

ROBERT C. POST

WHO OWNS AMERICA'S PAST?



THE SMITHSONIAN AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

Who Owns Americas Past The Smithsonian And The Problem Of History

Michael Hagner



Who Owns America's Past The Smithsonian And The Problem Of History:

Who Owns America's Past? Robert C. Post, 2013-10-15 From an insider's perspective Robert C Post offers insight into the politics of display and the interpretation of history Never before has a book about the Smithsonian detailed the recent and dramatic shift from collection driven shows with artifacts meant to speak for themselves to concept driven exhibitions in which objects aim to tell a story displayed like illustrations in a book Dust jacket flap *Who Owns America's Past?* Robert C. Post, 2013-10-15 When preserving our history what do we choose to value why and who decides Honorable Mention for the National Council on Public History Book Award of the National Council on Public History In 1994 when the National Air and Space Museum announced plans to display the Enola Gay the B 29 sent to destroy Hiroshima with an atomic bomb the ensuing political uproar caught the museum's parent Smithsonian Institution entirely unprepared As the largest such complex in the world the Smithsonian cares for millions of objects and has displayed everything from George Washington's sword to moon rocks to Dorothy's ruby slippers from The Wizard of Oz Why did this particular object arouse such controversy From an insider's perspective Robert C Post's *Who Owns America's Past* offers insight into the politics of display and the interpretation of history Never before has a book about the Smithsonian detailed the recent and dramatic shift from collection driven shows with artifacts meant to speak for themselves to concept driven exhibitions in which objects aim to tell a story displayed like illustrations in a book Even more recently the trend is to show artifacts along with props sound effects and interactive elements in order to create an immersive environment Rather than looking at history visitors are invited to experience it *Who Owns America's Past* examines the different ways that the Smithsonian's exhibitions have been conceived and designed whether to educate visitors celebrate an important historical moment or satisfy donor demands or partisan agendas Combining information from hitherto untapped archival sources extensive interviews a thorough review of the secondary literature and considerable personal experience Post gives the reader a behind the scenes view of disputes among curators academics and stakeholders that were sometimes private and at other times burst into headline news [Curating the American Past](#) Pete Daniel, 2022-02-04 As is well known Pete is an outstanding storyteller and this book is no exception Claire Strom Journal of Southern History In addition to chronicling significant exhibit work at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History *Curating the American Past* captures the excitement inherent in researching and writing history and Pete Daniel's efforts to prevent diluted celebratory stories from replacing the red meat of the American past In *Curating the American Past* Pete Daniel reveals how curators collect objects plan exhibits and bring alive the country's complex and exciting history In vivid detail Daniel recounts the exhilaration of innovative research the joys of collaboration and the rewards of mentoring new generations of historians In a career distinguished by prize winning publications and pathbreaking exhibitions Daniel also confronted the challenges of serving as a public historian tasked with protecting a definitive American museum from the erosion of scholarly standards *Curating the American Past* offers a wealth of museum

wisdom illuminating the crucial role that dedicated historians and curators serve within our most important repositories of cultural memory

Extinct Monsters to Deep Time Diana E. Marsh, 2019-02-18 Via the Smithsonian Institution an exploration of the growing friction between the research and outreach functions of museums in the 21st century Describing participant observation and historical research at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History as it prepared for its largest ever exhibit renovation Deep Time the author provides a grounded perspective on the inner workings of the world's largest natural history museum and the social processes of communicating science to the public From the introduction In exhibit projects the tension plays out between curatorial staff academic research or scientific staff charged with content and exhibitions public engagement or educational staff which I broadly group together as audience advocates charged with translating content for a broader public I have heard Kirk Johnson Sant Director of the NMNH say many times that if you look at dinosaur halls at different museums across the country you can see whether the curators or the exhibits staff has won At the American Museum of Natural History in New York it was the curators The hall is stark white and organized by phylogeny or the evolutionary relationships of species with simple albeit long text panels At the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago Johnson will tell you it was the exhibits people The hall is story driven and chronologically organized full of big graphic prints bold fonts immersive and interactive spaces and touchscreens At the Denver Museum of Nature and Science where Johnson had previously been vice president and chief curator we actually fought to a draw That he says is the best outcome a win on either side skews the final product too extremely in one direction or the other This creative tension when based on mutual respect is often what makes good exhibitions

