
Developing a Toolkit for Emotion in Museums

Linda Norris, Rainey Tisdale

Think about the last exhibition you visited.

Was the space large and open? Maze-like? Deep red? Soft blue? Pulsing with light, sound, and people—like Times Square—or calm and contemplative, like a monastery? Were the labels dry and intellectual or full of the human spirit? Did you feel anxious that you didn't know enough about the subject? Or happy to be there with a loved one?

Humans are emotional animals. Whether exhibition developers plan for emotion or not, every visitor brings their feeling self to the museum; it cannot be separated from the thinking self. Indeed, social science research suggests we wouldn't even want to try, that emotions actually help us learn more effectively. In *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, audience researcher John Falk explains this connection: "Every memory comes with an emotional 'stamp' attached to it. The stronger the emotional 'value,' the more likely sensory information is to pass this initial inspection and be admitted into memory."¹ In other words, emotion and memory are

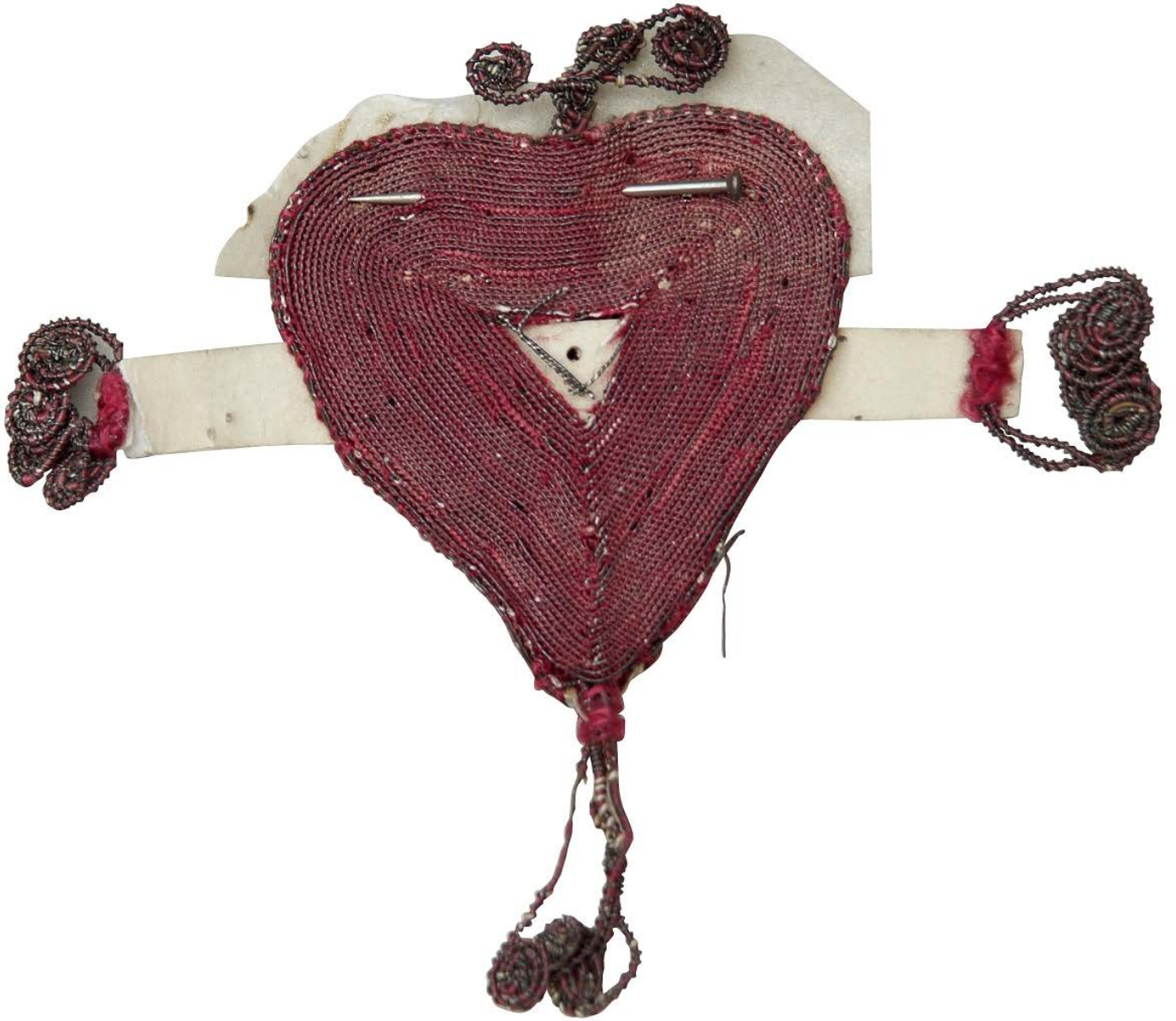
linked in the human brain, and unless emotion is involved, our brains won't flag something as meaningful. Therefore, if we want visitors to have transformative and memorable aha moments, we must make space for emotion. As user-experience designer Alli Burness puts it so eloquently, "the emotions join hands with the meaning and both ring out louder."²

