

The Boston Globe

B

Travel

TRENDSPOTTING

How museums are responding to an era of alternative facts



Museumgoers showing their support of science at The Field Museum in Chicago.

ZACHARY JAMES JOHNSTON/THE FIELD MUSEUM

By Jon Marcus | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 03, 2019

PHILADELPHIA — Josh Perelman stands reverently above a glass-covered display case at the center of a handsome room with dark red walls trimmed in sturdy oak, and gestures toward the document inside.

It's a letter written by George Washington to a Jewish congregation in Newport, R.I., after that state became the last of the original 13 colonies to ratify the Constitution but before the Bill of Rights would institutionalize the freedom of religion.

The new United States would boast “a Government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” Washington promised.

Perelman is curator of the National Museum of American Jewish History, across the street from Independence Hall, which speaks to the history of one immigrant group on whom attacks have escalated and whose stories hold parallels to those of current-day asylum seekers being thwarted in their hopes for new lives in America.

Developments like those have given this letter, and the exhibits around it, renewed meaning, and museums new responsibility and purpose, at a time when the very history and science at the center of their missions is being challenged.

“What museums can do is bring people into contact, face to face, with the material culture of history and to bear witness to the values that bind us together as a nation — even if we disagree,” says Perelman.

Many museums say their response to this skeptical age is simple: to continue to objectively present the facts.

“There’s not really great value in telling people they’re wrong. We give them the information so they can decide for themselves,” said the Jewish museum’s director, Ivy Barsky. “I don’t think we expect to make a neo-Nazi into a philo-semitic, but we try to make a dent in the universe and maybe get people to understand a little better.”

After all, she said, people who don’t understand history are doomed to repeat it.

“We want to make sure as historians that we are mindful of some of these historical parallels and present them — that there are some things we’ve seen before,” said Barsky. “We want to help our visitors build these bridges so the past becomes a meaningful tool for understanding the present.”

Convincing skeptics of, for example, the reality of global warming — which will be a theme of the updated fossil hall in the National Museum of Natural History when it reopens in June — requires showing them the process through which scientists determined it was real, said David Skorton, who as secretary of the Smithsonian Institution oversees that and 18 other museums and galleries.

“What I’ve always found the most effective is to take people on a journey in which you can show the march of discovery toward any of the many things we take for granted now,” said Skorton, a medical doctor and the former president of Cornell.

“The evidence for climate change and for human contribution to global warming is so overwhelming that I’m convinced it’s accurate. The vast majority of scientists are convinced it’s accurate. But just telling people you need to believe it because we say it’s true is not the way to persuade them.”

Some museums are increasingly taking an activist role, even if it’s comparatively subtle and polite.

The Jewish museum, for instance, prompts visitors to record their own reflections in response to questions such as “Should America limit who can legally immigrate to this country?” and “Is hate speech contagious?”

The Eastern State Penitentiary, also in Philadelphia, does more than expose its guests to the crumbling cellblocks that once held the likes of Al Capone; a display in the prison courtyard illustrates the dramatic explosion of incarceration rates since 1970 in the United States, where 2.2 million people are now behind bars, including a disproportionate number of blacks and Hispanics.

After the Ferguson shooting, the National Museum of African American History and Culture began a series of programs about social justice. The National Museum of the American Indian and National Museum of African Art teamed up on an exhibit about stereotypes in American culture called “From Tarzan to Tonto.” The Andy Warhol Museum used the artist’s depiction of guns to encourage a conversation about them. The National Building Museum mounted an exhibit about eviction. And the Newseum has updated its news history gallery to include information about digital disruption, fake news, and the mass shooting at the Capital Gazette in Annapolis, Md.

“Just as we left in the 19th century the idea of a truly objective historian, some museums are walking away from the sense of absolute objectivity,” said Laura Schiavo, head of the Museum Studies Program at George Washington University. “I would hope that museums would take that responsibility seriously and not hide behind [the idea that] ‘We just present the facts.’ Because museums have never just presented the facts. They’re also places of interpretation.”

The Field Museum in Chicago has been among the busiest on this front. It was a lead sponsor of that city's March for Science, invited visitors to a Speak Up for Science event at which they could meet scientists and send postcards in support of science to the Environmental Protection Agency and National Science Foundation, and held a Day of Facts.

"It is utterly bizarre" that a science museum in the 21st century is compelled to stage a Day of Facts, the Field's president, Richard Lariviere, said in a tone of exasperation. "Who's not in favor of science, like motherhood and apple pie?"

The museum is careful to stay neutral and nonpartisan, however, said Lariviere, the former president of the University of Oregon. When one visitor recorded herself debunking its exhibits about evolution ("These are just guesses off the top of their heads"), the video went viral on YouTube. Yet while the YouTuber was derided by many critics — she herself later said they made her out to be the Nut at the Museum — the Field decided after long deliberation not to respond.

"Boy, is it hard," said Lariviere. "Because if two plus two equals four and someone is advocating for something other than four, it's really hard to not say, 'Are you nuts?' But you can't do that, because the moment you do that you fall into the partisan divide."

He said: "We have this huge obligation, because the public trusts us. We've got to really be careful to maintain that trust."

Museums are, in fact, the beneficiaries of great good will. At a time when only the police, the military, and small business scored above 50 percent in a Gallup poll of how many Americans trust each of 14 institutions, a survey by the research firm Reach Advisors found that museums are considered the most trustworthy source of information, rated higher than newspapers, nonprofit organizations, the government or, academics.

In another poll, commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums, 90 percent of liberals and 87 percent of conservatives said they support the value of museums. Nearly eight in 10 Americans consider museums more reliable sources of information than newspapers, nonprofit organizations, or the government, according to the data and technology company IMPACTS.

The museum association's think tank, the Center for the Future of Museums, hypothesizes that, at a time of digital fakery, original documents in museums, such as the George Washington letter, command trust.

Museums also stumble, of course. The Newseum had to apologize for selling in its gift shop T-shirts that read "You Are Very Fake News." In a statement that exemplified this brave new world as much as the Field's Day of Facts did, it acknowledged, contritely, "Journalists are not the enemy of the people."

What's hardest is reaching people who might discount — or not be aware of — facts presented in museums, and not just preaching to the choir.

"That's the real critical question, isn't it? How to get them in," said Skorton.

Back at the Jewish museum, visitors don't even have to go inside anymore to see the pivotal words with which Washington laid out the principle of freedom of religion. The museum has hung a massive banner on its façade, in its enviable location next to Independence Hall. "To Bigotry No Sanction," it reads.

"The reason we go into this business and the reason we do the stuff we do, I don't think that changes," said Barsky, the director. "Every once in a while people pay just a little more attention."

Jon Marcus can be reached at jonmarcusboston@gmail.com.