Exhibit Review
Finding Philadelphia’s Past: Visions and Revisions

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The exhibition which opened in December 1989 at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is a “blockbuster” show in its size, ambitious agenda, and sponsorship. The display is dense: about five hundred objects are arrayed in two adjoining galleries comprising approximately five thousand square feet. While more space and flexible wall partitions might have helped to differentiate one thematic section from another, the packed visual effect and layering of historical topics within limited spatial parameters seem appropriate to an urban history narrative. Project director and HSP curator Elizabeth Jarvis reports that one objective in creating this comprehensive exhibit—the first of such magnitude in the institution’s 165-year existence—was to put the Society on the cultural map of Philadelphia as a destination for tourists as well as scholars and local history enthusiasts. Public and private benefactors answered the call to support a visually rich and textually sophisticated orientation to Philadelphia, from the 1660s to the early 1900s. Twenty-four sponsors are credited, with major funding provided by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Knight Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Like other ambitious museum exhibits, “Finding Philadelphia’s Past” had a long gestation. It was conceived in 1984 and brought to fruition by a team of nationally-recognized consultants, academic advisors, outside designers, audiovisual specialists, professional curators, educators and volunteers. At least seventy-five people contributed to the development of object arrangements, interpretive labels, and various interactive and programming adjuncts. An introductory video portrays history as a giant puzzle of differently-shaped and colored fragments. (Henry Nevison of InVision Communications, Inc., was the video director, aided by script writer Gerald Kolpan.) Six visitor-activated audio stations treat the mixed multitude that peopled William Penn’s young colony: the Loyalist Meschianza, the party politics of the Sedition Act, the Underground Railroad, the music of black West Indian band leader Frank Johnson in the 1830s, and women’s rights voiced at the 1876 Centennial. (Jay Allison produced the audiotapes; Charles Hardy III served as scriptwriter and audiovisual consultant.) Hardy and Nevison collaborated on the concluding set of videos, consisting of six 5-minute segments, housed in a re-created trolley car that “carries” visitors on a tour of turn-of-the-century urban and suburban neighborhoods, contrasting
industrial enclaves and tenement living with pristine middle-class domesticity and planned residential developments made possible by street-car and railroad lines.

Another innovative audience-pleaser, which doubles as educational programming, is a face-to-face theatrical encounter with ordinary citizens of by-gone Philadelphia, staged by "Partners with the Past." Funded for week-end performances during the initial months of the exhibition, the Royal Pickwickians troupe, headed by William and Pamela Sommerfield, researched some twenty personalities ranging from an Irish indentured servant of the 1740s and a black woman who nursed yellow fever victims during the 1793 epidemic to a middle-aged Jewish seamstress assisted by the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society and an Italian plasterer who helped mold the City Hall statue of William Penn in the 1880s. In addition to delivering scripted performances, actors encourage questions from spectators and improvise responses in keeping with the characters portrayed.

Participatory theater, kinetic visual aids, and taped vignettes were a means to the end of updating the Historical Society's conservative image as a repository of great men's relics, "old" families' heirlooms, and antiquarian documents savored by genealogists. Curator Jarvis, who supervised all aspects of implementing the show, noted: "With this exhibit we intend to interpret the historical value of our collections for the public in a way that is lively and entertaining but also contributes to an understanding of how American society has developed historically." To achieve the latter goal, Karin Calvert, of the University of Pennsylvania's American Civilization program, was employed as Guest Curator, to integrate material culture and social history perspectives into the story line illustrated by selected objects. Gary Nash, of the University of California, Los Angeles, was tapped as Guest Historian.

