

## **HIS/IAR 627: Museum and Historic Site Interpretation**

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Spring 2002  
T-Th 3:30 – 4:45 PM  
Office Hours: T-Th 11-12:30

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### **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 course teaches students how to develop an exhibits, websites, tours, how to write effective label text, and how to use graphics, objects and media to tell a story.
3. Cultivate a broad understanding of how museums have become cultural sites for the construction and contestation of history, 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.
- 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. . **If you miss more than two classes, there will be a 3% reduction of your final grade for each absence.** Beyond even this penalty, a student who neglects attendance and preparation risks failing the course.

**Class participation 30%**

(Includes attendance, oral participation, leading one class)

**1 Exhibit Review 20%**

(5-8 pages)

**1 Field Study Review 10%**

(3-5 pages)

**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)

Question: How has the representation of history changed at the Smithsonian over time?

✍ Short writing assignment due answering this question.

**January 21** - Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1925

#### **January 23 – Final Project**

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

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

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

Patricia West, Domesticating History

#### **February 4 - LANDSCAPES**

Delores Hayden, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America.

✍ *Exhibit Review #1 Due in Class*

#### **February 6 - LANDSCAPES**

Delores Hayden, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America.

Exercise: Using measured drawings to read a landscape. HABS/HAER Drawings.

#### **February 11 – TEACHING with HISTORIC LANDSCAPES**

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**

#### **February 13 - Field Trip to Tannenbaum Park.**

**Meet with Adrienne Byrd, Park Director.**

#### ***Interpretative Methods***

#### **February 18 - IDEAS and IMAGES**

Kenneth Ames, et. al. Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits

**February 20 - IDEAS and IMAGES**

Kenneth Ames, et. al. Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits

**February 25 - EXHIBITION PROCESS**

Michael Belcher, Exhibitions in Museums

**February 27 - EXHIBITION PROCESS**

Michael Belcher, Exhibitions in Museums

**March 4 - Project Research**

**March 6 - Project Research**

**March 11 - Spring Break**

**March 18 - TEXT**

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

**March 20 - TEXT**

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

✍ **Assignment:** *Bring an exhibit label to class for discussion. Make a transparency of the label.*

**March 25 - The POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION**

Readings will be forthcoming.

**March 27 Pamplin Park and Washington D.C Field Trip**

*Leave for Pamplin Park (Petersburg) on March 28, spend the night in Fredericksburg that evening, and tour Washington on March 29. Return to North Carolina on the evening of March 29. Instructions for paper will be discussed in class.*

***Intellectual Debates***

**April 1 - THE PAST IS PERSONAL**

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

**April 3 - THE PAST IS PERSONAL**

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

**April 8 - INTERPRETATION IS PROBLEMATIC**

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

**April 10 - 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 15 - MUSEUMS ARTICULATE NATIONAL IDENTITY**

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

**April 17 - MUSEUMS ARTICULATE NATIONAL IDENTITY**

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

**April 22 - Project Editing**

**April 24 - Project Editing**

**April 29 - Class Presentations**

**May 1 - Class Presentations**

## **Explanation of Assignments**

### **Lead Class Discussion (30% Class Participation Grade)**

Each student must lead one class discussion.

\_\_\_ **Develop three to five questions** with which to begin discussion of the reading. You may also bring an example, such as an exhibit or tour, to class to illustrate the reading.

\_\_\_ **Write a short review** (1-2 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 Review – 6-10 pages each (20%)**

Each student must write an exhibit review. 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. 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 Public 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, a website, an educational program, or a public performance*. **The professor will provide the class with three or four approved projects that work in collaboration with local museums and historic sites.**
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. Project must include a Script and Image/Artifact 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.