented: Small museums are very often centered on and responsive to local community needs. A high proportion of local volunteers and/or non-professional workers enables many small museums to offer a genuinely personalized visitor experience, encouraging repeat visits by local community members and families.

Innovative: Leaders and workers in small museums are often willing to try new or non-standard museological practices, enabling unique and enriching visitor experiences.

Nimble: Freed from bureaucracy and top-heavy leadership, small museums can pivot quickly in response to unexpected circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. They can implement innovative programs and methodologies quickly and halt them quickly if they prove ineffective or unpopular with visitors.

Specialized: Small museums often focus on local culture, people, and geography, celebrating the regional traditions and history of their immediate community.

Doria Hughes’ research looked at the work of four important theorists and researchers, three from outside the United States.

Stephen Weil frequently commented on the significant differences between museums of different scale and sizes. In his 1987 essay “A Meditation on Small and Large Museums,” he observed that “museums are not like a set of Russian dolls, nested one inside another and all alike except for their scale. Wholly aside from scale, small and large museums differ in a number of ways.”

Giancarlo Dall’Ara, the president of the Associazione Nazionale Piccoli Musei (Italy’s National Association of Small Museums), has written a useful manifesto on small museums, with the primary aim of differentiating them from large museums. Dall’Ara proposes an alternative definition for a small museum: “a mix of spaces, visitors, employees, and resources, which are limited or contained, but that … offers original experiences, in a welcoming context, and evinces a strong connection with its territory and local community.” He notes that a small museum “is not a shrunken version of a large one, and it is not a minor museum, but a different way of understanding the museum: more rooted in the territory, with a strong link with the local community, more welcoming, more relational…. it is a question of atmosphere and details.”

British researcher Fiona Candlin’s book *Micromuseology* incudes case studies of small museums that are often independent from mainstream or academic influence and retain a singular focus on a particular narrow topic. Her case studies elaborate on how small museum practices could impact the industry’s notions of museological practice in beneficial ways. Her research and analysis foregrounds, for instance, the micromuseological practice of providing “a radically particular view on something, somewhere, or someone,” as opposed to the more typical general view of an academic topic found in larger museums.

Canadian researcher Philippe Dubé’s research organization, Groupe de recherche-action en muséologie de l’Université Laval (GRAMUL), looked at small museums in Québec that were struggling with operational and infrastructural challenges and a “general state of fatigue.” He observed, for example, that at one of the museums they studied the source of the museum’s trouble was external. “…[T]he problems stemmed from the periphery, from an operational framework defined from outside and, more specifically, from public and governmental expectations created by an official definition that small and medium-sized museums simply cannot meet.”

History Cambridge

After over 110 years of being an exclusive historical institution, the Cambridge Historical Society knew it needed to change. In 2020 we began working on a new strategic plan that emphasized who we wanted to be: an organization that is inclusive, open to all, and committed to sharing the stories of everyone (especially those we have historically excluded). We embraced our new vision by rebranding as History Cambridge and began living our values of thinking, listening, and testing. The results have been interesting and meaningful, and, most importantly, they feel right. We still have a long way to go to achieving our vision, but we are now able to build off of our successes and work towards our beautiful future.

Old Stone House Museum & Historic Village

The story of African American Alexander Lucius Twilight has always been central at the Old Stone House Museum & Historic Village. However, since 2020 and the civil unrest, political turmoil, and reassessment of what racial equity means in this country, we realize how essential Twilight's story is to the national, state and local narrative. Here in the northernmost region of Vermont, we celebrate the story of an early 19th century person of color whose legacy resonates clearly in everything we do: the tours we give to visitors, our summer camps for kids, our many seasonal events, our exhibits and even our lodging amenities onsite. With the life, legacy and times of Alexander Twilight still solidly at the center, we now strive to preserve, educate and inspire in a variety of ways that are designed to reach a broad, diverse audience, build social capital and strengthen community resilience for a more stable future.

**For your reference…**

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