

Adventures in Gender, Memory, and De-Canonization: Conceptualizing Exhibits for the International Museum of Women

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The mission of the International Museum of Women in San Francisco is “to value the lives of women around the world.” We intend to do this in our exhibition strategy by exploring women’s history and current women’s issues. In its core exhibition, now in development, IMOW will inquire into the existential and cultural experience of being female, the “work” that women do, and the ways they have acted and continue to act, to change the world. It further aspires to reformulate the boundaries of the concept “museum” in order to make IMOW a living, inspirational center as well as an educational one.

There are at least four important intellectual challenges embedded in the project of developing exhibits for IMOW, each of which requires looking at the linked issues of gender, memory, and de-canonization with regard to expectations of the museum audience. My goal in this paper is to present some of our thinking about these challenges, based in my experience as a scholar of women’s history and as chair of IMOW’s Exhibition Development Core Committee.

- A first challenge lies in explicating a wide range of notions about “woman” and the “feminine” across time and place while retaining the conviction that women around the world do have some fundamental things in common. We want to present, examine, and compare varying and quite diverse ways of constructing gender and gender relations. We want people to think about these issues in new ways.
- A second challenge is how best to “internationalize” such a museum. Museums have typically been quite “national,” even “regional” or “local,” or topic-centered (art, history, science) or visitor-centered (think children’s museum) in their focus. Such de-canonization goes beyond simply getting beyond the “national” (mostly male-centered) canons in each country or society, and achieving some degree of comparison for the study and presentation of women’s concerns and issues. To do global work, one must truly aspire to be global and to “walk the walk,” including linguistically.
- A third challenge lies in the “translation” process from the knowledge base to exhibition format. We must select from and compress an enormous and complex body of women’s studies scholarship generated in the last 30 years around the globe and deliver a visitor experience of some 90 minutes. How can this possibly be done in an intelligible way?
- A fourth challenge is to arrive at a balance between historical material and contemporary concerns; this is, of course, most easily done by linking historical context to contemporary concerns. We will provide “alternative” perspectives and much new information about women’s lives and experiences that will act to decenter the old canons of history and “what counts” and to spur visitors to question what they know and how and why they know it. Will a new “canon” emerge from this approach? I don’t think so, precisely because it is so open-ended and can encompass audience input.

Museum professionals nowadays are obsessed with the issue of attracting, retaining, and building an audience. We are told by our museum consultants that audiences in museums (at least those situated in the United States, though I think these factors apply elsewhere) want to be comfortable, entertained, to leave feeling smart and feeling good. We are told also that what people surveyed to date seem to expect from a women’s museum is a gallery of famous women, an insistence on men’s wrongdoing and women’s rights, and that they do not find that type of “heritage” model particularly attractive. That is hardly our intention.

How then to disarm this expectation and to provide a welcoming, absorbing, thought-provoking, inspiring, and even entertaining visitor experience? How, in particular, to convey the comparative historical and contemporary dimensions of the “woman question” worldwide for an audience that knows what it doesn’t want, but that may not have that much exposure outside of specific “national” settings or histories and may not want to confront some of the uglier practices documented in the treatment of women in many parts of the world, not to mention controversial issues about sexuality? Surmounting preconceptions, inviting openness, and providing occasions for dialogue and debate is our ultimate exhibition challenge.

PAPER

I want to begin this paper by saying that there is no formula, no “canon” for thinking through an international museum of women. As presently conceptualized, we at IMOW intend to weave together an ambitious formula to encourage visitors to think about the past, the present, and the future. IMOW will be a “museum” like no other. We want to go “beyond” any existing canons. With regard to the historical component, we will echo the remarks of one “Henriette, artiste,” writing in one of the very first women’s newspapers during the French revolution of 1848: “For women, history is a lie and ... the truth will only appear once feminine observation and intelligence enter into it and, specifically, link it to women’s interests.”¹

I have provided two handouts: 1) the original proposal for this paper, which I think outlines my original ambitions for this presentation quite well, and 2) a bibliography of prior writings on the subject of women and/in museums, and on feminist rethinkings and strategies in museums. The latter will indicate that we are not exactly starting from scratch. In fact, beginning in the year 2000, but especially in 2003-2004 the Museum, through its exhibition concept committee (which I chair as a board member) held a series of consultative workshops in the United States and in Europe, bringing in many experts from the world of women’s and gender history, sociology, anthropology, the arts, and consultants from museum staffs to help us think through this effort in tandem with a well-known exhibition content developer. We are already operating beyond the “canon,” if indeed such a thing exists these days. Everybody wants to be “out of the box,” the box referring to a static sort of exhibitry that now seems obsolete.² “Virtual” and “interactive” are the current key concepts.

