

“Curation, Authorship, and a Museum of Words”  
by Carey Cranston

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Can there be a less exciting sounding job title than museum curator? In our culture if we want to create an image of someone who is quiet, bookish, and awkward, a museum curator ranks up there next to the librarian. However, curators (and librarians in their curatorial capacity) have an amazing influence on our lives, and in certain instances, we are all curators.

Imagine an empty rectangular room with four walls. There is an entrance in each of the long walls of the rectangle. The openings are not directly across from each other, instead they are each near the corners, as far from each other as possible, which forces someone walking into the room to walk through most of the space to leave the room. This room is a gallery in a museum. It may be an art museum, a history museum, or science museum, it does not matter.

An exhibit is being designed for this room. On the walls are a mix of paintings, maps, tapestries, and signs next to each object explaining its meaning, its history, and its connection to this exhibition. Scattered across the floor of the room are glass cases on top of cabinets full of objects related to the subject of the exhibit. Because this is a modern museum, in two spots on the walls there are interactive touch screens with additional information, and many of the cases have buttons to push that unleash audio content. If a visitor chooses to do so, they can download an app to their phone and on their headphones they can listen to commentary and additional information on the exhibit.

Visitors to this space enter through the opening in the south wall near the corner. They can meander from point to point, stopping to observe the objects and their relationship to each other, reading the panels of text next to each thing, and engaging with their app. Or they can gaze

at the room, let it all soak in, and then be drawn to those things that catch their attention, skipping over entire pieces, just to focus on what connects to them. Or, they might breeze through the space glancing here and there, but never engaging beyond the cursory. Eventually, everyone exits through the opening in the north wall, moving on to the next exhibit.

How do the four walls that define this room relate to the four sides of this page that these words are printed on? Readers enter this page at the top left and leave at the bottom right. Which words are chosen, and in what order, are what determine the story that is told on this page. The reader may choose to read closely and slowly. They may engage with other texts and sources while reading this page, or they may skim through the content, gleaning surface information and a general idea of what is on the page, but not getting into the details. The author may be sparse with the short and musical lines of a poem, or dense and meandering like this piece about curation and authorship.

The author and the curator overlap in a myriad of ways. And both the author, and the curator have been a part of our cultures for a very long time. While most people consider the museum to be a western construct, meant to identify and codify the other, with depictions of the past that include wax figures of native or far away peoples next to stuffed animals and models of teepees or mud huts, in truth the concept of the curated historical space can be seen in ancient Babylon.

In his book *Curators: Behind the Scenes of Natural History Museums*, Lance Grande, the Negaunee Distinguished Service Curator of the Field Museum, notes that, “The earliest known cultural history museum was established over 2500 years ago by a Babylonian princess and her father in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur.” The father, Nabonidus, “collected antiques and is the earliest known archaeologist. In 530 BC he influenced his daughter, Princess Ennigaldi, to

develop a museum focusing on the cultural history of Mesopotamia. She became the museum's first curator and developed a research program around its collection of artifacts."

Eventually, the city of Ur was abandoned due to draught, and the museum was lost from 500 BC until 1925 when it was discovered "by the famous archaeologist Leonard Woolley." As Grande describes it in his book:

Wooley discovered a large chamber with a curious collection of neatly arranged objects ranging in age from 2100 BC to 600 BC. The objects were associated with a series of inscribed clay cylinders representing labels. Woolley soon realized that he had discovered the remains of the world's oldest known museum.

Interestingly, the ancient room described is no different than the generic museum described earlier, and this may be because like authorship, curation, as we think of it today, is something we all do to one level or another in our lives as a way of creating meaning from the world around us.

I have personally witnessed this desire to make a statement through observation of my teenage son's room over the last few years. My son's room is extremely typical. A small box of a room in a classic Chicago Bungalow built in the 1920s. His room has a bed, a desk and chair, a bookcase, and a dresser that were supplied by us, his parents, with the help of the grand and mighty Ikea. Obviously, the first statements made in his room were through the position of toys in his room when he was young. Lego constructs, stuffed muppets, and superhero action figures were the centerpieces of his room, displayed in poses that showed which were more important and descriptive of who he was.

