

## History 627: Museum and Historic Site Interpretation

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Spring 2002  
Mon-Wed 4:00 – 5:15 PM  
McIver Room 222

Dr. Kathleen Franz  
Office: McIver 243  
Tel: 334-5645  
Email [kgfranz@uncg.edu](mailto:kgfranz@uncg.edu)

### **Course Summary**

This course introduces students to several aspects of historic interpretation for the public and involves them in the hands-on creation of a public history project. The course is divided into three sections: history of museums and historic sites, interpretive methods, and intellectual debates. The first section on the history of museums provides historical context for contemporary museum practice. The second section on interpretive methods gives students practical skills in formulating, organizing, and completing public history projects including exhibits, educational programs, and historic site interpretation. The course offers a greater understanding of the various interpretive tools that museum professionals use on a daily basis in museums. These include how to employ text, graphics, and media to effectively interpret the past to a wide audience. Finally, the class will engage in some of the current intellectual debates surrounding museums as a cultural institutions.

### **Learning Goals**

1. Understand the historical development of museums and historic sites in the United States and Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
2. Build strategies and skills for interpreting history in a public setting. This includes learning the process of exhibition development, learning to write effective label text, and learning how to use graphics and multi-media to tell a story.
3. Cultivate a broad understanding of how museums and historic sites become producers of culture, identity, and memory. Understand the cultural debates currently influencing museum practice.

### **Books**

- Kenneth Ames, Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits, Alta Mira Press.
- Michael Belcher, Exhibitions in Museums. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Representing the Nation: A Reader, Histories, Heritage, and Museums. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Richard Handler and Eric Gable, The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Delores Hayden, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America. Johns Hopkins, 2000.
- Ellen Cochran Hirzy, ed. Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1992.
- Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan, The Presence of the Past. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Beverly Serrell, Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach. Alta Mira Press, 1996.
- Patricia West, Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.

**Web sites:**

**Legacies = [www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu](http://www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu)**

**Teaching with Historic Places = <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp>**

**Assignments and Grading**

The success of this course depends on the active participation of students. Students should come prepared to discuss the material. That means having read the assigned reading, taken notes, and prepared a few questions or issues to raise in class.

**Class participation 20%**

(Includes attendance, oral participation, leading one class)

**2 Exhibit Reviews 40%**

(20% each. 5-8 pages each)

**Final Project 40%**

(This project must include a public component. Guidelines will be handed out in class.)  
See attachment for topics.

## **Course Schedule**

### **January 14 - INTRODUCTION**

#### ***History of Museums***

#### **January 16 - LEGACIES**

Visit the Legacies Website: [www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu](http://www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu)

?? Spencer Crew, 'Who Owns History?': History in the Museum" in The History Teacher, November 1996. (ER)

Meet in Jackson Library, First-Floor Computer Lab

#### **January 21 - MLK HOLIDAY - NO CLASS**

#### **January 23 - Field Trip to North Carolina Museum of History Meet at the Museum Reception Desk at 3:30PM**

#### **January 28 - MUSEUMS**

Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1925,

#### **January 30- MUSEUMS**

Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1925

Boswell and Evans, ed., Representing the Past: Nation Read the following:  
Part 3: Introduction, Chapters 11, 12, 13 (pp. 233-297).

#### **February 4 - HOUSE MUSEUMS**

Patricia West, Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums

#### **February 6 - HOUSE MUSEUMS**

Patricia West, Domesticating History

*✍ Exhibit Review #1 Due in Class*

#### **February 11 - LANDSCAPES**

Delores Hayden, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America.

#### **February 13 - LANDSCAPES**

Delores Hayden, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America.

**February 18 - Landscapes as Historic Sites**

Visit the Teaching With Historic Places Website

**Read:** CRM vol. 23, no. 8, 2000 URL address: [www.cr.nps.gov/crm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/crm)

✍ **Project Proposals Due In Class**

✍ 5:30 PM Public History Guest Speaker: Travis McDonald, Poplar Forest Historic Site, VA. Location TBA

**February 20 - Field Trip to Tannenbaum Park**

**February 25 - Project Research**

**February 27 - Project Research**

***Interpretative Methods***

**March 4 - IDEAS and IMAGES**

Kenneth Ames, et. al. [Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits](#)

**March 6 - IDEAS and IMAGES**

Kenneth Ames, et. al. [Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits](#)

**March 11 - Spring Break**

**March 13 - Spring Break**

**March 18 - EXHIBITION PROCESS**

Michael Belcher, [Exhibitions in Museums](#)

**March 20 - Reading Day - No Class**

**March 25 - EXHIBITION PROCESS**

Michael Belcher, [Exhibitions in Museums](#)

**March 27 - TEXT**

Beverly Serrell, [Exhibition Labels: An Interpretive Approach](#) (1996)

**April 1 - TEXT**

Beverly Serrell, [Exhibition Labels: An Interpretive Approach](#) (1996)

**Assignment:** Bring an exhibit label to class for discussion.

**April 3 - MUSEUM EDUCATION**

Ellen Cochran Hirzy, ed. Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums.

