

Perspectives on Women's Museum Projects from a Historian of women (or, been there, done that, and some lessons learned).

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First: why am I, as a historian of European women and comparative feminism, on this panel?

Although I am not a certified an historian of U.S. women in particular , I have done some work in that field and am a charter member of the NWHM. I do think a museum dedicated to the history of women in the United States is a worthy enterprise, even though I would like it even better if it aspired to develop leaky borders, appropriate for a country populated by immigrants. But that's another story.

My credentials for speaking today are as follows: From 1999 to 2011 I was a member of the working Board of the International Museum of Women, a private initiative based in San Francisco. I played a key role in the launch of which is now a "virtual" museum at <<http://www.imow.org>> , which since March of this year has partnered with the equally innovative Global Fund for Women.

Coming to the project - and to the board -- as a scholar-historian in 1999, I received a crash course in museum building, museum culture, and museum costs. I chaired the crucial exhibition and programs committee for many years (until we hired a vice-president who took over those duties and brought in curators and educators). Between 1999 and 2011, I worked closely with our founder and president Elizabeth Colton on every aspect of IMOW's development - from concept definition to site location, to fund-raising, to working with (and guiding and educating) exhibition content developers, to interviewing architects and exhibit development firms, and to crafting the interpretative plan for the potential bricks-and-mortar museum project.

After our chosen site (on a pier in the San Francisco Bay administered by the Port Authority) turned out to require too much of an investment by our donors (est. \$20 M) merely to retrofit its substructure, I participated in re-strategizing our project as an Internet museum. The "due diligence" effectively killed our building project, but sent us in an important new direction as a virtual museum, one that has since won honors from the museum community. Elizabeth Colton and I have co-published a handful of articles about our project internationally, including in the UNESCO publication *Museum International*, and in Spain and Italy. Our staff has developewd worldwide networks and has been co-producing events with partners on the ground all over the world.

As a Ph.D. historian and published author in the field of women's history (and a co-founder of the International Federation for Research in Women's History), I have also confronted the joys and difficulties of incorporating, for a lay audience, sophisticated concepts (such as gender analysis) that have

developed during the last 40+ years worth of international women's history scholarship. I have wrestled with how to convey, not always satisfactorily, deep scholarship as "soundbites" or short paragraphs, and how to make content "entertaining" as well as educational. I helped establish an international women's history advisory board for IMOW, in parallel with its Global Council of women world leaders. I gave mini-seminars to the Board and, more rarely, to the museum staff. I quickly learned, though, that what we really needed were several full time women's history experts in the office, working hand in glove with administrative and curatorial staff and with interns to embed a historical consciousness, to inform and integrate the most interesting and pertinent findings of women's history, and – not least– to teach fact-checking and double-sourcing to young people who would rather consult the Wikipedia on the Internet than read the books by scholars. Without historians on-site, our project relentlessly morphed toward a contemporary social action project targeted primarily at young adult women. This was not a bad thing, per se, but because there were no women's historians on staff, IMOW did not become the women's history museum that it might have become, and that Elizabeth Colton and I wanted it to become. In this story lie some lessons to be pondered by the NWHM.

What I say now about IMOW is that our path-breaking online exhibits are "making history" for contemporary women around the world (it has hundreds of thousands of visitors annually). The material archived on the site is spectacular and it will, in its turn, become a historical resource. Check out the past virtual exhibits: "Imagining Ourselves," "Women, Power, and Politics," and "Economica" – they remain available on the site - as well as the most recent exhibitions "Mama" and "Muslima."

My small but continuing contribution to the "women's history" aspect is linked to IMOW's blog "Her Blueprint," where since 2007 I have published a periodic blog, "Clio Talks Back," (this phrase indicates the desperate impatience of the so-called Muse of History with being – for centuries – merely an inspiration for the male-centered creations of male historians and who decides to speak for herself). My blog can be consulted at <http://imowblog.blogspot.com> as part of "Her Blueprint", and the backfiles are available on the Museum's website. It is pithy and full of historical documents, beginning with one that identifies the French writer Olympe de Gouges, author of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman," as the first female blogger.

