

## **Museum on Main Street 2009 National Planning Conferences Sharing Best Practices**

### **Beyond MoMS: Councils Engaging in Statewide Museum Initiatives**

Participation in regional workshops and trainings in museum interpretation and education (research, interpretive labeling, docent tour, educational philosophy, etc.) as a qualifier for hosting MoMS exhibits. We're calling our regional workshop and training program the Museum Interpretation Initiative or MII

Brandon Johnson, Utah Humanities Council

*MoMS Tour(s) That You've Coordinated (exhibition and year):* *Between Fences* (2007)

*What needs did you identify among your local hosts that led you to develop this component of your MoMS tour? Or, how did this all come about?*

Many of Utah's small museums exist as single-room galleries, are plagued by microscopic budgets, and operate with all-volunteer staffs that are highly motivated to collect and preserve historical artifacts, but have little professional training. For these reasons, most of the state's small museum professionals are unaware of current museum techniques and theories, and are ill prepared to get much from hosting a MoMS exhibit.

The limitations of Utah's small museums are best demonstrated by the current state of Daughters of the Utah Pioneers (DUP) museums which make up 32% of the state's museums. Historian Jessie Embry and museum curator Mauri Nelson write that "DUP museums have not followed more recent curatorial trends" that have led other museums to restructure their exhibits "to highlight their educational goals ... by presenting carefully selected items with a well-ordered narrative." Indeed, DUP museum policies "reflect little or no attention to modern museum theory, updated conservation methods, or new exhibition techniques." DUP museums might be filled with "cases upon cases of pioneer treasures," but their "selection of items seems never to have included any consideration of aesthetic or other rationales." DUP exhibit labels, if they exist, "are the short, explanatory notes from the donors that accompanied the artifacts into the museum." Such notes are "helpful in locating family donations . . . but fail to create a larger understanding of the period, contemporary events, or the relevance of a given object to its surroundings." (See Jessie L. Embry and Mauri Liljenquist Nelson, "Such is Our Heritage": Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museums" in *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities*, Amy K. Levin, ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Altamira Press, 2007), 161-168.)

A 2006 needs assessment survey pointed to interpretation, exhibit development, and educational tours as key priorities for Utah's museums. When asked what their current priorities were for improving their museums in the area of education ("very important" or "somewhat important"), 86% of respondents cited interpretation in permanent exhibitions, 87% indicated working on new exhibits, and 80% named working on changing/temporary exhibits, while 94% ranked developing student/school tours highest. When it came to general priorities for overall improvement, developing exhibitions was the premier concern for Utah museum professionals, with 80% ranking it as a "very important" priority and 17% ranking it as "somewhat important."

*What council resources/expertise were you able to utilize? What partner resources/expertise?*

My own training as a public historian has come into play in the MII program. We've also relied on institutional partnerships with the Utah Office of Museum Service, the Utah Museums Association, and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts for funding and program personnel.

*What were the steps involved in implementation?*

Partnership formation—needs assessment—program planning and fundraising—curriculum development—workshop logistics—program evaluation

The goal of the program is to work intensively with 100 professionals from 50 small museums over three years to create institutional change through: a) introductory workshops and trainings by experts as part of the Utah Museums Association annual conference, b) a series of three one-day workshops, c) establishment of a peer support network, and d) access to national associations that provide ongoing support and resources.

The project partners have developed curricula and resources for improving the curatorial, interpretive, and educational abilities of participating small-museum professionals that can then be translated into a richer experience for museum visitors. Museums selected for workshops will receive ongoing guidance and assistance from MII consultants on projects at their sites. Workshops 1) focus on helping museum staff and volunteers develop the skills to identify and successfully complete future interpretation projects; 2) foster stronger working relationships between staff and volunteers of small museums, allowing them to draw on each other for support and insight; and 3) better acquaint participants with the range of available resources.

*What were the results?*

This is still a relatively new program, so we have only preliminary results so far. I'm attaching data from the four workshops in our pilot year

*What adjustments (if any) did you make along the way?*

No adjustments yet.

*What's been the short and long term benefit to the local hosts?*

So far, the short term benefits of the MII program to participating museum professionals and volunteers have been: 1) professional development in historical research, artifact interpretation, exhibit and program design, educational best practices, and docent training; 2) extended access to project consultants for problem solving and advice on aligning museum goals with newly-acquired skills and information; 3) a nucleus of peer museum professionals with whom they can maintain a network of support, and 4) resources and materials detailing best practices in various areas of training, and equipment for completing successful projects.

*What's been the short and long term benefit to the state council?*

In addition to helping us further our goal of building the humanities infrastructure of our state, the primary benefit of the MII program to UHC has been our increased ability to reach museums that that don't know us or haven't worked with us.

*What advice would you have for other state tour coordinators trying to make a similar impact in this area?*

Work with partners to accomplish goals. Also, I think it makes a lot of sense to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment before starting something. Without data, it is harder to secure funding and what you end up doing may not address the needs of the population you're trying to serve.

*Do you have any files, forms, documents or digital images illustrating this component of your MoMS tour(s) that we could post on-line to share with others?*

At this point, I'd rather have them contact me for materials.

*Would you be willing to serve as a mentor to other state coordinators, advising them on this topic? If so, please indicate the best way for them to contact you.*

Yes. They can call me (801-359-9670) or email me (johnson@utahhumanities.org.)