



Flipping through actual records in *Vinyl: The Sound of Culture and Records* at the Oakland Museum of California.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHAUN ROBERTS. COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA



Audience Engagement through Collections

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Audience engagement is a clarion call to museums in the 21st century, akin to the American Alliance of Museum's 1992 *Excellence and Equity* report, which invited museums to rethink their role in public education. But what exactly is “audience engagement”? The current professional literature uses the term to describe participation by the public in exhibition galleries, programs, festivals, community partnerships, and outreach activities, including social media.

This literature is generally silent, though, about strategies of audience engagement that bring members of the public into direct contact with objects in museum collections. The AAM Curators Committee (CurCom) decided to see what museums are doing to bring members of the public into meaningful contact with their collections. This article reports the broad patterns that we found.

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The Survey

In spring 2017, CurCom partnered with eight other professional networks, including the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), to survey our combined memberships seeking examples of interesting ideas and innovations related to the use of objects in museums.¹ Our goal was to identify broad patterns that could be shared with the museum field. We received more than 200 responses to the 17-question survey, including nearly 60 examples that painted a vivid picture of the ways that museums are using their collection objects and archives to form deeper, more meaningful connections with the audiences they serve. Other examples have come to our attention through conferences and conversations.

The survey results clustered around four major categories: formal and informal education programs, community partnerships, handling objects, and creating exhibitions. Some examples of each suggest the variety of current examples that could serve as models for other museums.

Educational Programs

Students and Faculty in the Archives

From 2011 to 2013, the Brooklyn Historical Society systematically introduced 1,100 students from three local colleges, many of them people

1 The other professional networks were Collections Stewardship, Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE), Diversity Committee (DivCom), Education Professional Network (EdCom), Historic House and Sites Network, Latino Network, LGBTQ Alliance, and National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME).

of color, to primary source documents, aiming to improve their engagement and classroom performance (fig. 1). The grant-funded project, called “Students and Faculty in the Archives,” required faculty instructors to define precise course objectives, select documents from the collection keeping in mind that “less can be more,” construct templates for specific small-group activities, and prompt students to learn how to analyze and interpret the documents.

Extensive evaluation showed that when students returned to their classrooms, they were more engaged and performed better in writing and thinking than students who had not participated in the program. Project codirector Julie Golia noted that exceptional preparation and execution by museum staff and college faculty were critical to the project’s high level of student achievement. In addition, the grant funded several students to curate an exhibition in the summer. Based on the work of a 19th-century Brooklyn diarist, the exhibition – titled *Exploring the Journals of Gabriel Furman* – was mounted, fittingly, in the reading room outside the historical society’s archives. In spite of the project’s success in student achievement, and the presence of a website – TeachArchives – that offers detailed instructions for emulating this approach, the Brooklyn Historical Society has learned of few other institutions that have adopted this program.² The initial cost of preparing collection-specific

2 The website is Teacharchives.org. The report is at “Students and Faculty in the Archives, Final Evaluation Report, March 31, 2014” at www.teacharchives.org/wp/content/uploads/2014/12/Final_FIPSE_Evaluation_Report.pdf.