I want to convey this message to the NWHM: it is ESSENTIAL to your credibility to engage with and involve the scholars in women's history – NOW – and not put them "on hold" for some later date. It is they who know the material and who have important ideas about what concepts and stories to convey and can work with content developers on how to convey them. It is ESSENTIAL to your success to engage with these colleagues. It is not enough to say: "Let's build the building and then decide what we will put

in it, and how. People want to know, especially potential funders, what it will contain, what will it exhibit and how the building itself would relate to the content. They will want to know whether it is based in a forward-looking concept, one that will incorporate gender analysis (e.g., the intertwined development of the feminine and masculine, and the complex interactions between women and men); they will be looking to see whether it will offer a feminist perspective on women's past, and not merely rehearse a catalog of achieving women or the "success story" version of the women's rights campaigns. Granted, a public audience will want to learn about achieving women as well as the campaigns for women's rights, but that is not enough; it will want to know also about the conditions that blocked achievement, the conditions that permitted achievement; it will want to know about how women challenged and struggled against the patriarchal status quo, how they confronted the politics of knowledge, how they engaged with the major issues of their days and of ours. They will also want to know about women who were content with the way things were, and why. In short, the offerings of a NWHM must be context rich and provocative.

A museum that simply "celebrates" women, that is not analytical, that provides only a showcase for "the hat worn by Ms. So and So when she did Such and Such," will not satisfy either museum funders or prospective museum audiences. It is admittedly fun to look at the "stuff" of famous women – taking some examples of women's exhibitions and museums outside the United States – at Princess Diana's ballgowns or her going away outfit at Kensington Palace, or at Eva Peron's dresses in her museum in Buenos Aires, for example – or in the United States, at the Inaugural gowns of the First Ladies at the Smithsonian. But this will not produce a stream of returning visitors.

The real challenge will be to present context-rich glimpses into American women's ideas and actions. Will the NWHM choose to focus on women's "stuff" – or on how women have struggled to meet various historical challenges? It does not go without saying that FOCUSING ON WOMEN'S HISTORY NECESSARILY DOES REWRITE HISTORY – the old boy's history whose earlier monopoly on historical knowledge we are trying to shatter. At the National Museum of American History some years ago, my colleague Edith Mayo did a superb job of recontextualizing the President's wives inaugural gowns in a thought-provoking, social historical way, but after she retired the Smithsonian that exhibition was dismantled and returned to its earlier focus. And the powers-that-be at NMAH decided that they had "done" women – and that was that. A huge step backwards!!! It is not possible to "do" women's history, the history of the country's majority, as a one-shot affair.

The NWHM project has some hard choices to make. And they cannot wait. Speaking for myself, I dearly hope that the Commission that has just been endorsed by the House will take seriously the question of insisting on the presence of those who have done the research and can share their knowledge – these ARE

the hundreds of Ph.D. historians of women who have done such outstanding work during the last 40-50 years. To build this museum without integrating them and their knowledge base at the outset is to throw away an incredible opportunity. To say after sixteen long years that the scholars of women's history are unnecessary at this point but will be included "When we get to the point of discussing context....." [I am quoting Joan Wages] is surely a bad joke!!!

Let me conclude by quoting from an editorial by Roger Rosenblatt, which appeared in Time Magazine, 25 May 2002 (his thoughts about a possible memorial to the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center)

When the Sterling Library was going up at Yale in the 1930s, there was a big to-do over the building because it was one of the more impressive modern edifices of its kind in the world. Some wag who had his values straight proposed posting a sign outside the entrance when the building opened that read: "This is not the library. The library is inside."

We need to get clear about – and certainly the NWHM officers and staff, the congressional sponsors, and the hopefully forthcoming Congressional Committee will need to ponder – what will be “inside” this edifice. They will need to remember that it's the content, not the building, that really counts. The building is merely the receptacle, though certainly it should reflect the concept. The concept and content, the exhibitions and their ability to challenge viewers, to make us think and reflect, and to learn from women's past the lessons that will serve us in the present and the future – these are the important things. With all due respect to the efforts that have been made to date, I am certain that without the active participation of those who have dug out the documents and have rendered American women's history visible in exciting and imaginative ways – the scholar-historians of women's history – these important aspects will be compromised.

Museum audiences these days need to be challenged. The NWHM project has the potential to challenge its visitors – through its concept and content, developed in tandem with the experts – to SEE women in the American experience as they have never been seen before. Let's do it right!

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