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How Historical Museums Negotiate a Difficult Cultural Heritage

A community's past only comes to seem problematic or unproblematic through a retrospective assessment by various members or member groups. The same holds of the material and immaterial cultural heritage collected and exhibited by historical museums. The feelings it prompts in the viewers, such as shame, fear, contentment or pride, determine whether they are ready to assume it or reject it.

Generally we can say that for a long time historical museums, like art museums, were purely object-oriented and collected primarily "beautiful" and "unusual" material documents of the cultural inheritance. However, the rising interest in everyday history since the 1970s brought with it a change in the collecting policies of some historical institutions. Today many historical museums collect more thematically and thus are open to new categories of objects.

My paper will examine the various categories of objects that historical museums work with today in order to show what influence the museum curator has on the assessment of the cultural heritage and how the curator can help to shape or change a community's image of history. The focus will be on exhibition work.

The paper will also discuss whether the involvement of new categories of objects allows curators to address topics in their exhibitions that are impossible to present in a linear sequence of "traditional" museum pieces.

CV

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