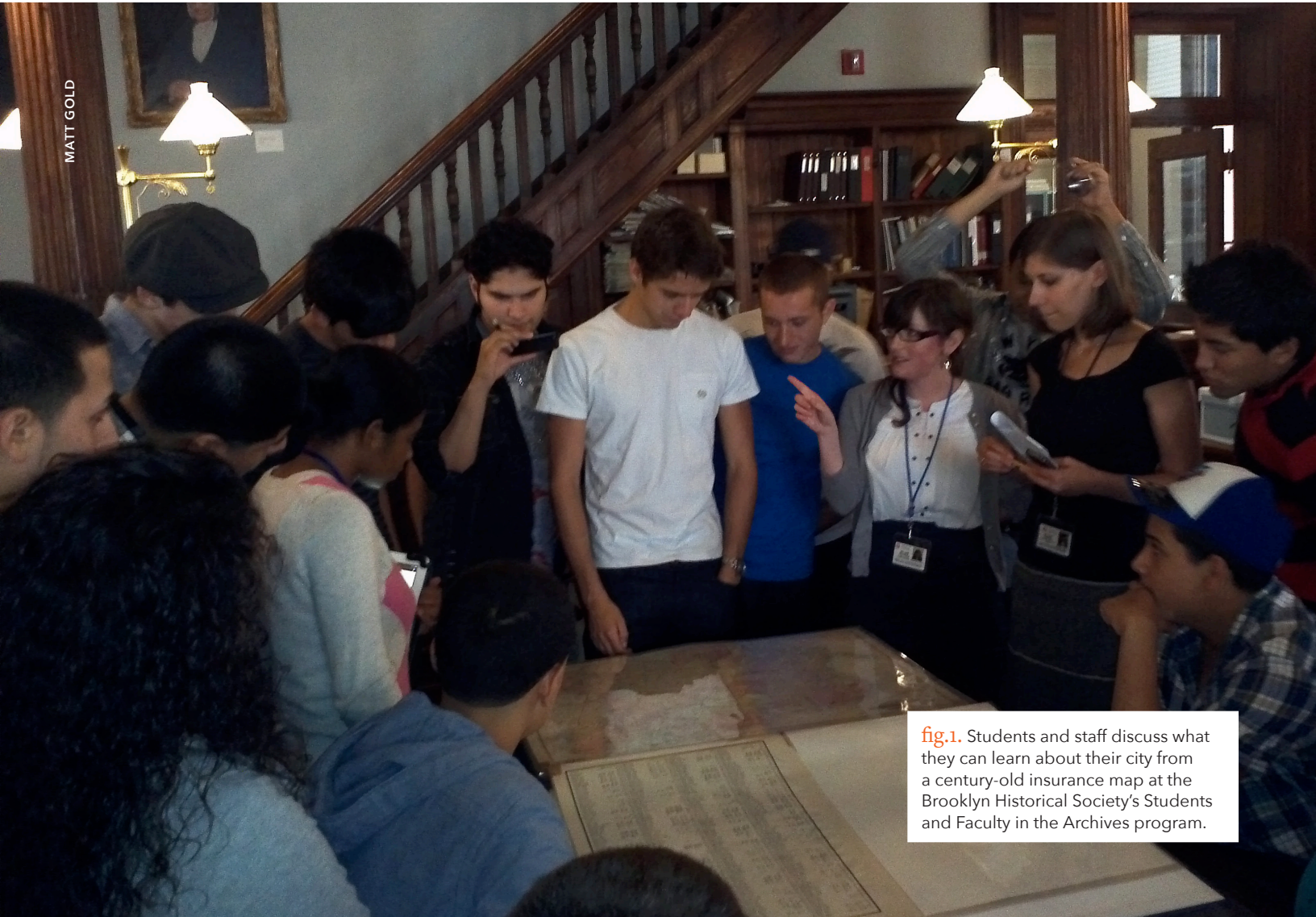


fig.1. Students and staff discuss what they can learn about their city from a century-old insurance map at the Brooklyn Historical Society's Students and Faculty in the Archives program.

materials and the investment of staff time was high, which may be a deterrent to other organizations.

Historical Craft Society Program at History Colorado

Conceived by collections and library staff members as an opportunity to engage the public with collection resources in a new way, History Colorado offers monthly crafting classes, such as embroidery, valentine-making, decoupage, weaving, and cake decorating. All are based on items

in the collection or created with graphic elements reproduced from the collection. The program was initially successful in meeting audience goals of repeat attendance and multi-generational family group participation. However, meeting in a museum classroom did not position the experience as a truly unique creative opportunity, and classes rarely filled to capacity.

Class numbers rose, though, when History Colorado partnered with the Byers Evans House Museum (BEHM), one of its eight community museums, to host Historical

Craft Society classes.³ The new setting of the decorative-and-fine-arts-filled historic house drew expanded participation from house supporters while introducing other participants to the Denver landmark home and the wealth of artistic inspiration embodied in the collections on display. Like many historic house museums, the BEHM struggles to attract new and younger visitors. The change in venue for the Historical Craft Society accomplished multiple goals: programs now fill to capacity with a mix of age groups, the public has ongoing opportunities to engage with collection items otherwise little seen, and many of the crafters have been converted to BEHM visitors and supporters, and, in some cases, new History Colorado members.

Community Partnerships

I Wish I Knew Who I Was Before I Was Me

Long committed to community outreach and art education, the Frye Art Museum in Seattle has utilized its collection extensively in interdisciplinary ways to serve the needs of its audiences and stimulate community discussion. It has found that working with partner organizations is key to success. An example of this kind of collaboration is *I Wish I Knew Who I Was Before I Was Me*. The exhibition, mounted in 2010, was curated by students working with Arts Corps poet and teaching artist Roberto Ascalon and musician/producer Amos Miller.

³ Historical Craft Society is the name of a public program comprised of monthly classes that are part introduction to a topic by a craftsperson, and part hands-on “how-to” class.