It is also true that everyone we talk with is eager to “reinvent” this project in a way that responds to their own immediate preoccupations and needs. The meetings in late June with our new Global Council of eminent women from around the world, in conjunction with the 60th anniversary celebration of the founding of the United Nations, attests to that.

Our team at IMOW is not the first to have had the idea of a museum or an exhibition that features women. Historically speaking, efforts to do something of this sort, though primarily focused at the local or national level, have been around at least since 1876. The idea of an international focus for a women’s museum was launched, in the 1890s, by a Dutch woman named Betsy Perk, following the enormous success of the women’s exhibition at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Late in the last century, ____ even wrote a novel about such a project.³ I do think, however, that IMOW is probably the first project of its kind to widen the focus to women around the world – to expand beyond the format of the nation-state and, what is more, to interrogate the notion of “woman,” of the “feminine,” while at the same time claiming that there is ground for gender solidarity efforts in the interest of a better future, respectful of human rights.⁴

Today I want to speak to two of the four points in my paper proposal, paying particular attention to the question of “audience” and how to accomplish something that is exceptionally “uncanonical” museum-wise that can still speak to a mass audience that is also “uncanonical” in the sense that it is neither wholly local, regional, or national nor is it “cosmopolitan” in the 18th century sense of enlightened, one-world upper-class culture. I am ultimately less concerned ultimately about the theoretical issues than about the methodologies we will employ, which is not to say that the theoretical issues are unimportant.

Our concern at IMOW is to raise questions, to get people – especially women – from around the world into communication with one another. Our content will feature women’s history – which is not simply about what women have “done” – their participation in human history in various parts of the world, but also about how women’s perspectives change the way we ask the questions and see the issues, both historically and in the present. Or, as Jenny P. d’Héricourt put it in already in 1860 in her book *La Femme affranchie*: “We demand our right, because we are persuaded that woman has to set her stamp on Science, Philosophy, Justice and Politics.”⁵ She could easily have added History. Like Henriette (Artiste) and Jenny, we will be contesting the very politics of knowledge.

- A first challenge lies in explicating a wide range of notions about “woman” and the “feminine” across time and place while retaining the conviction that women around the world do have some fundamental things in common. We want to present, examine, and compare varying and quite diverse ways of understanding sexual difference, of constructing gender and gender relations, of understanding notions of “beauty,” for example, and “identity”. Stories and myths about the “origin” of various peoples will figure prominently, especially as they embody female characters, as will issues about “representation,” about acknowledgements of women’s spirituality, about the European quarrels over women’s “creativity,” the brain-size debates, etc. We want to introduce visitors to the so-called “science of women” as developed by European male writers (particularly with respect to medical literature and “biological” knowledge) – and to its many critics as well.⁶ These critics include many intelligent and brave women. We want to introduce them to the new cross-cultural and historical knowledge on the cultural and political significance, shaping, and interpreting women’s unique capacities: menstruation and fertility, childbearing and childrearing, on which the future of the human race ultimately depends. We want to raise comparative questions about women’s (and men’s) understanding of sexuality and about who controls women’s bodies, and why.

Obviously, these notions have significant historical components as well as contemporary relevance. The questions we are posing, and the materials we will draw on to respond to them and stimulate visitors reflect recent findings in the fields of anthropology and sociology as well as history, as well as on feminist theory and wisdom, and even “queer” theory on the subject of gender construction.

We want people to think about these phenomena and the issues and power relations surrounding them in new, comparative ways – across time and space. In short, we want them to think about women as they never have before. [This is the overall message of IMOW’s core exhibit].

- A second, and very important, challenge is how best to “internationalize” – or “globalize” or “transnationalize” -- such a museum, as concerns women. Museums have typically been quite “national,” even “regional” or “local,” or topic-centered (art, history, science) or visitor-centered (think children’s museum) in their focus. Our concerns about de-canonization go beyond simply getting past the “national” (mostly male-centered) canons in each country or society, and achieving some degree of comparison for the study and presentation of women’s concerns and issues. To do global work, one must truly aspire to be global and to “walk the walk,” including linguistically. Yet as historians we cannot avoid being sensitive to the historical developments affecting women that cry out for comparisons across borders and through time, many of which are centered in concerns of religious institutions, ethnic or cultural traditionalism, or nation-state development. How can one really transcend borders when it comes to history, which has since the beginning of written records been framed with respect to those “boring” chronologies of rulers, empires, nations, borders? Even if one

moves away from a “state-centered” focus, one must contend with “society and culture” and the “linguistic nation.” Even social and cultural histories evolve within geographical and political frameworks that one ignores at great peril.