Author of eleven books, four of which deal with Philadelphia as an "urban crucible" of social change, political ferment, racial and class consciousness and conflict, Nash became the principal investigator for "Finding [and codifying] Philadelphia's Past." He wrote the following in the January issue of The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, the only published scholarly commentary on the exhibition until the catalogue appears in late 1990:

My task as Guest Historian was threefold: first, to provide the intellectual framework and the guiding rationale for such an exhibit; second, to build upon that framework and carry through that rationale for an exhibit by coordinating the choice of some 470 books, paintings, manuscripts, pamphlets, broadsides, lithographs, cartoons, photographs, and museum objects; and third, with the help of the curatorial and manuscript division staffs, to write a script for the show—about forty text panels on the walls and hundreds of object labels that would identify and interpret the many objects in the
exhibition and weave them together in a connected narrative about the making of the city's history.¹

Unlike the blockbuster offerings of art museums, HSP and its consultants have mounted a semi-permanent installation intended to endure to the year 2000. Loans from around the world are not brought together here; rather the focus is on one cultural institution’s holdings, supplemented by reproductions of documents and pictorial sources owned by other local repositories, such as the Archives of the City of Philadelphia, where, as one label indicates, one "must go . . . to trace the history of the poor and of poor relief." Even some Society-owned documentary rarities had to be represented by photographic substitutes since paper conservators recommend a limited display time of about three months. Why, then, include so many graphic images and written records (at least one-third of the items on view by this reviewer’s estimate) in a long-running exhibition spearheaded by the museum department? One might argue that "Finding Philadelphia’s Past" needed to include many documents from the library in order to represent the Society’s range and types of collections, numbering fifteen million rare books, manuscripts, prints, paintings, decorative arts, and historical artifacts. However, the fundamental reason is that the three-dimensional objects did not fully represent the history which Nash and his colleagues wanted to transmit to museumgoers.

Although there is no gift shop at the end of the show, stocked with posters, stationery, scarves, t-shirts, and lavishly-illustrated books promoting Philadelphia landmarks and historic "firsts," this exhibit is a blockbuster in Webster’s definition of the term as “a huge high-explosive demolition bomb.” The target is American history as the study of white founding fathers, great battles, Congressional acts, and “melting pot” democracy.

While the seven major divisions of the exhibition are essentially chronological, the time-frame is subordinate to the unifying theme of historical paradox and cultural complexity. Introductory text panels for each part articulate contradictions that argue against the continuity and consensus model still prevalent in many textbooks and popular publications spawned by the Bicentennial. "Quaker Visions" sets forth William Penn’s founding ideals of toleration, ethnic diversity and peaceful coexistence, but label copy points out rifts like Proprietary squabbles, land hunger, slaveholding, and depredation of native Americans (e.g. the “Walking Purchase” swindle). The artifactual difficulty here, which plagues other portions of the exhibit also, is that colonial items owned by the Society are often relics (Penn’s Bible and razor, the family cradle, a wampum belt supposedly presented by the Lenni Lenape, etcetera) expressive of elite aspirations and affluence, at odds with actual conditions in a frontier society. A subsection called "A Bedrock of Tolerance" is intended to balance the Penn articles by showcasing portraits, metal and needlework, furniture and printed
materials betokening diverse immigrant backgrounds: Swedes, Huguenots, Jews, German Pietists, Moravians, Anglicans, Irish indentured servants, and blacks.

Section II on "The Commercial Seaport" illustrates Philadelphia's 18th-century prosperity as a grain port, shipping capital, and artisanal center. Subgroupings contrast the cult of gentility practiced by leading merchants and landholders with the economic uncertainty and destitution of less fortunate craftsmen, laborers, and almshouse indigents. An excellent panel graphic, consisting of reproductions of the 17-page inventory of Caspar Wistar and the much more modest tabulations of possessions amassed by a clerk and a widow, visually conveys how quantification has instigated qualitative reassessments of the past. One might have reinforced the message of the inventories by juxtaposing cases of objects demonstrative of penury, frugality, and opulence in eating/dining equipage, for example. Such a display would have helped visitors to understand the relative meanings of "necessity," "amenity" and "luxury"—categories employed to good effect by Walsh and Carr to translate numerical data into interpretive insights about 18th-century consumerism. Curiously, the change from a deferential (Proprietary) social organization, rooted in landed wealth and hereditary status, to a mercantile culture where objects mediated status, is not emphasized. Instead, the exhibition organizers have focused on producers and products rather than client-patron interrelations that shaped the material universe of colonial respectability and fashionability. The long gallery wall devoted to examples of the diverse output of Philadelphia artisans (fig. 1) is unified and nicely explicated by illustrations from the Book of Trades on the silk-screened label rail. Still, the collaboration between family dynasties of workmen (e.g. Richardson silversmiths) and gentle folk (e.g. the Logans) in generating a consumer revolution would have functioned as a fine transition to Sections III and IV on "Making a [political] Revolution" and "Constructing a Nation."