Arts Corps, the largest nonprofit arts education organization in the Seattle area, describes itself as “a force for creativity and justice in a region where race is the greatest predictor of whether a young person has access to an arts education.” The organization believes that “creating art can be a personal act of liberation, and when done collectively can transform schools, neighborhoods, and beyond.”⁴

An early example of a then (and perhaps still) unconventional exhibition approach, *I Wish I Knew Who I Was Before I Was Me* brought young people from Youngstown Cultural Arts Center, an inclusive, multigenerational arts hub located in southwest Seattle, into the Frye’s collection. They worked with Ascalon and Miller to select objects from the Frye’s permanent collection, determine an exhibition theme and title, and participate behind the scenes in creating an exhibition. The youth also shared their personal responses to the works of art chosen for the exhibition from the permanent collection in a variety of ways, through music, poetry, and spoken word.

Ascalon and Miller, along with Jill Rullkoetter, former Frye Art Museum Senior Deputy Director, Laura O’Quin, artist and designer, and Deborah Sepulveda, former Frye Art Museum Manager of Student and Teacher Programs, collaborated with the youth, encouraging reflection, persistence, discipline, creative thinking, and risk-taking.

⁴ “Statement of Purpose,” www.artscorps.org.

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Community partnerships offer intriguing possibilities, and the survey revealed a number of interesting collaborations. The Smithsonian and other institutions offer crowdsource cataloging and transcription of archival collections.⁵ The Frick Collection and a number of other New York City museums host a program for law enforcement officers to improve their visual perception through the examination of paintings.⁶ And the UCLA Library Special Collections collaborates with the United Service Workers West SIEU Local 1877 in using archival materials collected from the Justice for Janitors movement to train union leaders.⁷

Handling Objects

Thirteen respondents to the survey described ways in which visitors interact directly with their collections – from touching tide-pool animals, to driving Model T cars, to using working computers that are artifacts. Several programs allow visitors on the autism spectrum and visitors who are blind or low vision to handle collection objects. More than a dozen other institutions noted that they offered some mechanism for visitors to see (though not touch) objects in storage or as part of an artifact table in association with a program or exhibition. In principle, these activities can help inform exhibit

5 For example, Helen Thompson, Smithsonian.com, August 12, 2014; Alexis Mainland, “The Library Hands Out Menus to Thousands of Volunteers,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2011.

6 Sarah Lyall, “Off the Beat and Into a Museum: Art Helps Police Officers Learn to Look,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2016.

7 The Justice for Janitors movement is a campaign to help “low-wage workers achieve social and economic justice,” according to its website at www.labor.ucla.edu/what-we-do/labor-studies/research-tools/campaigns-and-research/justice-for-janitors.

developers how visitors approach and interpret collections and what objects and archival materials engage them and spark a deeper interest.

Some museums bring members of indigenous communities into contact with their ancestral objects. A number of New Zealand museums lend portraits of Maori (the country’s aboriginal people) ancestors to descendants for ceremonies outside the museums. The Washington State Historical Society invites Nisqually tribal carvers to use the canoe paddle of Nisqually Chief Leschi to make their own paddles for use in ceremonial canoe journeys. The Oakland Museum of California periodically invites a small group of Ohlone (non-enrolled) tribal members to the museum’s collections facility to sing to the baskets held there. The singing, in Ohlone tradition, “feeds” the baskets, and helps maintain their place in cultural context. The Ohlone invite their own guests to witness the ceremony. In such ways, collections actively help museums engage with indigenous communities. In principle, the stories community members bring and the questions they ask should provide an opportunity to enrich exhibits and interpretation.

A different type of example is *Vinyl: The Sound of Culture and Records* at the Oakland Museum of California, organized by Senior Curator of Art René de Guzman.⁸ The exhibition, which explored the “social and cultural phenomenon of listening to,

8 See *Vinyl: The Sound and Culture of Records* at <http://museumca.org/exhibit/vinyl-sound-and-culture-records>.



fig. 2. Students, faculty, and museum staff viewing a pop-up exhibition and participating in a QUARTZ event in the main gallery at the University of Arizona Museum of Art, 2017.

collecting, and sharing records” made the experience of selecting and playing original vinyl a primary element (**intro image**). The museum allocated significant resources towards the purchase of hundreds of albums for use and multiple turntables to ensure that visitors – some of whom had never handled a record – had an authentic and unmediated experience with the objects and, in doing so, became part of the exhibition. In addition, the exhibition featured thematic listening stations created by “crate curators” – influential members of the record community. Each of these community curators chose 33 records to tell a personal story, and visitors could play the vinyl at “their” station.