As time went on though, he discovered new means of self-expression through posters. His walls were first covered with posters of superhero and science fiction TV shows. But then he

found an art store with small landscape paintings on clearance and started to add art. Later he began to look around the antique malls his mother and I dragged him through for objects that interested him; a manual typewriter, a wooden cased record-player/radio combination, and a rotary phone. They did not work, but they were artifacts that fascinated him, because they represented an old school notion that he began to embrace in his dress as well. Eventually pieces of family history came his way from a grandfather he never knew, a baseball bat, a ceremonial sword, and custom license plates from a 67 Corvette. They all hang or have places of display on top of the dresser, bookshelf, and radiator.

Watching my son move through these phases I remembered quickly the days of my youth going around to yard sales in the summer, or digging through piles of junk on the curbs of our neighborhood when there was spring trash pick-up. I clearly recall finding objects of wonder in people's remains and bringing them back to my room, and I remember making that space mine by displaying things that I had found, that spoke to me, and through which I found meaning.

The comedian George Carlin had an amazing clarity on this issue, when he talked about “stuff” in one of his more famous routines. In a sample of that piece we find his words on the nature of why we have houses:

That's all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That's all your house is- a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff. They never bother with that crap you're saving. All they want

is the shiny stuff. That's what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff! Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.

The idea that we express who we are by arranging and displaying our “stuff” is of course around all of us every day. What pictures do you hang on the wall of your home, what mementos from your trips sit on shelves, what prizes of a collection do you set on a mantle, or what knickknacks do you keep on your desk? Is there a high school in America that does not have a case full of trophies with dates and highlights spelled out to tell the story of their institution?

So, while Princess Ennigaldi may have been one of the first formal curators of a museum or exhibit, the notion to curate exists in all of us. Grande in his book moves on from Princess Ennigaldi to discuss that throughout history while these types of activities took place, and collections of “curiosities” might make exhibits that were “meant to be theaters of wonder, propaganda or even displays of personal wealth and power,” it was during the 18<sup>th</sup> century that these types of displays developed into the museum collections we recognize today. Most of these curators were scientists, collecting samples, and codifying them for study. The work of Carolus Linnaeus created “the hierarchical classification system for plants and animals that we still use,” and those collections of samples that he put together are still housed and curated in museums to this day.

This notion of the curator as the person who catalogs and indexes a collection and then displays and labels the collection for viewing is the traditional passive view of the curator. But as museums expanded from natural history to general history, astronomy, art and so many other areas, the notion of the curator, and the curator’s role, began to shift.

One of the most provocative curators of the art world, who is seen as the primary leader of this shift from the late 1960s and through to his death in 2005 was Harald Szeemann. Szeemann was a radical curator of exhibits that challenged visitors, and elevated the curator from a manager of the pieces of an exhibit to the role of author. Shortly after his passing in 2005, the art magazine Frieze asked some of the most prominent curators and critics of the day about the importance of Szeemann, art critic Aaron Schuster summed up that,

the image we have of the curator today: the curator-as-artist, a roaming, freelance designer of exhibitions, or in his own witty formulation, a 'spiritual guest worker'... If artists since Marcel Duchamp have affirmed selection and arrangement as legitimate artistic strategies, was it not simply a matter of time before curatorial practice--itself defined by selection and arrangement--would come to be seen as an art that operates on the field of art itself?

In his 2015 article “Curator, Curation, Curationism” for *Art Monthly*, author Andrew Hunt explores the wide range of new writing on the topic of the curator and his or her role in making a statement that is more than just a representation of the work displayed. In recent years, star curators like Jens Hoffman and art critics like David Balzer have written books that seek to define what it is to be a curator today, with the term now being used on topics from works of art to website content, musical playlists, and the artful arrangement of furniture.

So, if curation is a form of artistic expression or authorship, where the curator selects, arranges, and labels objects as a means of telling a story in a space or making a statement about history, art, or science, then how does one curate a museum about writers and their works?

