

Reaching out and reaching across: Collections and social inclusion

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ongoing efforts of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, at the University of Oregon, to diversify itself and the publics it serves through programming, community outreach, institutional change and collection development. The JSMA has prioritized the building and sustaining of diverse publics in fulfillment of its new, more inclusive mission and in recognition of the growing and significant presence of Latin American and Asian/Asian American constituents in the region and state, including the university. With an Asian collection formed more than 75 years ago and given to the university to bridge cross-cultural understanding and create a more peaceful world, the JSMA is uniquely positioned to be a vital and relevant art museum for new generations of K-12 and university students and area residents. Increasing audience diversity and availing the collections for cross-curricular teaching, research and community outreach were embraced as key priorities in 2008-2009 strategic planning. Through acquisitions, cross-curricular teaching, research, advisory committees, and community outreach (key priorities in JSMA's strategic plan), the JSMA also furthers the university's diversity goals and seeks to build new audiences for the visual arts.

Introduction

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA) is one of two purpose-built museums on the campus of the University of Oregon (UO) in Eugene, Oregon. Starting in late 2008, with the arrival of a new Director (Jill Hartz), the JSMA has worked intensively on increasing its constituencies and their engagement. Strategies have included reaching out to various communities of the region, and reaching across campus to academic departments and students not yet taking advantage of the museum as an educational or cultural resource. The JSMA has also prepared for change internally, with long-range planning, evaluation, alliance building, program and collection development, and securing grant funding. These efforts are discussed further, following some details of the history and context of the museum.

Brief institutional history

The University of Oregon Museum of Art was founded to present the Murray Bass Warner Collection of more than 3,000 works of Asian art. The museum opened in 1933, and for most of its existence was under the direction of cross-appointed faculty, and closely affiliated with the art history department. Following a four-year closure for major renovations, from 2001 through 2004, the museum re-opened in 2005 as the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, named after a major supporter of the renovation project. The project doubled the museum's size (to 70,000 square feet) and added state-of-the-art climate control, collection storage systems, public spaces, and new galleries. JSMA is now run as a publicly oriented academic museum and is a joint report of the provost/senior vice president and vice president of university relations.

JSMA holds significant collections of Asian, European and American art and is actively developing its Latin American holdings. The museum's Asian collection is regarded as one of the most significant on the West Coast and now numbers more than 8,500 Chinese, Japanese, Korean and South Asian works. It is one of very few university museums in the United States with Korean art galleries. These collections include both historical and contemporary works from both South and North Korea. The American and Pacific Northwest collection is comprised of more than 3,500 works in many media. The

growing European and Latin American collections include icons, paintings, prints, photographs and drawings.

The other UO campus museum, the Museum of Natural and Cultural History (MNCH), opened in 1936 and is still operated as a branch of the anthropology department. MNCH holds ethnographic collections from around the world, and large Native American and geological collections from Oregon. While the museums are of similar age and both recently underwent major facility renewal projects, they differ in their administration, approaches to curriculum and research, resources and public engagement. Despite sharing a host institution, the JSMA and MNCH have different resources and priorities, so would not necessarily approach the work described below in the same manner.

Local context

In 2008 the JSMA took on the task of diversifying itself and its audience. Locals and UO students were found to be under-utilizing the museum. Both the audience and the local population have been overwhelmingly 'white', but this is quickly changing. What some Oregonians may have until recently experienced as the illusion of a homogeneous population is being challenged as a result of new immigration trends. Some simple demographic data is offered here to illustrate only a few aspects of this rapid change.

Eugene, Oregon, is a city of 150,000, located 100 mi/ 160 km south of Portland. U.S. census data from the year 2000 (the most recent available) reports that twenty percent of the city's population is under 18 years old, and 12 percent is over 65. While there has always been ethnic and cultural diversity in Oregon, the state is still much more predominantly 'white' than the rest of the United States. Approximately ninety percent of the population is of European descent (U.S. CENSUS BUREAU 2009).

From the late nineteenth century through the 1960s, the vast majority of immigrants moving to Oregon came from European countries. Since the 1960s, European immigration has remained steady, but immigration has grown dramatically from Latin America, Asia and, more recently, Africa. By the year 2000, eighty percent of immigrants to Oregon arrived from countries outside of Europe, with more than half coming from Latin America. Oregon is also now one of the most welcoming states in the United States for refugee resettlement. Results for the 2010 U.S. Census will demonstrate the significant, rapid change underway.

Oregon now stands as a major gateway for new immigrants, which is helping to transform the state into a far more diverse and pluralistic society. Asians are the second largest immigrant group but (applying U.S. Census Bureau categories) are the largest non-white ethnicity represented on the UO campus. Most of Oregon's now approximately 379,000 Latino residents immigrated after 1990 and hail mainly from Mexico. By the year 2020, it is estimated that 28 percent of school-age children will be Latino. The JSMA serves as the art museum for the university, the local community and the region. School groups from a number of counties are served. JSMA, therefore, determined that reaching out to Asian and Latino communities was its first priority.

Planning

Increasing audience diversity and availing the collections for cross-curricular teaching, research and community outreach were embraced as key priorities in 2008–2009 strategic planning.