As interpretive planners who are constantly seeking new tools and methods for developing more meaningful visitor experiences, we have been researching and exploring the emotional landscape of museums since 2014; it was a natural extension of our collaboration on the book *Creativity in Museum Practice*. In this article we want to share the basics of what we've learned so far with the *Exhibition* readership, in the hopes that it will help each of you expand your understanding of emotion's place in museum exhibitions and build your own toolkit for developing emotionally evocative work as part of your practice.

¹ John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Left Coast Press, 2009), 147.

² Alli Burness, "Reacting to Objects: Mindfulness, Tech and Emotion | Museum in a Bottle," *Museum in a Bottle*, April 29, 2013, <https://museuminabottle.com/2013/04/29/reacting-to-objects/>.

fig. 1. Tokens like this were often fastened to the clothing of infants left at the Foundling Hospital. Emblems of loss, like this token (now in the collections of London's Foundling Museum), almost inevitably evoke emotional responses.



What would an exhibition be like that made people feel giddy? Restored? Apathetic? Abandoned? Cozy? Discombobulated? Wistful? Intimate? Insecure? Respected? Openhearted?

Let's start with a definition. Which is harder than you'd think—even the scientific researchers don't have consensus on what exactly emotion is, even though it is as familiar to each of us as breathing. As psychologist Alan Fridlund puts it, "The only thing certain in the emotion field is that no one agrees on how to define emotion."³ With this challenge in mind, here's our best shot at a layperson's definition. Commonly described as "a strong feeling," emotion is an affective state of consciousness, one that often includes a physiological response. Etymologically, emotion is related to *motion*; it is something that moves or stirs us; indeed, emotion can prompt changes in both motivation and behavior. Emotion is often a reaction to an experience (for example, an event, a social interaction, or a memory). Technically and theoretically, there are complicated differences between emotion, feeling, mood, and affect, but in everyday language we generally use these terms interchangeably.⁴

And now let's go a bit deeper. Emotions (in a museum context or otherwise) can be positive or

negative, private or public, spontaneous or performed, single or combined. There can be different levels of emotional intensity, depending on the situation. An experience can have an emotional arc, in which feelings unfold in time, one after another. Emotional responses can vary across individuals and across cultures. Moreover, emotions aren't right or wrong; they just are. Sometimes from the outside they might seem socially inappropriate or inauthentic, but there is always some human reason they are being generated.

Scientists often reference five basic emotions—anger, fear, disgust, sadness, and happiness—but the list of emotions goes far beyond these.⁵ What would an exhibition be like that made people feel giddy? Restored? Apathetic? Abandoned? Cozy? Discombobulated? Wistful? Intimate? Insecure? Respected? Openhearted? (The Center for Nonviolent Communication has an excellent list you might download for reference.⁶)

Heritage researchers Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell note that people use museums and historic sites to "manage" emotion. They write that they are "permissible places for people to not only feel particular emotions, but to work

3 Julie Beck, "Hard Feelings: Science's Struggle to Define Emotions," *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/02/hard-feelings-sciences-struggle-to-define-emotions/385711/>.

4 "Emotion | Definition of Emotion by Merriam-Webster," *Merriam Webster*, accessed September 21, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emotion>; "Emotion | Define Emotion at Dictionary.com," *Dictionary.com*, accessed September 21, 2016, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/emotion>; Aaron Walter and Jared M Spool, *Designing for Emotion* (New York: A Book Apart/Jeffrey Zeldman, 2011), 26.

5 Paul Ekman, "What Scientists Who Study Emotion Agree About," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 31–34, doi:10.1177/1745691615596992.