With regard to the terminology: -- “internationalization” or “globalization” or “transnationalism,” or “world” – Which of these terms should one choose? Do they mean the same thing? We at the museum have selected “international” – yet what precisely does it mean in relation to the alternatives? Is this the most effective approach in an audience-driven situation? And how do we best deal with the question of perspective or “standpoint”? Is it really possible for “Westerners” situated in San Francisco to step outside of a Western perspective? How do we deal effectively and efficiently with the question of multiple perspectives, multiple points of view? We are still wrestling with these questions and trying to find the best possible answer, one that will satisfy people outside our own country as well as those within it. Indeed, one of our objectives is to resituate the US and our US visitors within the larger world. For our museum, and our intended broad audience, this de-centering task comprises a critical aspect of our mission; it is also very complicated.

In fact, there is (as yet) no “canon” – no curriculum, not even a well-accepted outline -- for examining global, or world history and current world developments. “Globalization” is the current socioeconomic term, but it is one that can – and does -- mean almost anything. There is (as yet) no “canonical” way of incorporating gender concerns, though distinguished US-based scholars such as Peter Stearns, Merry Wiesner Hanks, and Judith Zinsler, in conjunction with a group called the World History Association, have been (re)thinking hard about the issues involved and how a gendered narrative and curriculum might be constructed.⁷ “Beyond Borders,” “Without Boundaries,” offer others way of considering this, as is “transnational.” All these terminologies and more were reflected in the program of the 13th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held in early June. With regard to history, this is a time of wonderful, frustrating intellectual ferment.

And yet the “nation” won’t seem to go away. Indeed, I would argue, against the organizing proposition of this session and on the basis of my recent experiences both among scholars and in the museum content development field, that perhaps only among a certain elite group of (European-based) scholars does “the received canon of national history and political thought no longer command[s] the ‘natural authority’ it once possessed.”⁸ On the contrary, it seems – however battered -- to be alive and well – not least at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. My prediction is that in the twenty-first century will not easily (barring major catastrophe) give up the nation (state) -centered canon. In fact, the history of feminisms to date is de facto women’s political history, tied to women’s efforts to participate fully in the development of the nation-state.

Post-colonial is one thing; post-modern is another..... most nations – and most people in them -- are not there yet; they are still “modernizing.” Indeed, if one looks around the world today, it is easy to see that there are various “nations” that are struggling to achieve state sovereignty: just look at Palestine, at the Kurds, at the many former colonies who have barely succeeded in achieving independent nationhood, however fragile and at such great cost. And there are many others who have recently done so: Israel, for example, or Ukraine, or Georgia. Many of these are just now “inventing” their national “identity,” their tradition, their history – looking for a glorious – or at least somewhat honorable past of their own. There are many nation-states that are less than 100, or even 50 years old. There are nearly 200 national members of the United Nations, many with populations smaller than that of the state of California (30 M) . The situation looks different, no doubt, from the perspective of historians in smaller post-colonial European states

who are members of the EU, where indeed national boundaries have become “porous and contested.” But this is not normative for much of the world.

With regard to the relationship between women’s history and national histories, the objective of women’s historians such as myself over the past thirty-five years has been, first, to fully incorporate women into national narratives, and second, to “gender” the story – that is, to reassess every issue concerning nation-state formation with an eye to the interplay of masculine and feminine elements. How, for example, is nation-building “gendered”?⁹ What roles are assigned to men and to women in that process? How are values assigned to what women and men do during that process? Who gets to be a citizen, and how? Who is excluded (usually the women)? Who gets schooling, access to knowledge and time to think? To earn and handle money and property? To raise the children? To manage households? And who decides? Historically speaking, women have gotten the short end of the stick; it is only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that women around the world have begun to complain and make demands on a sustained basis. And, most of the time they have been calling for inclusion in their respective societies. It is quite recently that women have turned into severe critics of the existing order, especially of militarism and wanton destruction. This is also an aspect of women’s history, one that IMOW will pay attention to.