The most obvious answer is that you build a library. Of course the most commonly recognized first museum was the Musaeum of Alexandria, which was an “Institution of Muses.” However, while the word museum comes from Alexandria, it really was more of a university with a library, than what we think of today as a museum of artifacts, or as Carlin would call them, “stuff.” The means of celebrating, preserving, classifying, and disseminating the written and printed word has always been in libraries. Massive libraries that are giant structures with reading rooms and shelved manuscripts, often include displays and exhibits to highlight their works from the New York Public Library to the Newberry Library here in Chicago. But it was just one of these amazing institutions, the Library of Congress, which inspired, to some extent, the idea of a writer’s museum that was not a library.

The founder of the American Writers Museum in Chicago is Malcolm O’Hagan. O’Hagan is an engineer by schooling, and for most of his career a leader and businessman. Born and raised in Ireland he came to the United States for graduate school and never left. He spent the latter part of his career as the President of the National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA). So, from his background there seems no reason for him to found an American Writers Museum, but it is also why he was the only person who might.

While having no museum experience, or formal literary background, O’Hagan has always had a passion for the written word and its power. When O’Hagan retired from his position at NEMA he took up a volunteer docent position at the Library of Congress. He would tour groups through this amazing structure and show off some of its many object treasures, from a copy of the Gettysburg Address to one of the few fully intact vellum Gutenberg Bibles. Of course the objects sit under glass, with small descriptive panels, really no different than the clay cylinders in that first museum in Mesopotamia.



O'Hagan enjoyed explaining to visitors about the bible's significance as one of only three perfect velum copies known to exist, and the importance of the first printed book. Of course since the book is under glass, and open to view two pages written in Latin, most visitors do not readily capture the significance of the object unless they are on a guided tour.

During his time as a docent, on a trip see family in Ireland, O'Hagan visited the Irish Writers Museum in Dublin. While not a library, this museum's exhibits were similar to the displays in the Library of Congress, with books and manuscripts under glass, and text discussing the history and influence of writers on the history and culture of Ireland. Returning from this trip, O'Hagan was keen to visit the American version of the Irish Writers Museum, but when he asked his colleagues at the Library of Congress, it became clear that no such institution existed in the United States. The notion that a country that was literally founded on the written word, through the Declaration of Independence, did not have a singular space that celebrated the writers who had such an impact on the history and culture of the country, inspired O'Hagan to make it happen.

If O'Hagan has one quality that helped create the American Writers Museum, it would be unbridled tenacity. Once he recognized the lack of the museum, he set about finding out how to create it. He started talking about it with everyone he knew, from staff at the Library of Congress, to members of his book club. He found when he started to talk about the need for an institution in this country that celebrated its writers and their works the way we had institutions celebrating sports legends and rock stars, he found people quickly agreed, and he began to gather a group of like-minded people to help him on his mission.

The first formal step in the process was to find some funding to begin a formal study and planning phase of what the museum should be and how it could be built. With his unbridled tenacity, O'Hagan went down the road from the Library of Congress to the offices of the National Endowment for the Arts, the NEA. He had no appointment but asked to meet with the director. When he was assured that would not happen he persisted to request to speak with someone, until the Assistant Director of the NEA came down to the lobby and offered him fifteen minutes of his time, there in the lobby. Forty-five minutes later, the Assistant Director of the NEA was sold, and impassioned, but also forced to explain that he could not help O'Hagan, because in America, writing is not an art, it is a humanity. O'Hagan needed to take his pitch to the NEH, the National Endowment for the Humanities, but at least this time he would be able to get an appointment with the help of the NEA.

The NEH agreed to the significance of the idea quickly, and provided a modest planning grants for two years to move the project from an idea to a plan. The grants helped the loose group of supporters become a board that could raise funds and create an organization.

The organization also held meetings with senior staff at the Smithsonian Museums to get perspective on the undertaking of creating a museum about writers. The Smithsonian staff made two major recommendations, the first was to hire a strong design firm, and the one they recommended, Amaze Design out of Boston was engaged very quickly thereafter. Also, the Smithsonian staff recommended that the museum avoid hiring a single curator, because it would give the institution too singular of a voice. And so, a museum that is about writers, who so often toil in isolation, languishing over their choices of words, would not be authored by a singular curator, but instead by a large cacophony of voices.