Creating Exhibitions

iLGBT QUARTZ Pop-up Series

Museums and galleries at several universities and colleges invited students to create exhibitions using their collections. One of the more detailed descriptions we received in the survey was about iLGBT QUARTZ: UAMA. This hybrid pop-up exhibition series/program was jointly developed by the University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA) and the University of Arizona’s Institute for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Studies (iLGBT) in the fall of 2016. QUARTZ is short for “Queer Art Zone,” a project designed to immerse iLGBT faculty and their students in active engagement with the UAMA permanent collection. The UAMA uses its galleries as a curatorial laboratory for faculty and students to enhance their studies and research. Faculty

worked with their students and UAMA staff, drawing from the museum’s collection, to co-curate a pop-up art exhibition (**fig. 2**) designed to complement their class content. The program was piloted by iLGBT director Adela C. Licona and then-UAMA director, W. James Burns.

An unplanned outcome of iLGBT QUARTZ: UAMA is a semester-long exhibition curated by graduate student Dani Stuchel, who participated in the pop-up exhibitions both as an iLGBT Studies staff member and student, scheduled to be shown at the UAMA in spring 2018. Titled *Best Wishes*, the exhibition will feature works from the collection, and will ask a central question: “Does it make you angrier to see yourself clearly and not love what you see, or to see yourself distorted and to be told it’s really you?” An attempt at curating through a non-binary filter (also known as genderqueer; both are terms for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine – identities that are outside the gender binary and can be expressed with a combination of masculinity and femininity, or neither), the exhibition will feature collaborative labels intended to give voice to a broad spectrum of gender identities. The exhibition will also feature multiple guides for in-museum use: traditional print; an XHTML (computer language) born-digital guide (non-print); and a sensory guide.

Best Wishes will offer multiple opportunities for audience engagement with collections, including metadata generation in the form of search terms to be added to the

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museum's collection database. Those terms will assist future scholars to more easily identify relevant LGBT-related works in the museum's collection. *Best Wishes* and iLGBT QUARTZ: UAMA have broken new ground. The museum's permanent collection is now being used in new ways and through a more inclusive lens, opening up a space for dialogue about issues of equity in collecting practices. Further, by conceiving of inventive ways to help visitors engage with art/objects, students generated new knowledge. This is precisely the kind of work an academic museum should be doing: providing a model for museums at large.

Challenges and Opportunities

The survey undertaken by CurCom and eight other AAM professional networks in spring 2017 offered up some intriguing insights. It showed that many museums offer a wide variety of creative programs that use the objects in their collections to engage audiences in direct, meaningful ways, both in programs, and to a lesser extent in exhibitions. Some have detailed protocols and evaluation; others are very informal and unstructured. This very variety suggests that museums are developing these programs independently, often unaware of similar programs in other institutions, even in this hyper-connected world in which we live. That very independence allows for innovation, but hinders the field from developing best practices.

While relatively undocumented in the professional literature, the broad spectrum

of examples of audience engagement with collections projects, captured by our survey, suggests that a wealth of potential exists. The field would benefit from more in-depth knowledge of these and other objects-based projects to enable others to enhance their own work as museum educators, curators, and exhibition designers.

Towards that end, we advocate for developing more precise protocols for our programs; evaluating our own programs more systematically; learning what other programs – across disciplines – are doing, and learning about them in greater depth; and codifying and sharing what we learn. For example, librarians and archivists have taken steps in this direction by producing “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy” to “articulate crucial skills for navigating the complexity of primary sources and codify best practices for utilizing these materials.” The guidelines are intended to help users of many formats, including “original artifacts, both physical and born-digital...”⁹

There are challenges in this work, including the high level of staff time and commitment required to develop, implement, and sustain these projects. Substantial amounts of staff time translate to a significant investment of institutional resources. This may generate administrative concerns about the return on investment, particularly when resources

9 Association of College and Research Libraries' Rare Book and Manuscript Section and Society of American Archivists Joint Task Force, “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, Final Version – Summer 2017,” www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Source%20Literacy%20-%20FinalVersion%20-%20Summer2017_o.pdf.

are tight. The survey did not seek detailed accounts of how direct use of collections improved exhibitions, although there are tantalizing clues – listening to the comments of police officers, janitors, students, and other community members would seem to encourage writing of more engaging texts; noticing which objects elicited strong reactions might lead to different choices of objects to exhibit.

We invite you to share your programs, projects, experiences, and thoughts with us as we continue to explore audience engagement through collections.

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