

American Studies Capstone Seminar
Making the Past: Museums, Lowell, and the Representation of History

40.401, sec. 201

M/W 1-2:15

Fall 2007

UMass Lowell

Michael Millner

office: 418 O'Leary Library

michael_millner@uml.edu

office hrs: M 12-1, W 9-10, F 12-1

& by appointment

I count 166 museums in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They range from contemporary art museums (like the ICA in Boston) to living-history museums (like Plimoth Plantation), from research-focused museums (like some of the Harvard archives) to entertainment-oriented museums (like the wax museum in Salem), from heritage/history museums (like the ones here in Lowell) to science and technology museums, from the sublime (the Museum of Fine Arts) to the absurd (MOBA – the Museum of Bad Art).

These museums are important sites for our understanding of culture and history. Indeed, along side other mass-cultural instruments like television and schools, they are among the most public and influential sites for the interpretation of history and culture. In particular, heritage and history museums shape the ways that we understand the past. In their representation of that past, they construct pictures of the nation, its institutions, race, gender, ethnicity, public life, private life, etc. They are also shaped by the present – the concerns of social history, identity politics, and globalization. In many instances, they offer us a usable past – one that fits well with today's values. Sometimes they attempt to resist and critique present-day values. Art museums are just as influential as heritage/history museums. They help determine what counts as "culture" and establish that category as separate from the everyday. They are influential in establishing cultural hierarchy – what is high culture and low, what is avant garde and completely quotidian.

Over the past couple of decades museums have become important for another reason: they are sites of tourism and have become engines for economic and urban development. In fact, cities themselves have in some instances become museums. Think of the Boston Freedom Trail or parts of downtown Lowell. There are many questions to ask about this phenomenon – namely, how is historical interpretation affected when it is so closely entwined with development and tourism?

In this course we take up this question and others surrounding these issues. The first three quarters of the course are dedicated to reading scholarship about museums and then visiting local museums so as to apply that scholarship. The essays and chapters that we will read are about the history of museums of various sorts, the types and strategies of display, ethnographies of curators and visitors, and the politics of representation, among other issues. The final quarter of the course is dedicated to the final capstone project. This assignment offers students a great deal of freedom to be intrepid and creative. You might design your own museum exhibit, conduct your own ethnography, work in close relation to a local museum, do a history of some part of the development of the National Park in Lowell, or write an in-depth appraisal of a local museum. This assignment will be broken down into small parts and developed in close consultation with me. You may choose to work as a group or individual, but the assignment should entail about fifteen pages of work on each person's part.

Required Texts:

There are only two required texts for this course. Many of the essays will be provided by me in the course packet. Please also keep in mind that you are responsible for the museum fees.

Richard Handler and Eric Gable. The New History in an Old Museum. Duke UP, 1997.

Cathy Stanton. The Lowell Experiment. Massachusetts UP, 2006.

Course Rules and Requirements

1. **Class participation** makes possible a dynamic, collaborative learning community -- the possibility that we as a community produce knowledge. For this reason, class participation is part of your final grade. In order to participate you must, of course, come to class well prepared. Don't just do the reading, but write down questions you have and begin to develop opinions about the reading. Always bring the assigned texts and materials with you to class: every class discussion will involve us in some close analysis of specific passages and images. I will often provide handouts with study questions, and you should come to class having considered those questions in depth. You should also come to each class with at least one marked passage or image and/or one well-considered question or observation to launch discussion. The less assertive need not fear: class participation is not measured by how much you talk; rather, it is the degree of your involvement with and attentiveness in the class, your ability to listen to and respond to your peers, your willingness to share your thoughts in a constructive way.
2. You will write **one formal paper (5-7 pages)** at the midterm **and do a final project (15 pages)** in this course. For each I will distribute a handout detailing requirements, due dates, and procedures. Papers are due **AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS** and must be typed. A late paper will be docked half a letter grade for each class period it is late.
3. **Plagiarism or cheating** of any sort will result in failure of the course. For a discussion of plagiarism see the plagiarism handout.
4. This course has various other small writing assignments and reading quizzes which play a role in your final grade.
5. **You are required to attend class.** Also, you must have prepared whatever material the assignment requires. An absence will affect your participation grade. And prolonged absences will lead to failure of the course. If you miss class more than three times I will expect you to see me in my office to discuss your future in the course and possible withdrawal. If you miss five classes you will fail the course.
6. If you come to class **excessively or repeatedly late**, it will affect your grade. Also, please refrain from getting up and leaving the room during class unless it's an emergency. Please do not eat in class – however, you may drink.
7. Your **final grade** is comprised of your grades on the 5-7pp paper (25% of the total), your grade on the final project (50% of the total), and class participation (which includes quizzes and other daily activities and constitutes 25% of the final grade).
8. In the event of a **class cancellation** because of snow or my absence, please stay current with the syllabus.
9. Please feel free to drop by my office hours to discuss the class or the reading/writing assignments. Of course, I will be happy to make appointments at other times if my office hours conflict with your schedule. **You can best reach me by email.** Please do not leave messages on my office phone; it may take me 48 hours to return your call because I do come into the office everyday.
10. You are **responsible for checking you UML email account.**