History Comes Alive M. J. Rymsza-Pawlowska, 2017-10-03 During the 1976 Bicentennial celebration millions of Americans engaged with the past in brand new ways They became absorbed by historical miniseries like Roots visited museums with new exhibits that immersed them in the past propelled works of historical fiction onto the bestseller list and participated in living history events across the nation While many of these activities were sparked by the Bicentennial M J Rymsza Pawlowska shows that in fact they were symptomatic of a fundamental shift in Americans relationship to history during the 1960s and 1970s For the majority of the twentieth century Americans thought of the past as foundational to but separate from the present and they learned and thought about history in informational terms But Rymsza Pawlowska argues that the popular culture of the 1970s reflected an emerging desire to engage and enact the past on a more emotional level to consider the feelings and motivations of historic individuals and most importantly to use this in reevaluating both the past and the present This thought provoking book charts the era's shifting feeling for history and explores how it serves as a foundation for the experience and practice of history making today

Seeing Foucault's Pendulum Michael Hagner, 2025-09-30 An investigation of a cosmic experiment In 1851 the physicist L on Foucault performed an unforgettable experiment By suspending a large pendulum inside the dome of Paris Pantheon Foucault provided the first simple direct empirical evidence of the Earth's rotation an

undeniable demonstration of heliocentrism This experiment conducted long after the Copernican Revolution and using a laboratory apparatus rather than astronomical observation visually confirmed what had previously been accepted as theory The pendulum s motion clearly illustrated the Earth s rotation But Foucault s experiment did not end there It sparked a range of subsequent reenactments and interpretations each adding new layers to its meaning Repeated over and over again its afterlives were many as were its ramifications Historian Michael Hagner revisits this epoch making experiment and its reception from the nineteenth century to the present day and follows how cosmological questions conjoined political and aesthetic judgments about the public staging and history of science The pendulum experiment Hagner argues is more than just a mere scientific demonstration It contains within it the histories of technological innovation ideological conflicts and the rise of popular culture and visual media In a series of insightful studies of literary artistic and scientific reenactments Hagner uses both words and images to narrate the rich and complex legacy of this experiment Seeing Foucault s Pendulum includes among other fascinating tales a short but stunning history of the Copernican Revolution the paradigm shifting work of the nineteenth century astronomer Camille Flammarion and the reenactments of Foucault s experiment at the Smithsonian Institution and New York s United Nations building Linking nature to culture and calling for world unity the experiment s legacy extends beyond science It has been reimaged in Umberto Eco s novel Foucault s Pendulum and in Gerhard Richter s 2018 installation enchantments of the postmodern world theater where the relationship between knowledge and sensory experience is problematized anew A complex symbol in the history of ideas challenging our assumptions inspiring artistic expression and prompting philosophical reflection on our place in the cosmos Foucault s experiment serves as a powerful reminder that both the Earth and the universe should never be reduced to a disposable mass of human hubris and of irresponsible manipulation

Instrumentalizing the Past Jan Rydel, Stefan Troebst, 2022-09-20 In today s world we can point to many international disputes and interstate conflicts fueled by past events Historical resentments or memories of past suffering or fame are often used to justify political economic and even territorial demands Inter state disputes and historical conflicts should be understood as evidence of political and social tensions related to active serious differences in the assessment of the common past The book explains the role of such conflicts in international relations and suggests ways of classifying them It presents examples of the internationally relevant instrumentalisation of history from different regions of the world and outlines ways of overcoming them

Collecting and Exhibiting Computer-Based Technology Petrina Foti, 2018-11-05 Computer technology has transformed modern society yet curators wishing to reflect those changes face difficult challenges in terms of both collecting and exhibiting Collecting and Exhibiting Computer Based Technology examines how curators at the history and technology museums of the Smithsonian Institution have met these challenges Focusing on the curatorial process the book explores the ways in which curators at the institution have approached the accession and display of technological artifacts Such collections often have comparatively few precedents and can pose

unique dilemmas In analysing the Smithsonian's approach Foti takes in diverse collection case studies ranging from DNA analyzers to Herbie Hancock's music synthesizers from iPods to born digital photographs from the laptop used during the filming of the television program *Sex and the City* to Stanley the self-driving car Using her proposed model of expert curation she synthesizes her findings into a more universal framework for understanding the curatorial methods associated with computer technology and reflects on what it means to be a curator in a postdigital world *Collecting and Exhibiting Computer Based Technology* offers a detailed analysis of curatorial practice in a relatively new field that is set to grow exponentially It will be useful reading for curators scholars and students alike

Gender and Activism Mieke Aerts, 2015 This Yearbook attends to various ways in which women were active and organized themselves in order to question sex and gender related issues in the political arena Covering a diverse range of cultures and political situations the Yearbook discusses how women protested against perceived religious suppression actively participated in local democratic political institutions whilst not really changing gender roles or discussed experienced discrepancies between socialism and feminism How do women find their ways in democratic systems of governance What do these systems offer them in terms of emancipation and involvement in political decision making affecting their lives