Using the NEH grants the organization set out to meet with museum experts, and to set up charrettes, or brainstorming sessions, around the country. They invited authors, poets, scholars, editors, librarians, and publishers to come and discuss what they thought should be featured in an American Writers Museum. The Charrettes were held in cities around the country, including New York, Chicago, San Francisco and others. This was the beginning of assembling some of the people who would come to be known as the Content Leadership Team. There were six key members to the Content Leadership Team, which included two poets, a librarian/author, a literary critic and head of the National Book Festival, the publisher/scholar of Library of America books, and a Children's book historian. Through the attendees at the charrettes and the connections of the Content Leadership Team over forty more Subject Matter Experts were engaged to help supply content and make suggestions about authors to be represented, and works to be featured in the exhibits.

One of the major decisions about the content and structure of the museum, was the reliance on artifacts. While the traditional museum is often the place of things, as has been discussed, the focus of this museum was not going to be the original manuscripts or the trappings of the authors, it was going to be their words, and their stories, without a reliance on the physical medium that may have carried those words originally.

Since this was an American Writers Museum, all of the writing came after that Guttenberg Bible printing, and so the notion of the original page almost always has less import than the content of the pages, which might have seen several printings over decades and even centuries.

One quintessentially American example of this comes from the Declaration of Independence itself. As a written document, there are few documents that in so few words had so

much impact on our history and culture. The hand scrawled parchment with the signatures is an artifact, preserved and living under glass, that people can line up to see. There is even an entire action film about stealing it to find the secret message on the back hidden there by Masons.

But the truth is, immediately after it was completed, it was ordered that it be set to print, by John Dunlap, the official printer of the Continental Congress. This was so that it could be distributed throughout the colonies and travel with the head of the Continental Army. By July 6 the content of those first printings by Dunlap were printed in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*. So the document may seem important, but the words were transferred to different mediums in days, and it is the impact of the words that moved a nation to take arms against their overlords, not the original parchment.

But, how does one build a museum focused on words and not objects? The design firm, Amaze Design, recommended by the Smithsonian, were key to this process. Also, O'Hagan's experiences at the Library of Congress and in visiting the Irish Writers Museum in Dublin helped to illustrate what needed to be different about the American Writers museum from what had come before.

From early in the process, it seemed important to create a space that was engaging, celebratory, and interactive. Amaze Design, and its principal, Andrew Anway, understood this challenge and began to craft exhibits that were meant to be touched and interacted with at all levels. In the early conceptual work exhibit ideas were shared with the content leadership team and the subject matter experts. One exhibit was a meant to look at a chorological exploration of American writing from a myriad of sources, to explore the idea of what might be the elements of an American Voice.

This one exhibit started off in initial designs with over 300 authors, spanning five centuries. Long conference calls and email exchanges with members of the curating team began to shrink that number to levels that could be addressed in a singular exhibit. And eventually the number of authors in that one exhibit were limited again by the physical limits of real space.

In the early phases of curation of the American Writers Museum exhibits were conceptualized without an actual building or even a city secured. The original group of supporters that O'Hagan had gathered had grown, and while many were in D.C. with O'Hagan, they quickly decided that the museum needed to be in a different city. Between the swell of museums to compete with in D.C., and the fact that D.C. is not a city known for its long literary tradition, the search began with where to establish the museum. In visiting many cities during the planning process, Chicago stood out because it fit so many of the group's criteria, from its draw as a destination city in the middle of the country to its rich literary tradition, so after a detailed analysis of potential locations, the group chose Chicago.

Once the city had been chosen, a location needed to be found. The group found new supporters in Chicago, and expanded its board and its partners. Organizations like the Newberry Library and the Poetry Foundation offered support and partnership. But it took time to find a location. As fundraising moved forward decisions had to be made, and while some sites offered more square footage, or first floor access, there was a strong desire to be on Michigan Avenue, close to the throng of visitors and where people expected to find museums and cultural institutions. However, the choice led to a smaller space than originally planned, and to a second floor location.