6 "Feelings Inventory" (Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2005), https://www.cnvc.org/sites/default/files/feelings_inventory_o.pdf.

out or explore how those emotions may reinforce, provide insight or otherwise engage with aspects of the past and its meaning for the present.”⁷ We have come to expect certain emotions at certain types of museums. For example, visitors to the 9/11 Memorial Museum or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum expect a cluster of emotions—from grief and discomfort to anger and compassion. Exhibitions at local and national history museums are often constructed (intentionally or not) to engender pride, patriotism, or belonging (sometimes engendering the opposite for those who feel excluded from the dominant narrative). Wonder is a go-to emotion that many museums fall back on. But there is so much more emotional territory to investigate. In fact, we would argue that an exhibition topic that has little potential to evoke emotional responses in visitors is an exhibition topic that is not worth pursuing.

By purposefully integrating ideas about emotions into the exhibition planning process, we can explore the full complexity of human emotion and create deeper, more varied, and more meaningful visitor responses to museum content. Below are some ideas for doing just that.

7 Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, “The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect, and Emotion,” in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, eds. William Logan, Mairead Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 443–60.

Begin With the Team

Making space for exhibition team members to feel paves the way for an experience that helps visitors to feel. By introducing opportunities to practice observing and discussing emotion in all its variety and complexity, you can support your team in strengthening its ability to tease out exhibition content, themes, and design elements that have the greatest emotional potential. Linda likes to start each new interpretive planning process by asking the team to share their fears about the project. It gets hidden anxieties out into the open rather than having them bubble below the surface where they hamstring progress; it also sends a message that emotion has a legitimate place in our work. Another strategy is to take an “emotional field trip” together to a different museum or public space. At the end, you can discuss how the space made each of you feel at various points in the trip, what you noticed about the emotional experiences of others in the space, and how that space might inform your own project.

Consider the Objects

Emotional potential is an often-overlooked criterion in choosing objects for exhibition. You might want to adapt your exhibition documentation tools to help you track and sort objects accordingly (ideally, we hope, including a field for emotion in collections databases will eventually become

common museum practice). With some artwork and objects, the opportunity for eliciting an emotional response is fairly obvious: think of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, which depicts the tragedy of a fascist bombing, or the tokens left by mothers at a foundling hospital to identify their abandoned children (fig. 1).⁸ In other cases, a visitor needs carefully framed interpretive information to prompt a reaction. Remember that objects can evoke different emotions in different people and different contexts. Therefore, in the development process it is useful to get feedback from many different kinds of visitors: How do specific objects make them feel? Does more or different information change the emotional response? Does it change when the object is juxtaposed with other objects or with images?

Make An Emotional Map

During the conceptual design phase, you might consider mapping the exhibition as an emotional landscape that visitors will move through in time. We were excited to learn that the Peabody Essex Museum has been experimenting with this technique: educator Michelle Moon shared with us an emotional bubble diagram used in planning the *Native Fashion Now* exhibition.⁹ Rainey also used

8 “The Foundling Museum,” Foundling Museum, accessed January 20, 2017, <http://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/>.

9 “Native Fashion Now,” accessed January 20, 2017, Peabody Essex Museum, http://pem.org/exhibitions/180-native_fashion_now.

this technique in developing *Dear Boston*, an exhibition of objects from the makeshift memorial for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.¹⁰ Her goal was to design an experience that would help visitors process their negative emotions about the bombing and leave feeling connection and hope. Such mapping isn't meant to dictate emotions, but rather to consider the storytelling arc of an exhibition and how a variety of responses might be engaged throughout the space. You might ask questions such as: What is the emotional progression for visitors and where is its high point? Of

¹⁰ See: <http://www.bostonbetter.org/calendar/2014/4/7/dear-boston-messages-from-the-marathon-memorial>.

which emotions? How do we hope visitors will feel when they leave? If mapping your gallery seems like a stretch, you might practice first by watching a handful of dramatic movies and mapping their emotional arcs.