The Ever-Changing Past James M. Banner, Jr., 2021-02-16 An experienced multi-faceted historian shows how revisionist history is at the heart of creating historical knowledge A rallying cry in favor of historians who revisiting past subjects change their minds Rewarding reading Kirkus Reviews History is not and has never been inert certain merely factual and beyond reinterpretation Taking readers from Thucydides to the origin of the French Revolution to the Civil War and beyond James M Banner Jr explores what historians do and why they do it Banner shows why historical knowledge is unlikely ever to be unchanging why history as a branch of knowledge is always a search for meaning and a constant source of argument and why history is so essential to individuals awareness of their location in the world and to every group and nation's sense of identity and destiny He explains why all historians are revisionists while they seek to more fully understand the past and how they always bring their distinct minds dispositions perspectives and purposes to bear on the subjects they study

The Museum Samuel J. Redman, 2024-10 Celebrates the resilience of American cultural institutions in the face of national crises and challenges On an afternoon in January 1865 a roaring fire swept through the Smithsonian Institution Dazed soldiers and worried citizens could only watch as the flames engulfed the museum's castle Rare objects and valuable paintings were destroyed The flames at the Smithsonian were not the first and certainly would not be the last disaster to upend a museum in the United States Beset by challenges ranging from pandemic and war to fire and economic uncertainty museums have sought ways to emerge from crisis periods stronger than before occasionally carving important new paths forward in the process The Museum explores the concepts of crisis as it relates to museums and how these historic institutions have dealt with challenges ranging from depression and war to pandemic and philosophical uncertainty Fires floods and hurricanes have all upended museum plans and forced people to ask difficult questions about

American cultural life With chapters exploring World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic the Great Depression World War II the 1970 Art Strike in New York City and recent controversies in American museums this book takes a new approach to understanding museum history By diving deeper into the changes that emerged from these key challenges Samuel J Redman argues that cultural institutions can and should use their history to prepare for challenges and solidify their identity going forward A captivating examination of crisis moments in US museum history from the early years of the twentieth century to the present day The Museum offers inspiration in the resilience and longevity of America s most prized cultural institutions

Life on Display Karen A. Rader,Victoria E.M. Cain,2014-10-03 Rich with archival detail and compelling characters Life on Display uses the history of biological exhibitions to analyze museums shifting roles in twentieth century American science and society Karen A Rader and Victoria E M Cain chronicle profound changes in these exhibitions and the institutions that housed them between 1910 and 1990 ultimately offering new perspectives on the history of museums science and science education Rader and Cain explain why science and natural history museums began to welcome new audiences between the 1900s and the 1920s and chronicle the turmoil that resulted from the introduction of new kinds of biological displays They describe how these displays of life changed dramatically once again in the 1930s and 1940s as museums negotiated changing often conflicting interests of scientists educators and visitors The authors then reveal how museum staffs facing intense public and scientific scrutiny experimented with wildly different definitions of life science and life science education from the 1950s through the 1980s The book concludes with a discussion of the influence that corporate sponsorship and blockbuster economics wielded over science and natural history museums in the century s last decades A vivid entertaining study of the ways science and natural history museums shaped and were shaped by understandings of science and public education in the twentieth century United States Life on Display will appeal to historians sociologists and ethnographers of American science and culture as well as museum practitioners and general readers

Prompt and Utter Destruction, Third Edition J. Samuel Walker,2016-06-27 In this concise account of why America used atomic bombs against Japan in 1945 J Samuel Walker analyzes the reasons behind President Truman s most controversial decision Delineating what was known and not known by American leaders at the time Walker evaluates the options available for ending the war with Japan In this new edition Walker incorporates a decade of new research mostly from Japanese archives only recently made available that provides fresh insight on the strategic considerations that led to dropping the bomb From the debate about whether to invade or continue the conventional bombing of Japan to Tokyo s agonizing deliberations over surrender and the effects of both low and high level radiation exposure Walker continues to shed light on one of the most earthshaking moments in history Rising above an often polemical debate the third edition presents an accessible synthesis of previous work and new research to help make sense of the events that ushered in the atomic age

Active Collections Elizabeth Wood,Rainey Tisdale,Trevor Jones,2017-11-07 In recent years many museums have implemented sweeping changes

in how they engage audiences However changes to the field's approaches to collections stewardship have come much more slowly Active Collections critically examines existing approaches to museum collections and explores practical yet radical ways that museums can better manage their collections to actively advance their missions Approaching the question of modern museum collection stewardship from a position of tough love the authors argue that the museum field risks being constrained by rigid ways of thinking about objects Examining the field's relationship to objects artifacts and specimens the volume explores the question of stewardship through the dissection of a broad range of issues including questions of quality over quantity emotional attachment dispassionate cataloging and cognitive biases in curatorship The essays look to insights from fields as diverse as forest management library science and the psychology of compulsive hoarding to inform and innovate collection practices Essay contributions come from both experienced museum professionals and scholars from disciplines as diverse as psychology education and history The result is a critical exploration that makes the book essential reading for museum professionals as well as those in training

