

Editor's Corner

New Representations, New Truths

Sarah H. Case

Our four featured articles in this issue, all Reports from the Field, examine public historians working with performing artists, corporate donors, undergraduate students, and suspicious artifacts. They analyze innovative public history practice in projects from diverse international perspectives, from Greece to South Africa to the United States. All share an interest in using public history methodology to open up new kinds of understandings of the past, and all ponder the idea of truth and representation in historical interpretation.

In “Performing Invisible Stories through Creative History: Escaping with Piet, a Gona-Xhosa from South Africa, 1820,” Julia Wells discusses a two-person play developed in collaboration among the Applied History Department at Rhodes University, in Makhanda, South Africa, students and faculty at the university from the arts, and local performing artists. The play was inspired by the actions of a young man who freed his mother eight years after she had been taken as a prisoner of war, an act of defiance that is briefly mentioned in official records. Using a creative history methodology that pushes beyond the limitations of the colonial archive, Wells worked with two performing artists to “construct a human story from a tiny piece of archival material.” The result was an engaging and emotional play that connected Piet’s story with current social and intellectual protest. In so doing, the team demonstrated how the “interconnectedness of facts, interpretation, and imagination” can generate new kinds of knowledge and powerful engagement with public audiences.

In “. . . stories behind History”: A Public History Exhibition at the National Historical Museum in Athens,” Andromache Gazi analyzes an innovative project. Arguing that national museums often center a narrative that privileges defining a national identity over social history, Gazi sought to create fresh interpretation by staging an “exhibition within the exhibition” with nonprofessional historians. The museum allowed a group of undergraduates to create temporary, low-tech supplemental interpretations of existing exhibits and place them in the permanent galleries. Especially notable was the inclusion of stories about women, largely absent in the museum’s primary interpretation. Through this project students found themselves much more curious about historical interpretation through objects, and visitors encountered new ways of thinking about national history.

Students also played a key role in very different museum in Wichita, Kansas, as discussed in “Serving up a Slice of Entrepreneurship on Campus: The New Pizza Hut Museum.” At Wichita State University, an interdisciplinary team worked with both a corporate sponsor and students to create an unusual kind of university museum—a business museum that could tell both a local and global story. Wichita is home of the original Pizza Hut, and its founders, the Carney family, donated the building to the university. Although the building was physically in poor shape, the team, Sue Abdinnour, Rachelle Meinecke, Lisa Parcell, and Jay M. Price, realized that renovating it into a Pizza Hut Museum could provide an opportunity to examine entrepreneurship, university-business collaboration, and accessibility in design and interpretation. Further, by providing cultural and social interpretation, the museum “also offered an opportunity to bring a humanities presence to a space that tended to more often celebrate STEM achievements.”

Jennifer Bush, Reba Kocher, and Bradley T. Lepper, in “The Newark Holy Stones: Touchstones for The Truth,” address how to rethink contentious objects. The Newark Holy Stones, now held by the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum in Coshocton, Ohio, were allegedly found in ancient burial mounds near Newark, Ohio, in the 1860s. They are stones with Hebrew inscriptions meant to look ancient but are clearly nineteenth-century forgeries. At the time of their finding, they were cited as evidence that incorporated Indigenous people into the “unity of man,” and later in the twentieth century, as evidence that Native peoples could not have created and built the complex earthworks and stone mounds. The authors find that the museum’s earlier attempt to create a “neutral” exhibition avoided controversy at the expense of the truth. A new exhibition, which debuted in 2020, addresses the forgery head-on, and contextualizes the various arguments attempting to establish the stones as authentic. The museum now embraces its “responsibility to tell true stories and foster critical thinking.”

Please join me in thanking our outgoing editorial board members, Vanessa Camacho, Ben Houston, Na Li, Olwen Purdue, Juliane Tomann, and Morgen Young. A heartfelt thanks also to David Vail for his service as Book Review Editor. We welcome our newest members of the board Jerome de Groot, Mireya Loza, Samantha Rosenthal, Jennifer Scott, and Joanna Wojdon.