Attend to the Physical Environment

Humans constantly pick up cues from their immediate environment that influence their emotions (for a fascinating deep dive into this process, you could read *Places of the Heart: the Psychogeography of Everyday Life* by neuroscientist Colin Ellard). We already understand that moving through an exhibition is a sensory-motor experience that is highly affected

by a multitude of design factors; keep in mind that those design factors also influence emotions. Once you have established goals for the emotional progression of the exhibition content, you can plan space, color, lighting, texture, smell, sound, and other design details that will further enhance—and not detract from—this arc. Rainey will never forget the historical recreation of a 1970s gynecologist's office at Den Gamle By, a living history museum in Aarhus, Denmark. The stirrups and gynecological tools were powerful on their own, but the design details—a sterile, windowless room; fluorescent lighting; and a silhouette projection of a patient behind a screen changing into her gown—made the feeling of anxious vulnerability all the more visceral (fig. 2).¹¹

Make Space for Human Voices

Humans are wired to respond to the emotion expressed by other humans. During planning, seek out exhibition content—audio, video, quotations—that allows a variety of people to speak for themselves, with feeling, in their own way. The wildly popular Museum of Broken Relationships (founded in Zagreb, Croatia and now traveling globally) exhibits everyday objects, contributed by community members, along with first-person labels that reveal the array of emotions humans experience

¹¹ "Remember the 1970s," Den Gamle By, accessed January 20, 2017, <http://www.dengamleby.dk/engelsk/the-old-town/discover/remember-the-1970s/>.

RAINEY TISDALE



fig. 2. Historical recreation of a 1970s gynecologist's office, Den Gamle By, Aarhus, Denmark, 2015. Different settings evoke different emotions for different people. It's not surprising that men and women have different emotional reactions to this space.

during breakups (fig. 3).¹² Reading these stories in contributors' own words makes the emotion all the more immediate and meaningful. You can also make space for visitors to layer their own voices and feelings on top of the content you provide. On a recent visit to the Oakland Museum of California, we encountered a simple talkback station that collected and displayed visitors' intense memories from a local disaster, the 1991 Oakland–Berkeley firestorm. Another talkback station asked visitors what California evoked for them (fig. 4). When collecting people's voices, your content will be richer if you take care to ask meaningful questions that invite emotional responses. The award-winning, national oral history project StoryCorps is a great resource: the interviews posted online offer examples of what emotionally compelling first-person narrative sounds like, and the website also offers lists of tried-and-true interview questions.¹³ Lastly, you might consider ways that emotion could make the curatorial voice seem more human and real; winners of NAME's annual Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition regularly provide inspiration for this approach.¹⁴

¹² "Museum of Broken Relationships," Museum of Broken Relationships, accessed January 20, 2017, <https://brokenrelationships.com/>.

¹³ "Great Questions from StoryCorps," *StoryCorps*, accessed September 21, 2016, <https://storycorps.org/great-questions/>.

¹⁴ "Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition," American Alliance of Museums, accessed January 20, 2017, <http://aam-us.org/about-us/grants-awards-and-competitions/excellence-in-label-writing>.

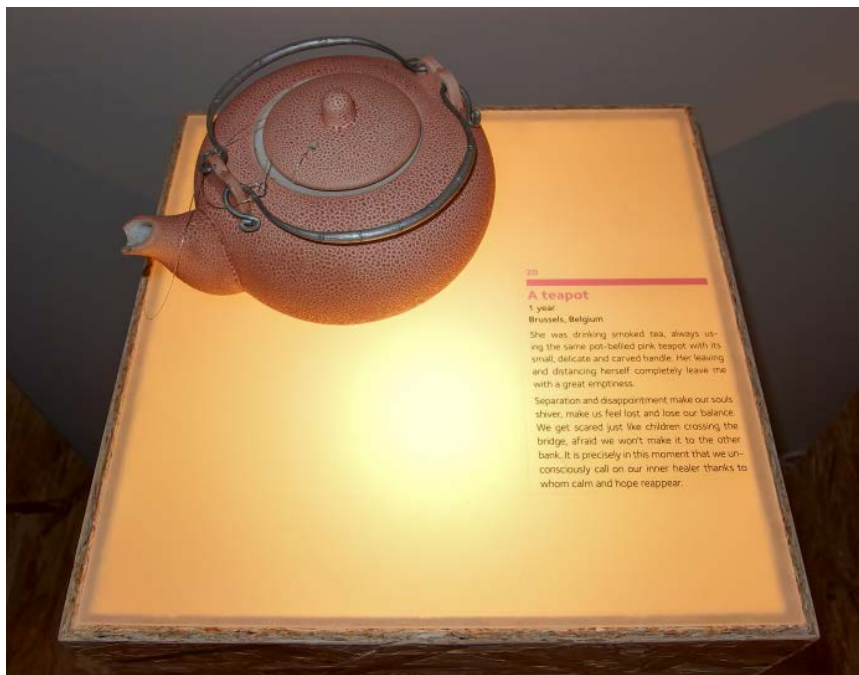


fig. 3. Teapot and label, Museum of Broken Relationships, Brussels, Belgium, 2014. The label, written by the teapot's owner, begins, "She was always drinking smoked tea..." and continues, "We get scared, just like children crossing the bridge, afraid we won't make it to the other bank." Imagine other museum labels written with the same passion.