Course Syllabus

Week (1) of 9/5

W: Course introduction: central issues and debates in museum studies

Week (2) of 9/10

- M: **Museum visit:** Homework due: Visit Mill Girls Exhibit (see for more information: https://cms.ner.nps.gov/lowe/planyourvisit/boat_tour.htm)
On interpreting museum displays: Homework due: Read first half of Henrietta Lidchi, “The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures,” 151-184 (handout)

Museum Visitation Assignment: Take notes on the following and be ready to turn them in: Consider the primary goal or intent of the exhibition, secondary goals (if apparent), what kinds of objects were exhibited, how was the exhibition designed (include lighting, traffic flow, use of exhibition cases, etc.), what kinds of conservation issues were posed by the exhibition, how were objects labeled, what sort of documentation accompanied the exhibition (catalogue, gallery brochures, etc.), was public programming/outreach developed for the exhibition, what kind of attention was given to multicultural issues? Consider objects in the exhibit: how are they represented?

- W: **On interpreting museum displays:** Homework due: Read second half of “The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures” 184-218 (handout)
On the history of heritage and history museums: Homework due: Read Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present,” 3-37 (packet)

Week (3) of 9/17

- M: **Museum visit:** Homework due: Visit Cotton Mill Exhibit (answer the same questions as above)
On interpreting museum displays: Homework due: Mary Blewett, “Machines, Workers, and Capitalists: The Interpretation of Textile Industrialization in New England Museums,” 262-293 (handout)
On the history of museums: Homework due: Read Lawrence Levine on the nineteenth U.S. museum, 146-158 (handout)
- W: **On interpreting museum displays:** Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography,” 17-78 (handout)

Week (4) of 9/23

- M: **Interpreting Colonial Williamsburg:** Homework due: first three chapters, Handler and Gable, The New History in an Old Museum, 3-77.
- W: **Interpreting Heritage Museums:** Homework due: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Destination Museum,” 131-176 (handout)

Week (5) of 10/1

- M: **Interpreting Colonial Williamsburg:** Homework due: chs. 4 and 5, Handler and Gable, The New History in an Old Museum, 78-124.
Dissenting Opinion: Homework due: reviews of Handler and Gable:
Carson, Cary, “Lost in the Fun House: A Commentary on Anthropologists’ First Contact with History Museums,” Journal of American History 81(1): 137-50 (available through the library web site)
- W: **Museum visit:** take on the walking tours of Lowell (same questions as above)
Interpreting Lowell: Homework due: Stanton, The Lowell Experiment, 3-28

Week (6) of 10/8

- M: NO CLASS – Columbus Day (University Closed)
- W: **Interpreting Lowell:** Stanton, Chs. 3 and 4, 45-96

Week (7) of 10/15

- M: No class, but meet with me about essays due on Wed. Bring a draft to the meeting.
- W: **5-7 page essay do on your analysis of a museum exhibit**
In class: for your delight: popular culture representations of museums

Week (8) of 10/22

- M: **Interpreting Plimoth Plantation:** Homework due: Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Plimoth Plantation," 189-200 (handout)
Representing Native Americans: Homework due: "Native Americans in Museums," Anthropology Today, Vol. 16, No. 6, Dec. 2000, 8-13
- W: NO CLASS: TRIP TO Plimoth Plantation

Week (9) of 10/29

- M: **Cultural development and economic development:** Readings TBA
- W: **Cultural development and economic development:** Homework due: 97-132

Week (10) of 11/5

- M: Museum Visit: Salem Witch Museum
- W: Museums, nationalism, and globalization: Sharon J. Macdonald, "Museums, national, postnational and transcultural identities," Museum and Society 1 (1) [2003]: 1-16.

Week (11) of 11/12

PLEASE NOTE: We have class on THURSDAY this week, but no class on Monday.

- M: NO CLASS: Veterans' Day (University Closed)
- W: **Interpreting Art Museums:** Homework due: Carol Duncan, "Art museums and the ritual of citizenship," 88-103 (handout)
Colin Trodd, "The discipline of pleasure; or, how art history looks at the art museum," Museum and Society 1 (1) [2003]: 17-29.
- TH: **Topic for Final Project Due**
NO CLASS, but meet with me.

Week (12) of 11/19 Note: Thanksgiving Week

- M: **Museum Visit:** Addison Museum in Andover
- W: NO CLASS: I have to leave town to see Family (this class will be made up by the trip to Plimoth Plantation)

Week (13) of 11/26

The final two weeks of class are given over to the final project and meetings with me.

M: **Outline of Final Project Due**

W: meet with me

Week of (14) of 12/3

M: **Draft of Final Project Due**

W: meet with me

Week (15) of 12/10

M: **Final Project Presentations**

W: **Hardcopy of Final Project Due**
LAST DAY OF CLASS