The strength and depth of the Asian collections afforded the museum strong ties with local Asian Americans but went unrecognized by the large number of Asian international students on campus. So, new programming was planned to attract these (and other) university students. While the Asian collection was already well established and shown in permanent collections galleries, the JSMA found

they had little material representing Latino culture. A commitment was made to build a Latin American collection.

As its new mission attests, the JSMA serves the university by strengthening its academic program, and it serves the larger community through educational and cultural outreach. Collections were already used extensively by some faculty for classes (some of which are open to community members), but many faculty seemed unaware of the potential art collections hold for cross-curricular teaching and research, beyond art and art history. Faculty receptions were held and exhibition proposal forms distributed.

The JSMA staff, university officials, faculty, students, and community members engaged in a wide-ranging self-assessment in preparation for AAM reaccreditation. As part of the self-assessment work, the JSMA long-range planning committee (including Hartz and Livingstone) reviewed the mission statements and best practice of 34 Pacific Northwest university museums, focusing on those with major art collections. This process began with a re-dedication, in the JSMA mission, to founder Gertrude Bass Warner's vision of why she collected Asian art and gave it to the university almost a century ago. She stated very clearly (in archived texts) that her collection was to be seen by the people of Oregon as an effective way of building cross-cultural understanding for the purpose of creating a more peaceful world. She said that art is one of the most potent tools in bringing people from disparate cultures together so they may gain a greater appreciation of other societies and countries and find a common language from which friendship, partnerships and peace might flourish. Never has this goal been more relevant at UO, where increasing numbers of Latin American students will soon take their degrees and where enrollment of students from Asia is strong and growing.

These ambitions matched well with a new Diversity Action Plan at the university, and both planning and grant support were secured. Grant funding was also obtained from the federal government. Focus groups were conducted with local leaders of Latin American organizations on- and off-campus to plan programs and marketing strategies.

Progress

Within a year, Hartz had made significant strides in affirming the JSMA's importance to the academic mission of the University of Oregon and its responsibility to the broader community, state, and region. The JSMA has a history of partnering with faculty, students, and community on Asian initiatives, but until this time did very little to engage Latino audiences.



Fig. 1 - Eugene Taiko performs at an opening reception for *On the Road: Two Visions of the Tokaido* © Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art

During fall 2008, the JSMA presented a major Cuban avantgarde exhibition. A new initiative was launched for Spanish-speaking audiences that prioritized bilingualism in print, wall labels, audio tours, docent tours, in-service teacher training, and family days. Also, a private collector, whom the director had known from her previous position, gave the museum six major works by contemporary Cuban artists, and the JSMA was able to purchase a work by the noted Mexican photographer Tatiana Parceró; the JSMA was positioning itself

effectively to reflect Latin communities on a permanent basis. Relationships established with local community leaders have been maintained and, in the process, program committees have also been diversified.

Radio interviews were conducted in Spanish, faculty teaching Spanish language and Caribbean and Cuban history and culture were engaged, and the exhibition became a platform for coursework and community building. The opening reception brought hundreds of first-time visitors. For the first time, Spanish was heard throughout galleries.

The JSMA also continued to build its connections with Asian audiences. Japanese prints are often the first connection to Japanese art and culture – in fact, there are more Japanese woodblock prints in the U.S. than anywhere else. The spring/summer 2009 exhibition *On the Road: Two Visions of the Tokaido* compared Hiroshige's well-known edition of prints with that of a 20th century artist named Sekino. Information was presented in English, Spanish and Japanese. Throughout the summer, Japanese cultural presentations were held. Community members assisted in the production of two iTour podcasts, which were recorded in Spanish ([JSMA Tokaido Rd iTour Spanish](#) © Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art) and in Japanese ([JSMA Tokaido iTour Japanese](#) © Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art). The audio files here are excerpts of those podcasts. Cross-cultural connections were made through comparisons of traditional Japanese prints with work by contemporary American artists, like Iona Rozeal Brown, who layers hip hop culture onto ukiyo-e.



Fig. 2 - Chinese brush demonstrations in the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art studio © Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art

The JSMA has also been successful in its strategy to build a diverse collection reflecting old and new constituencies by acquiring works from exhibitions. Works by Vietnamese American artist Binh Danh, who exhibited at the JSMA in 2009, were purchased. A local Cambodian group was also actively engaged with his show, which focused on the Cambodian genocide.

Conclusion

A range of strategies is being applied at the JSMA to engage an increasingly diverse public. The museum is taking advantage of existing strengths in the collections and is developing other collection areas through acquisitions and loans. Exhibitions apply cross-cultural themes, target marketing, and include multilingual texts, docents and iTours. The museum is consciously reaching out to campus and regional communities in the development of public programs, partnerships, and board recruitment. This work is being supported in part by internal and external grant programs for diversity initiatives. Staff and docent training also support this work.

JSMA now sees their task as two-fold: (1) to sustain the engagement of new audiences; and (2) to cross-pollinate them. For example, how can the JSMA create a dialogue *between* Latinos and Asian communities, using museum collections and programs regardless of whether they are specifically

Latino or Asian in focus? That is being explored in 2009–2010 through an American Association of Museums MAP Public Dimensions grant. As work-in-progress, JSMA continues to look for examples of best practice, and asks readers: What has worked for you in partnering with university departments or with other cultural organizations, in board development, in hiring and training staff or student volunteers and in making and sustaining new community relations?

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