Curious Devices and Mighty Machines Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, 2022-09-26 From their quirky origins to their contemporary role as centers of advocacy a look at the secret lives of science museums past present and future Science museums have paradoxes at their core They must be accessible and fun while representing increasingly complex science They must be both historic and contemporary Their exhibits attract millions but most of their objects remain in deep storage seldom seen This book delves into these conflicts revealing the secret lives of science curators where science objects come from and who uses them and ultimately what science museums are for With an insider's eye Samuel J M M Alberti exposes the idiosyncratic past and intriguing current practices of these institutions and sets out a map for their future

Automobile Heritage and Tourism Michael V. Conlin, Lee Jolliffe, 2016-12 The Barbados Historic Rally Carnival

Crying the News Vincent DiGirolamo, 2019-08-05 Crying the News A History of America's Newsboys is the first book to place newsboys at the center of American history analyzing their inseparable role as economic actors and cultural symbols in the creation of print capitalism popular democracy and national character DiGirolamo's sweeping narrative traces the shifting fortunes of these little merchants over a century of war and peace prosperity and depression exploitation and reform chronicling their exploits in every region of the country as well as on the railroads that linked them

The Librarians of Congress Christian A. Nappo, 2016-02-04 For over 200 years the Library of Congress has served as our national library Since its establishment in 1800 thirteen librarians have served as the institution's head librarian Sadly little is known about most of them The Librarians of Congress is the first book to contain the biographies of all these librarians Beginning with a brief history of the Library of Congress the book then contains short biographies of each of the thirteen Librarians of Congress beginning with John J Beckley and ending with James H Billington Each biography is accompanied by a photograph A subject index concludes this work

Curating and Re-curating the American Wars in Vietnam and Iraq Christine Sylvester, 2019 We have long saved and curated objects from wars to commemorate the war

experience These objects appear at national museums and memorials and are often mentioned in war novels and memoirs Through them we institutionalize narratives and memories of national identity as well as international power and purpose While people interpret war in different ways and there is no ultimate authority on the experiences of any war curators of war objects make different choices about what to display or write about none of which are entirely problematic good or accurate This book asks whose vantage points on war are made available and where for public consumption it also questions whose war experiences are not represented are minimized or ignored in ways that advantage contemporary militarism Christine Sylvester looks at four sites of war memory the National Museum of American History the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Arlington National Cemetery and selected novels and memoirs of the American wars in Vietnam and Iraq to consider the way war knowledge is embedded in differing sites of memory and display While the museum shows war aircraft and a laptop computer used by a journalist covering the American war in Iraq visitors to the Vietnam Memorial or Arlington Cemetery find more prosaic and civilian items on view such as baby pictures slices of birthday cake or even car keys In addition memoirs and novels of these wars tend to curate ghastly horrors of wars as experienced by soldiers or civilians For Sylvester these sites of war memory and curation provide ways to understand dispersed war authority and interpretation and to consider which sites invite viewers to revere a war and which reflect personal experiences that show the undersides of these wars Sylvester shows that scholars policymakers and other citizens need to consider different types of situated memory and knowledge in order to fully grasp war rather than idealize it

Frank O'Hara and MoMA Matthew Holman, 2025-08-07 This is the first book to closely examine the curatorial work that the celebrated poet Frank O'Hara 1926-1966 undertook for the Museum of Modern Art in New York and abroad Upon his premature death the New York Times obituary ran with the headline Frank O'Hara 40 Museum Curator Exhibitions Aide at Modern Art Dies Also a Poet However in the half a century since O'Hara's fascinating career as a curator where he oversaw exhibitions of the likes of Jackson Pollock Helen Frankenthaler David Smith and Larry Rivers among others has been eclipsed by the critical attention given over to his poetry Drawing on a broad range of unpublished archival material the book reveals the impact O'Hara's curatorial work had both on the reception of American modern art abroad and on the curatorial profession itself It focuses on his travelling exhibitions for MoMA's International Program a vehicle for soft power during the fraught years of the cultural Cold War exposing him to new art artists and cities while developing important transnational networks far from New York from Madrid to Venice Zagreb to Otterlo Bringing together close readings of O'Hara's poems and unpublished letters with a selection of archival illustrations Holman argues for O'Hara's sense of exuberant continuity between life as a writer and a curator an American and a cosmopolitan revealing that he was so much more besides the quintessential New York poet It is perfect reading for anyone interested in American art in the mid 20th century curatorial and museum studies or simply this lesser known but fascinating aspect of the legendary poet's career

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