The organizing principles of conflict and multiple historical viewpoints work well in these sections that illuminate the ambiguity of Tory and patriot labels and the contrast between national patriotism, local loyalty, and self-interest. The emphasis on ethnic heterogeneity, introduced in Section I, continues in this third component with paintings and documents functioning as place-holders for French, Hessian, native American, Jewish, and black protagonists in the Revolutionary struggle. A case is made for a fractured homefront and a divided "spirit of '76," since liberty was not for all, as shown in manuscripts and printed sources chronicling on-going antagonisms between "Americans" and Indians and slaves.

Similarly, the writing and ratification of the Constitution, discussed in Section IV, engendered mixed, and heated, responses that led to the founding of an opposition party, although such factionalism was finessed artifically in nationalist icons like Washington portraits (on ceramic jugs as well as canvases),
“Columbia” imagery, and various relics of the “national genius” incorporated in Charles Peale’s museum. Glossed over by the exhibition team for “Finding Philadelphia’s Past” are the War of 1812 and the issues of building a national economy, generating and supporting home manufactures, and cultural Anglophilia among middling consumers as well as the Republican Court. In fact, the historians and curators seem to have reverted here to the traditional mode of history exhibits depicting heritage—albeit more diverse than that envisioned by HSP founder John Fanning Watson—rather than city life and the ordinary citizenry.

The richly-textured urban fabric is more fully developed in Part V, called “The Republic Transformed,” covering the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Objects and text trace the development of industrialization, an immigrant work force and attendant labor strife, reform impulses, popular entertainment, and municipal/fraternal organizations for fighting fires and patrolling the streets. The dichotomy between unifying, progressive technology, seen in steamships, railroads, canals and bridges that linked places and people, and social dislocation manifested in the polarization of industrial capitalists and factory operatives, of native-born Protestant workers and recently-arrived Catholic
laborers, is highlighted. The display (fig. 2) seems more accessible than in preceding sections, partly because the label rail (fig. 1) has been eliminated, allowing viewers a more intimate look at paintings and cased items. In addition, the inclusion of theater and circus artifacts along with colorful fire company paraphernalia evokes festive associations even though this subsection is entitled "On the Stage and in the Streets: Contending Cultures." Another subgrouping on photography shows different faces of the city (animate and inanimate), enhanced by label copy regarding photographic processes and photographers. This reviewer would have liked more of this kind of explication, simultaneously conveying knowledge about objects and their urban history context, in the rest of the exhibit.

Sections VI and VII bring to the fore the undercurrents of abolitionism and of women's rights and civic activity that have been interwoven throughout the exhibition. The former follows a format similar to the fourth part on the Revolution. Heroic portraits of generals or battles and the mundane realities of divided loyalties and of liberty restrained by racism and class interests are contrasted. The Civil War portion contains more three-dimensional artifacts than its Revolutionary counterpart because the Historical Society was in existence at
the time of the historic rupture, and its Republican members "regarded the war as a patriotic struggle to preserve the Union."³

The concluding segment of the show, entitled "Workshop of the World," actually focuses on the Centennial and its several faces. On the one hand, it was a celebration of technological progress and of national unity restored; on the other, it was a highly visible forum for protest by Southerners, who, for the most part, did not participate in mounting displays, and by women, who issued "A Declaration of Rights for Women" and set up a separate women's pavilion. This section is one of the weakest, for it grossly oversimplifies the "woman question" and fails to grasp the utopian dimension of the world's fair, which set the tone for subsequent international expositions in Chicago and New York in 1893, 1933, and 1939.⁴ One difficulty is that the Society's artifact collections diminish in strength and breadth with the approach of the twentieth century. To their credit, the exhibition organizers made the best of this limitation by conceiving a brilliant finale consisting of video montages of still photographs and film footage, skillfully edited and narrated, to convey visitors through the first quarter of the twentieth century while seated in a trolley-car theater.

