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READER GUIDE

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Does Museum Education Have a Canon?

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Does Museum Education Have a Canon?

by Nathaniel Prottas

Whatever its discipline, a museum can have a set of criteria or canon that underpins the intellectual worth of objects collected and placed on view. In his introduction to *Does Museum Education Have a Canon?*, the latest issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*, guest editor Nathaniel Prottas suggests that a disciplinary or institutional canon based on aesthetic or technical quality, historical association, or other ideas, can influence ways museum educators prioritize and value the objects we have chosen for teaching.

The following questions, done in conjunction with the guest editor, aim to foster reflection on how an institutional canon might impact object selection and public engagement in your own institution. The questions ask you to discover what might influence your choice of objects for educational programming, and to consider whether or not our museum education field needs to develop its own canon based on the intrinsic qualities of museum learning.

You can **access the article online** through our publishing partner
Taylor & Francis's *Journal of Museum Education* web page.

1. Does your museum discipline have an intellectual canon that prioritizes certain works and/or the ideas they represent? Is the canon explicit or implicit at your institution? If so, who are its main influencers and what is its impact on objects displayed?
2. How might a canon be helpful in your interpretive work as a museum educator? How might it constrain it?
3. How might features of a canonical object—size, shape, content, etc.— and the curatorial and design decisions for its location and display influence your choice of it as an educator for use with various audiences?

(continued)

4. Do audience expectations for what your museum should show as “highlights” influence object choices docents and museum educators make for interpretation? (e.g. where’s the dinosaur, the mummies, Picasso?) If so, how might this be helpful, how might it be a constraint?
5. Are there go-to objects that make up a museum education “canon” used by docents and other educators at your museum? If so, what varied goals do these objects meet, what methods are used for their selection, and why do they consistently work well with various audiences? Is there a thread that connects the objects?
6. The author of this article mentions some methods museum educators have used to re-think their institution’s canon by turning over the power of object selection to visitors themselves through engagement strategies in the galleries or analysis of the choices and connections they make online with digital collections.

How might these approaches be of value at your museum? Are there other ways the voices or perspectives of visitors—or potential visitors—might help to broaden the conversation about which objects are part of the canon?

7. The author ends this article by saying that the ability to assess the objects we use effectively with visitors will help redistribute power within museums, “shifting attention to the central work of education in mediating with the public.”

Do you believe such a shift is necessary at your museum? If so how might a museum-education-based canon be of value? What could one look like in your museum?

8. How might other staff at your museum react to a museum-education based canon?