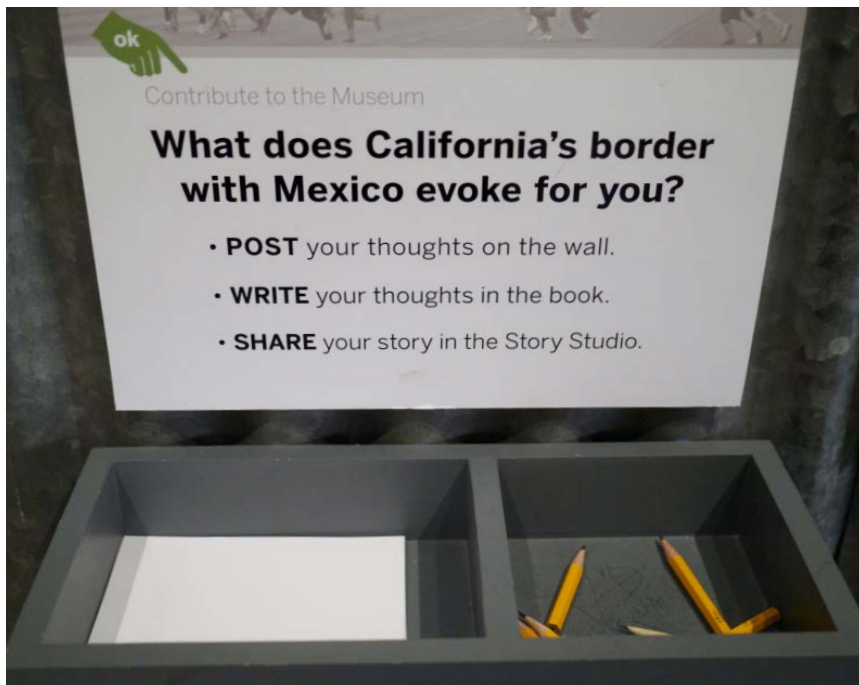


fig. 4. "What does California's border evoke for you?" talkback station at the Oakland Museum, California, 2015. Thoughtful design of both text and the physical station itself can help encourage deeper, more emotional responses from visitors.

Create Moments of Comfort, Connection, Expression

It's not enough merely to evoke emotions in exhibitions; it's also important to support visitors in processing those emotions. Recently, Linda visited the John C. Crosbie Sealers Interpretation Centre in Canada. In an exhibition on a 1914 sealing disaster in which more than 130 men died on the ice was a small theater space showing film footage of sealers out on the ice. You could envision the cold and the danger. On the bench in front of the video screen was a box of tissues, a small gesture that offered social permission and space for strong reactions. At the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio, in-gallery activities called "Connections" provide a chance for visitors to

share their own thoughts, feelings, and stories in reaction to works of art on exhibit (fig. 5). A quiet nook, some well-placed comfy chairs, an empathetic interpreter, opportunities to express emotion through writing and art-making—these are all tools for helping visitors process their emotional responses.

Seek Out Opportunities for Empathy

We consider empathy to be the holy grail of visitor emotions because it fuels not only social connection (both bridging and bonding) but also social change. From the Empathetic Museum project, founded by Gretchen Jennings in 2012, which seeks to make empathy a core component of all museum institutional

fig. 5. (left) "Connection Station" at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 2016. By encouraging responses directly in gallery spaces, the emotional connections between art and visitors become stronger.

fig. 6. (right) *A Mile in My Shoes* by Clare Patey and Kitty Ross for the Empathy Museum, London, England, 2016.