- At IMOW, we face yet another challenge (3rd and 4th points) -- to arrive at a balance between historical material and contemporary concerns; this is, of course, most easily done by linking historical context to contemporary concerns. We will provide “alternative” perspectives and much new information about women’s lives and experiences, past and present, that will “decenter” earlier historical narratives and reevaluate “what counts” in the past. By posing thoughtful questions, we hope to spur visitors to question what they know and how and why they know it. Will a new “canon” emerge from this approach? I don’t think so, precisely because our method is so open-ended and can encompass evolving audience input. Even this balancing does not leave room for aspects of women’s history that, however fascinating in themselves, do not necessarily link to the concerns that are utmost in the minds of contemporary planners and visitors.

With regard to the historical content, it is far easier to identify a “canon” that requires destruction in political theory and literary studies than it is in history. Although some countries, and notably in the West, France, do have a highly structured and centralized approach to national history, this is not uniformly the case. Every country has its own “national” narrative, some of which are more ragged than others. Yet even national narratives, intended to structure national identities for citizens through a common memory, can be multiple and highly plastic – as is certainly the case in our own country, the USA.

The bigger practical challenge we face with regard to the knowledge base is to select from, compress and distill down an enormous and complex body of women’s studies scholarship generated in the last 30 years around the globe and deliver a visitor experience of some 90 minutes. How can this possibly be done in an intelligible, much less “entertaining” way? The “translation” process from the knowledge base to exhibition format is remarkably complex, even infuriating, for text-driven scholars. One way to address this challenge is by careful use of our interrogative format, and by changing our regional focus and continually rotating material within the core exhibits.

What the IMOW hopes to do with respect to its historical exhibition strategy and public & educational programming content is to “gender” the past by highlighting women around the world and their contributions to the societies in which they live, to resituate US history within a

global or international framework, to expand people's minds (by pointing out the "gender" of history as it has been written to date), and to encourage them to take action to make the world a better place for everyone – especially for women – by promoting equity and partnership between the sexes. In our current core exhibit plan, we proceed comparatively, by engaging very broad themes through questions such as: What is a woman? What do women do? How have women contributed to, even changed the world? What about the future? How do women and men become full partners? We will examine women's experiences in various societies around the world, with respect to their "shared field of historical experience."¹⁰

The question is – how do we determine that shared field of historical experience, if not in reference to existing "canons"? Given that women's history has still to make it into existing narratives and curricula, whatever we present will be new to most visitors. How far can we "stretch" the minds of our prospective visitors, especially the local ones, without losing their attention. IMOW does not intend to develop any sort of "canon" with respect to the world's women; even so, our staff and consultants have to understand where visitors, both physical and virtual, are coming from, and something about the "canons" with which they are already familiar.

How radically different, how "uncanonical" or "anti-canonical" can a museum become without losing its intended broad audience? We want this museum to be "out of the box," yet how far out of the "box" can we be? How far can we "push the envelope" without losing the audience? All these questions continue to undergo careful consideration.

Are we "canonizing" gender? I don't think so. What we will offer is an extremely important alternative way of seeing things that for a very long time have been seen through a masculine perspective that was not named; we intend to "re-gender" a history and set of issues that have, all along (as Alice Kessler-Harris pointed out again at the 2005 Berkshire Conference) been gendered "male". There is no such thing as an "abstract, universal citizen," as the French like to put it. It is a fiction, like many others. We want to show that both citizenship and knowledge are gendered. How many times do we have to repeat this critique before the point sinks in?¹¹

What we will certainly do is contest the politics of knowledge, to stimulate debate and rethinking. Will we succeed? I think so. What we intend is to "value women" by giving authority to women's perspectives, in all their diversity and by doing so, to expand our visitors' understanding of how gender issues lie at the core of human knowledge, just as they lie at the core of the human experience. Making central issues visible, posing questions about these issues, is not the same thing as constructing a new canon. The ultimate goal is to enhance peoples' understanding of themselves and the societies they live in, to encourage and expand their knowledge of people in other parts of the world, and hopefully to impel them to help make our world a better place, especially for women who have been historically – and in many places still are – disadvantaged, by insisting on negotiation over force and violence, by calling for a more peaceful future. Our platform is progressive; it rests on the Beijing platform of 1995 and on the Declaration of Human Rights. Our intent as a museum and educational project that is and will become increasingly an Internet presence as well as a physical site, is to promote partnership between women and men.