\* "Anna Billings Gallup Popularizes the First Children's Museum," in Edward Alexander, The Museum in America (1997) (ER)

✍ *Exhibit Review #2 Due in Class*

***Intellectual Debates***

**April 8 - THE PAST IS PERSONAL (Out of Town)**

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life.

**April 10 - THE PAST IS PERSONAL**

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life.

**April 15 - INTERPRETATION IS PROBLEMATIC**

Richard Handler and Eric Gable, The New History in an Old Museum (1997)

**April 17 - INTERPRETATION IS PROBLEMATIC**

Handler and Gable, The New History in an Old Museum

\* Jeffery Stewart and Faith Davis Ruffins, "A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective, 1828-1984" in Benson, et. al. Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public (1986)

**April 22 - MUSEUMS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

Jessica Evans and David Boswell, Representing the Nation: A Reader in Heritage and Museums. London: Routledge, 1999.

**April 24 - MUSEUMS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

Jessica Evans and David Boswell, Representing the Nation: A Reader in Heritage and Museums. London: Routledge, 1999.

**April 29 - Project Editing**

**May 1 - Project Editing**

**May 6 - Class Presentations**

**May 8 - Class Presentations**

## **Explanation of Assignments**

### **Lead Class Discussion (10% Class Participation Grade)**

Each student must lead one class discussion.

\_\_\_ **Develop three to five questions** with which to begin discussion of the reading. Students may work in *groups* of two or three. You may also bring an example, such as an exhibit or tour, to class to illustrate the reading. You should plan about 15 to 20 minutes of material.

\_\_\_ **Meet with me** the week before you lead class to discuss you plans.

\_\_\_ **Write a short review** (2-3 pages) of the assigned reading. Each student must do this individually. The review should address the following : What is the author's central question and thesis? Did s/he prove the argument to your satisfaction? Why or why not? What evidence was particularly effective? What evidence didn't work? Why? Use quotes and examples from the book to support your points. Does this book suggest other possible research topics? If so, what?

### **2 Exhibit Reviews – 6-10 pages each (40%)**

Each student must write *two* exhibit reviews. You can review a history exhibit, a historic site, or an on-line history site. *AVOID ART MUSEUMS AND THE MESDA COLLECTION*. Reviews must balance description and analysis. You must use the *course readings* to help critique the exhibit or historic site. Cite course readings using *footnotes*. (You may want to consult The Chicago Manuel of Style for help with footnotes.) If this seems unclear, don't worry; we will discuss the elements of a good exhibit review in class.

\_\_\_ **Find models**. Read published exhibit reviews to use as models. You can find scholarly reviews of exhibits in Pubic Historian, American Quarterly, and in Ken Ames, et. al. Ideas and Images (1997). Museum News is a good place to find reviews written by public history professionals.

\_\_\_ When you critique an exhibit, remember not to slam the interpretation. Note what is useful about the interpretation, objects, and design as part of your critique. Suggest what could be changed to improve the interpretation.

## **Final Project (40%)**

The final project must combine historical research with the public presentation of that research. When designing your project proposal please adhere to the following guidelines.

### ***General Guidelines***

1. All projects must have a public dimension. Final projects can take the shape of a *small exhibit, a tour, an educational program, or a public performance*.
2. Projects should benefit the community; meaning your work should fill a need at the university or a local museum. This project can then be listed on your résumé as public history experience.
3. All projects must use graphics and/or three-dimensional artifacts to “tell the story.”
4. Projects must draw on *original historical research* into the subject area you choose. This means finding primary sources as well as secondary sources, books and articles, that provide an intellectual framework for your work.
5. Proposal. Proposals should include a five **(5) page summary** of the project and a ***calendar*** for completion. What is the goal of the project? What will be the final form of the project? How will it address some of the intellectual concerns in the course reading? What interpretive methods will you use? What historical resources or collections will you use?
6. Script and Image List. (10-12 pages) See Michael Belcher.
7. Final Report. Submit a final report (10-15 pages) along with the finished project at the end of the semester. The report should be based on your proposal, giving an overview of the project and tying it to some of the ideas and *readings* discussed in class. Remember to include a bibliography of everything you've read.