With a space chosen, exhibit designs began to be modified to fit the frame of the building, which effected exhibits like American Voices. The exhibit now had to include no more

than 100 authors to represent the idea of an American voice being illustrated in its history, which meant huge curatorial decisions.

Some early decisions about permanent exhibit pieces included the notion that the authors represented would only include authors who were deceased. If an exhibit was meant to illustrate the influence of writers on American history and culture, there had to be an ability for the totality of the authors work to be measured. Also, since many of the content experts were authors and had friends who were authors, no one wanted to have to answer the question, “Why did you put author X in there and not me?”

Another issue that had to be addressed was answering what type of writing and authors would be featured. Was this a literary museum that explored fiction and poetry, and if it was more than that what breadth of work would be featured? The answer was that the museum would look at the definition of writing broadly. Poets and song writers, short story and novels, philosophical works and journalists, speech writers and comedians, would all be considered, including Mr. Carlin, though not his observations on “stuff.”

Also, the curatorial teams made a strong effort to address the need to highlight canonical writers with their desire to be inclusive in looking at the breadth and diversity of American writers. This meant being clear that the museum was not going to be a Hall of Fame. Writers were selected because they were representative and emblematic of a genre, a period, or a movement. Like the museum with a physical collection that is immensely larger than the works it has on display, the American Writers Museum would be a space that could never list or recognize every author, but instead would select for its exhibits authors whose works were important when they were written, and that if read again today would still seem relevant.

In the American Voices exhibit, the 100 authors in chronological order fill a long 80 foot wall that lines up their lives against a timeline for American history above them, and panels of period specific information below them. Three rotating panels are filled with text about each author, and along the rail that runs the length of the exhibit, manual interactives provide small details and fun points of illustration. Embedded below the authors as well are touch screens that explore the idea of three themes that are meant to tie the 100 authors together. The themes of Identity, Edge, and Promise are discussed in interactive videos with even more content.

While most museums find their space filled with artifacts, artworks, facsimiles, or representations of things, with only words to serve as highlights, the textual content of the American Writers Museum is far denser than any normal museum. Just the one American Voices exhibit can consume visitors who try to digest the totality of its content in one visit, and it is only one exhibit in that gallery.

The museum itself has seven galleries, with multiple exhibits in most all of them. Five of the galleries are of a permanent nature, and two are designed for rotating content. The permanent galleries include exhibits as varied as the massive chronology of the American Voices Exhibit, to the highly tactile Story of the Day, where visitors can type their own stories or verses on old restored manual typewriters and post them on the wall. Every day visitors leave behind new content for others to read, and for the museum to collect.

While the museum does not feature artifacts, it will have artifacts at times in its temporary exhibits. One source of those artifacts will often be the American Writers Museum Affiliates. As the concept of an American Writers Museum was fleshed out, the issue arose that while there was no single American Writers Museum, there were actually many small author homes and museums all over the country dedicated to one author at a time. From the Hemingway

home in Oak Park to the Frederick Douglass Historic Site in D.C., there are dozens and dozens of these institutions that range from single homes run by a staff of two people to whole large scale institutions, like the Vonnegut Museum and Library in Indianapolis. Rather than compete with these institutions, O'Hagan and his early supporters reached out to them to see if they would be willing to establish a connection and become Affiliates of the American Writers Museum. What started with a small group of ten quickly grew, and now the AWM has over 70 Affiliates across the U.S. These unique connections offered an even greater expanse of expertise during the curation of content for the museum.

When the museum opened in May of 2017, its smaller changing gallery, The Roberta Rubin Writers Room, held under glass the original first draft scroll of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. When Kerouac returned from his trip across the U.S. and sat down to write about it, he wanted to write stream of conscious, with as few interruptions as possible, and that included having to constantly change sheets of paper on his manual typewriter. So instead, he secured sheets of 15-foot-long teletype paper, so that he could type for long stretches without having to change sheets of paper. When he had filled eight of those 15-foot pages, he taped them together and read through the draft, highlighting and crossing out across the 120-foot draft.