[If there is time, draw on THE FINAL CUT (film) to conclude]

¹ This text, originally in La Voix des femmes, no. 28 (20 April 1848): 2-3, is republished in French with full English translation by Karen Offen, in “Getting to the Source: ‘What! Such Things Have Happened and No Women Were Taught About Them’: A Nineteenth-Century French Woman’s View of the Importance of Women’s History,” Journal of Women’s History, 9:2 (Summer 1997), pp. 146-153. On the story of Agnodice, see the discussion by Helen King of imaginary midwives, Hippocrates’ women: Reading the female body in Ancient Greece (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), chap. 9. See Karen Offen, “‘Woman Has to Set her Stamp on Science, Philosophy, Justice and Politics:’ A Look at Gender Politics in the ‘Knowledge Wars’ of the European Past,” in Geschlecht und Wissen – Genre et Savoir – Gender and Knowledge. Beiträge der 10. Schweizerischen Historikerinnentagung 2002, ed. Catherine Busshart-Pfluger, Dominique Grisard, Christina Späti (Zurich: Chronos, 2004), pp. 373-393.

² See Andrea Witcomb, “The End of the Mausoleum: Museums in the Age of Electronic Communication,” paper delivered at “Museums and the Web: An International Conference,” Los Angeles, March 16-19, 1997. On the web at <<http://www.archimuse.com/mw97/speak/witcomb.htm>>

³ See the novel by Gabrielle Burton, Heartbreak Hotel (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1986), about the Museum of the Revolution, focused on women’s history and women’s views of history.

⁴ See IMOW’s Concept Document (dated 12 Oct. 2001), which includes the Mission Statement, Goals, and Statement of Guiding Principles, as well as a sketch of the IMOW Experience. See also the Executive Summary: Interpretative Plan for the Exhibitions (latest version 8-27-04, KO edit.) and IMOW Final Interpretative Plan (8-28-04, KO edit). These documents are the result of a lengthy process with many participants.

⁵ Jenny P. d’Héricourt, La Femme affranchie (1860); in English translation as A Woman’s Philosophy of Woman, or Woman Affranchised; An Answer to Michelet, Proudhon, Girardin, Legouvé, Comte, and Other Modern Innovators (New York: Carleton, 1864; reprinted by Hyperion Press, Westport, CT, 1981), and excerpted in WFF, I, doct. 98. Quote, WFF, I, p. 346. On Héricourt, see Karen Offen, “A Nineteenth-Century French Feminist Rediscovered: Jenny P. d’Héricourt, 1809-1875,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 13:1 (1987), 144-58. See also Alessandra Anteghini, Socialismo e femminismo nella Francia del XIX secolo: Jenny d’Héricourt. Quaderni dell’Istituto di Scienza Politica, Università di Genova (Genoa: ECIG, 1988), and Caroline Arni and Claudia Honegger, “Jenny P. d’Héricourt (1809-1875): Weibliche Modernität und die Prinzipien von 1789,” in Frauen in der Soziologie: Neun Porträts (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1998), pp. 60-98.

⁶ See Paul Hoffmann, La Femme dans la pensée des lumières (Strasbourg: Ophrys, 1978) and the penetrating critique by Eva Marcu, “Pensées sur la femme,” Diderot Studies, 20 (1981), 331-41; see also the works of Ludmilla Jordanova, and also the ever provocative Thomas Laqueur on male medical thinking about women in Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁷ Peter N. Stearns, Gender in World History (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, Gender in History (Oxford & Malden: Blackwell, 2001); “Women’s History and World History,” unpublished paper delivered at the IFRWH conference, Belfast, 2003. See also A Companion to Gender History, ed. Teresa A. Meade & Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
Judith Zinsser, presidential address, WHO.

Also session 41 at the Berkshire Conference, June 2005, “As If Women Mattered: Re(Writing) Global History,” with Iris Berger, Teresa Meade, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, & Claire Potter on this topic. At the Berks there was much talk about “transnationalism.”

⁸ Maria Grever, “Beyond the Canon: What Remains of History?” unpublished paper given at Rotterdam, conference “Beyond the Canon: History for the 21st Century,” 16-17 June 2005.

⁹ See, for example, Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation (London: Sage Publications, 1997); the essays in Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State, ed. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon, & Minoo Moallem (Durham: Duke UP, 1999); and in Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, & Catherine Hall (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2000). See also Féminismes et Identités nationales: Les processus d'intégration des femmes au politiques, ed. Yolande Cohen & Françoise Thébaud (Lyon: Programme Rhone-Alpes de recherche en sciences humaines, 1998).

¹⁰ Ellen Carol DuBois & Lynn Dumenil., Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents (New York: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2005).

¹¹ Quite a few times more, no doubt. For an example of a new publication that pays lip service to gender issues, but does not seem to fully integrate women into “culture,” see the massive new anthology, Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology, ed. Ackbar Abbas & John Nguyet Erni (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005; 685 pages). Once again, “where are the women?” and “what about the women?”