

Laura Newsome
Observational Study
February 24th, 2010

When doing a comparative study on how information is presented and how visitors engage with that information in cultural institutions, it is important to have some sort of control to make sure that the study has some sort of meaningful results. The control can be the type of institution, the content of the exhibits, the group being observed, or any other number of things, but there must be something with which to base the comparison on. I am doing this project on two institutions which were exhibiting a similar set of information, but in very different environments. I visited the King Manor House, an historic house museum, and the John Brown exhibit at the New York Historical Society, a traditional history museum.

Both Rufus King (the featured owner of the King Manor) and John Brown were prominent political figures during early to mid-1800's and were avid abolitionists. While these two men have similar stories and an almost identical political world which shaped their lives and actions, the two museums have drastically different approaches in presenting this information, and this becomes glaringly evident in the narratives told and the ways in which the museum visitors engage with the information.

Some of these differences are quite apparent simply by looking at the mission statements of the two museums. The mission of the King Manor House is to showcase the roles of Rufus King and his son, John Alsop King, in the early antislavery movement, and the different aspects of life and work at King Manor in the nineteenth century. This is a very specific mission, and deals with a narrow set of information during a narrow time

period. The mission statement of the New York Historical Society is “to engage a broad range of people in American history through a series of initiatives that enliven and illuminate the past, from groundbreaking exhibitions of history and art that capitalize on the New-York Historical Society's extraordinary museum and library collections to intellectually engaging programming and educational activities.”. This shows that the John Brown exhibit is just a small part of the much larger institution, and they have a much broader set of information with which to build their exhibits.

From these mission statements we can also begin to see what the narrative approaches of these different types of institutions will be. The King Manor House starts with the smaller details and moves out. Their main focus is the King family and their life in that house. This is then expanded upon to show how the surrounding political climate affected the family, and, finally, what Rufus and John King were able to accomplish in that political environment. Conversely, the New York Historical Society starts off with the political climate and prominent issues of the time period concerned, and show how a turning point in that time period came down to one man – John Brown. On the one hand we have the people affecting the world, and on the other we have the world affecting the people.

For the King Manor house, the only way to view the museum is through a guided tour. There was no set time, as the guide explained when introducing the visitors to the museum, because each tour is based on what the visitors are interested in seeing and the level of information they are trying to obtain. I went on the tour with a small, but very diverse group of people. The tour started in the parlor, where we were seated in chairs

which the guide told us were period pieces, and similar to the ones guests of the King's would have sat in. This immediately engaged the visitors in the room around them and the other pieces of furniture they could see, and got us started about the lives of the Kings. As the guide was introducing us to the basic history of the King family and some of the important historical events of that time period, he periodically asked people questions to determine their level of knowledge concerning this topic. In answering these questions the visitors seemed to gain confidence in their knowledge and feel more comfortable asking questions about the house and King family.

The rest of the tour was much more informal and felt more like a conversation than a lecture. People were pointing out interesting things to each other and asking a lot of questions. The guide was easily able to answer almost everything, and explain why he could not answer a few of the questions (a PhD student is currently going through the King family papers for a dissertation so there are a lot of pieces of information popping up which have not been completely filled out yet). The guide was able to gracefully bring together information about the family and their personal histories, the political and social climate of that time period, and the architecture of the house. He clearly explained the research behind most of his knowledge of the house and the Kings, and the provenance of many of the pieces. Each person on the tour was able to comfortably linger on aspects of the house they were interested in without the fear of being left behind or missing something else. The tour of the six accessible rooms in the King Manor House ended up taking almost an hour and a half, and when it was over many of the visitors stayed behind, talking to the guide and each other about what they had just seen and other

historic houses they have visited. The guide gave us all fliers listing upcoming special events and programs, and several of the people I talked to planned on returning, bringing friends or children with them.

At the New York Historical Society, I had a very different experience. When I first entered the museum, I looked for fliers or an exhibition guide which would tell me more about the John Brown exhibit, but there was nothing more than the short blurb which I had already read on their website. After wandering around the museum for about fifteen minutes trying to find the exhibit, I found it on the second floor. The exhibit is in a small room with very low lighting, and all of the pieces being displayed were in glass cases on either side of the room. It took me about half an hour to go through everything being shown, most of which were practically illegible letters written by John Brown, transcriptions of speeches he gave about the abolition of slaves, and photographs.

Most of the writing provided by the curators talked about the political issues of the time, such as the Missouri compromise and the Civil War, and the exhibitions, from what I could tell, were meant to clarify or further explain these issues through the eyes of one man, John Brown. There were, however, almost no explanations of the pieces themselves, and in order for a visitor to really appreciate what they contained, they would have had to read each piece in its entirety.

When I was done going through the exhibit, I began to observe other visitors. There were about ten people in the room at any given time, with the exception of when a tour went through. On average, each person spent about a minute reading the introduction outside of the room (which was about a page long) and about thirty seconds looking at

each artifact. This is not nearly enough time to read everything displayed, and as nobody was speaking to anyone else, it was difficult to tell what they may have been getting out of the exhibit.

During the hour that I spent in the exhibit, one tour went through. There were about fifteen people in the tour, making the room uncomfortably crowded when added to the other visitors present. I followed the tour around, but was having trouble following what the guide was talking about. Everything seemed very scripted, and while he was talking about the life of John Brown and the political issues of the time, there did not seem to be much continuity in what he was saying and he utilized only about a quarter of the pieces on the exhibit to illustrate what he was talking about, and most of those pieces were photographs of the people he had mentioned. Nobody in the tour asked any questions, or seemed particularly interested in what was going on. I spoke with a few people as they were leaving the exhibit and asked them what they had gotten out of it. Among the most specific and articulate answers I received was “John Brown was a great abolitionist and did a lot for this country”.

While there is a great range of variety within each of these types of institutions, the two that I visited for the purposes of this study seemed to fall on opposite ends of the spectrum. The King Manor House presented its information in a personalized way which seems sure to engage all but the most cynical of historic house visitors, whereas the John Brown exhibit seemed to be prepackaged and uncaring as to what visitors took away from it. These two exhibits clearly illustrated to me how the way a museum presents its information can greatly affect whether a visitor becomes actively interested in history or

continues to think of it as a collection of disconnected names and dates.