That draft has been preserved for over 60 years now, and its owner, who bought it at auction for over \$2 million has been generous about letting it be displayed around the world, though it had not been in Chicago for over 10 years. The scroll is immensely fragile and is handled only by one special collections librarian who spent hours painstakingly unrolling the first 12 feet of the scroll for observation at the museum and putting it in the case.

This exhibit was a great exploration into the process of writing. It illustrated how one writer, constrained by the writing medium of his day, truly longed for an experience of typing



that we find today in writing on a computer, with no regard for page breaks or paper changes. When this exhibit was next to the Story of the Day exhibit, where adults and kids get the chance to write on the same type of machine he did, the young ones learned quickly just how hard it used to be. As one twelve-year-old visitor observed, the typewriters are really just “instant printers.” When the exhibit first went up, there was also in the room a touch screen with hi-res digital display of the entire 120-foot scroll, including the ability to zoom in and see Kerouac’s notes and edits. Visitors often looked at the scroll for a minute, and then spent twice as long engaging with the virtual exhibit of the scroll. When the scroll returned to its owner last October, the touch screen interactive stayed in museum due to its popularity.

Our new exhibit in The Writers Room is now on Laura Ingalls Wilder. Working with one of the six Wilder home/museums around the country, we were able to secure a loan of one of the first drafts for *The Long Winter*, the sixth book in the *Little House Series*. Wilder wrote out all of the books as first drafts on note pads she bought at the five and dime. Interestingly, while these pages under glass can elicit strong reactions from visitors, it is still very similar to the issue of the Gutenberg Bible under glass at the Library of Congress. The object itself is not as interesting as the panels of information that surround it. The one part of the Wilder exhibit that gets the most attention and interaction is a mailbox filled with facsimiles of fan letters Wilder received during her lifetime as she grew to fame. The facsimiles, taken from digital scans, are recreated to look and feel as they might have then. Visitors who are fans of the works pour over the letters, while the handwritten notebooks get a only a passing view.

So, even when we have artifacts to enhance some exhibits, we have found that the interactive components tend to draw the most attention and engagement from visitors.

Since the American Writers Museum opened, visitors have nearly unanimously praised the museum. The most common observation visitors make is that is nothing like what they expected, because for most of them they imagined books on a shelf and books under glass. Not a cloud of books above their head, or a wall of words brought to life with moving lights, or a chance to write their own story.

To curate a museum or an exhibit, one normally starts with a story to tell. While the early concept of the curator was staid and dry, telling stories that were based on facts, or at least what were at the time accepted as facts, over time, the voices of curators began to have more individuality, and exhibits became constructed works of their own. The arrangement of objects and interactives created statements with purpose and provided interaction with the visitor. They told engaging stories for an audience.

Interestingly, in 2010, around the same time that O'Hagan began to recruit members from his book club to join him in the pursuit of building an American Writers Museum, a new art show had been curated by one of the newer celebrity curators, Jens Hoffman at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in California. It was the third and final exhibit in a trilogy of exhibits that used classic works of American literature as a jumping off point for artistic expression. Each exhibit was packed with works from a variety of modern artists, many creating new and specific pieces for the exhibits. The first two exhibits had been on *The Wizard of Oz* and *Moby Dick*, respectively. The final exhibit in 2010 was on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

In the catalogue for the exhibit *Huckleberry Finn*, Hoffman tweaks Twain's original "Explanatory" to the novel and writes, "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. By order of the curator." Just the notion here that Hoffman the

curator sees such a direct connection between his role and Twain's, exemplifies the notion of curator as an author.

So, when it came time in this era to make a museum full of exhibits about writers and their words, it became necessary to see the concept of curation and the museum differently. The space is still one that guides a visitor through an exploration, but rather than a curator creating a story, a host of curators worked together to craft a means of exploration to avoid a single narrative voice. And, instead of a host of artifacts the museum is full of words, words of and about the writers. So if a museum is a book made up of exhibits instead of chapters, the American Writers Museum is the deconstruction of that model, simply because it is a museum of words and the artists and craftspeople who wield them.

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