Taken as a whole, just how successful is HSP's encapsulation of 250 years of Philadelphia's history? The exhibit is a good "read" if one likes a book on the wall. Despite all the words, there are major omissions, notably cultural geography perspectives on the history of the landscape, the interdependence of city and hinterlands, the ideal of orderly urban planning versus the reality of "messy" streetscapes. This seems a missed opportunity, for Americans in the late 20th century are vitally interested in matters of ecology and the natural environment as altered by the hand of man. Furthermore, "Finding Philadelphia's Past" makes only superficial attempts to explicate the Quaker, Pietist, and other sectarian religious creeds and concomitant ways of life which shaped the colonial development of Pennsylvania as profoundly as did Puritanism in Massachusetts or Connecticut. Certainly it is valid, even essential, to set limits in survey exhibitions. Nonetheless, some HSP visitors might argue, as have museumgoers polled about the crowd-pleasing "Rowhouse" show soon to be re-mounted by the Baltimore City Life Museum, that inclusiveness, rather than selectivity and editing, is a major problem curators should address.⁵ It is not an overdose of objects that lay audiences complain about, but long and numerous verbal explanations that present too much detail or divergent data.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of text panels and group labels for not just the seven major display areas demarcated at HSP, but up to a dozen subsections contained within a single section, can be disconcerting. Quenroe Design Associates of Baltimore, charged with the exhibit design and installation, demonstrated sensitivity to the overstimulation that might accompany so many words and artifacts in close proximity. They created low-key, "domestic" interiors with attractive but unobtrusive moldings and plain backgrounds for
cased articles. The lighting is sometimes harsh, but subtleties in directing and modulating light are hard to achieve given conservation concerns and the need to provide even illumination for a reading public.

Reading intently, as opposed to looking intensely at individual artifacts and provocative object juxtapositions, emerges as an important, though unstated, objective of Nash and the project team. They do recognize the power of artifacts, since they seek to relate the history, and "mysteries," of collecting—"subtly and intermittently"—as a subsidiary exhibition theme. In fact, motivations and acts of collection-building are addressed in prologue and epilogue groupings that seem like "coming attractions" or "trailers" for the movies, bracketing the feature presentation. An ingenious attempt to link revisionist interpretation and collecting involves the image of Benjamin Franklin's bifocals as a logo affixed to certain labels, prompting visitors to look at history through alternate lenses. The implementation is flawed, however. Instead of utilizing the graphic cue of eyeglasses to encourage viewers to derive new cultural meanings from the visual analysis of "style as evidence," or of the technique of manufacture as a structural—and structuralist—language of performance and affirmation of community identity, the symbol is used to signify conceptual re-focusing.

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In all fairness to the HSP show and its guiding hands, it must be said that the proper balance among concepts, words, and objects is the subject of a vociferous debate carried on by museum professionals, academics, and advocates for the non-specialist public. A recent article by Bernard S. Finn, "Exhibit Reviews—Twenty Years After," assesses the impact of exhibit reviews and sets forth criteria for the critical discussion of exhibitions. Finn pinpoints both the limitations and the potential in examining history through artifactual displays. He quotes from Stuart W. Leslie's 1982 review of The Milwaukee Public Museum's "Urban Habitat": "The challenge for technical [and other] museums, then, is to take advantage of the special qualities of the artifact while at the same time displaying it as part of a social and economic environment." Several pages later, Finn introduces a caveat:

The reviewer should, in my view, not be too rigid in looking for strong themes in exhibits. Museums are still archival storehouses of historically significant artifacts, and an older tradition, where the visitor was expected to provide substantial context for a display of the collections, still has validity ... consider Eugene Ferguson's strongly felt statement: 'the notion ... that a museum of ideas rather than objects is superior to the mere displayer of objects is, in my opinion, flatly wrong."

What the HSP show got right was the central theme of paradox and contradiction, although the organizers may not have been fully conscious that it applied to the exhibit itself as well as to the historical content encased therein.
Notes


3. Quoted from the exhibition text panel "Portraits of the War."


9. Ibid., p. 997.