LINDA NORRIS

cultures,¹⁵ to museum conference sessions, to the new book *Fostering Empathy Through Museums* (Elif Gokcigdem, ed.), empathy is increasingly recognized as an important topic for our field, and yet it feels like we have barely scratched the surface in understanding the ways museum exhibitions can nurture empathetic responses in visitors. What can you contribute to this developing practice? Can you use emotion to help visitors identify with either artists or subject(s)? Can you help visitors empathize with each other? (“Have you ever experienced something like this? What did it feel like?”) Can you design and prototype a bridging interactive?

15 “The Empathetic Museum,” The Empathetic Museum, accessed January 20, 2017, <http://empatheticmuseum.weebly.com/>.

The Empathy Museum, which has no formal site but produces pop-up exhibitions across the United Kingdom, is an excellent source of inspiration in this regard; its *A Mile in My Shoes* project (you literally wear someone else’s shoes while listening to their audio diary) gracefully reveals the power of this complicated but crucial emotion (fig. 6).¹⁶

Lean Into the Hard Emotions

Our public audiences need us to help them dig into the hard emotions, even if it’s scary. It’s the only way we will grow and improve, together. And it’s even more crucial when race, class, gender, politics, and social views create emotional

16 “Empathy Museum,” Empathy Museum, accessed January 20, 2017, <http://www.empathymuseum.com/>.

polarization, where one group’s emotional reaction is favored over another’s. The staff at the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture made a decision to put on display the casket of Emmett Till, who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 (his mother insisted on an open-casket funeral to highlight the brutality of his death). In an August 18, 2016 *Washington Post* article, writer Krissah Thompson describes why director Lonnie Bunch made the difficult choice:

As painful as it may be, Bunch said, it’s essential that his institution delve into stories such as that of Till, the Chicago teenager who was murdered for whistling at a white woman during a visit to Mississippi—an event that galvanized the civil rights movement. ‘You couldn’t tell the story of the African American experience without wrestling with difficult issues, without creating those moments where people have to ponder the pain of slavery, segregation or racial violence,’ Bunch said.¹⁷

Staff and volunteers at the museum receive training to help them respond to visitors who have strong

17 Krissah Thompson, “Painful but crucial: Why you’ll see Emmett Till’s casket at the African American museum,” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/painful-but-crucial-why-youll-see-emmett-tills-casket-at-the-african-american-museum/2016/08/18/66d1dc2e-484b-11e6-acbc-4d4870a079da_story.html.



NATALIE HOLMES

reactions to Till’s coffin, or to other emotionally charged moments in the galleries. Your museum may need such training too—plus lots of prototyping, input from diverse perspectives inside and outside your museum, and deep conversations about exactly which approach to use—but don’t avoid emotions just because they are hard. The hardest work is often the most important work.

Evaluate for Emotions

In planning for exhibition evaluations, move beyond solely knowledge-based outcomes. Yes, your visitors may learn the particulars of rock formations or the specifics of the history of your place, but changes in what people feel can be just as powerful—and just as valid—in terms of the service museums provide to their public audiences. One common evaluation framework for integrating emotion with other project outcomes involves asking, “What do you want visitors to know, feel, and do upon leaving the exhibition?” This model acknowledges that emotion often serves as the bridge between knowledge and action. At the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut, emotion and empathy are key elements of a newly developed interpretation of Stowe’s home, an experience that is part exhibition and part facilitated dialogue in a historic house setting. “Feeling” responses from visitors helped solidify the connection between knowledge, feeling, and action.

Said one, “This tour brings up all my emotions...I am a mother, I am a great-grandmother. I know as a mother what it feels like to have a newborn put in my arms. For a slave to have a baby...and to have that child taken away is [to] have your heart taken away.”

Conclusion

We plan to continue researching, exploring, and experimenting with emotion in museums in order to improve our own museum practice. We hope that you will do the same, so that as a field, we can learn and share together. Each of you has emotional expertise to bring to the table. So does every visitor you encounter. It’s part of being human. That’s a wonderful thing, for everyone to be able to bring that human expertise to the museum, for everyone to be naturally good at this particular way of knowing exhibition content the moment they come through the door. When we imagine what museums could be like if that emotional expertise was valued and integrated into the exhibition experience, we get intrigued, excited, invigorated, optimistic, and more than a little impatient. We hope you do too. ■

Linda Norris is Global Networks Program Director, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, based in New York City. linda@lindabnorris.com
Rainey Tisdale is an independent curator based in Boston, Massachusetts. raineytisdale@gmail.com