Compiled by Brian Butko from Museum Division staff contributions

FOR MANY YEARS, a visit to a museum meant seeing long rows of bottles or guns or steam engines. The focus was on the objects themselves, and any interpretation was based on great men and great events.

About 30 years ago, the philosophy of historical studies and museum displays began to change. Historians became increasingly interested in the everyday lives of ordinary people, and by the 1970s, historians and curators were calling for exhibits to be more relevant to contemporary experiences and for collections to come from all segments of society. Over the past decade, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania has paralleled this shift with an increased emphasis on interpretive exhibits with social history themes — exhibits which relate to and document the experiences of people from a broad spectrum of society. Of course, no field is static, and the thinking behind collections and exhibits continues to evolve.

When the Historical Society began this transformation in 1986, it had been collecting objects for 70 years, but with a far different agenda. Early efforts accumulated relics and curios such as wood from Fort Pitt or a pioneer family's cradle. The sweep
broadened in the 1930s, according to HSWP Chief Curator Ellen Rosenthal, “when the Historical Society began to collect American decorative arts with or without a Western Pennsylvania connection. Mostly finer furnishings from colonial homes, these included American-made furniture, English ceramics, Chinese export porcelain, and the now-important collection of glass tableware.”

The collecting goals of the Historical Society remained unchanged for a half-century, until the late 1980s, when the Museum Division took several steps to transform collecting efforts. First was a new system of classification, based on an important book in the field written in the 1970s. “Objects previously characterized by material or form were now organized by function,” says Rosenthal. “For example, a Heinz vinegar sampling tumbler that was previously filed under ‘glass’ was now classified under ‘advertising.’ A collections policy was also adopted which required regional historical significance for collected objects.”

Most importantly, the Society began outreach initiatives to acquire materials related to the region’s industrial and ethnic heritage, community life, and more recent events. “Collections have since grown exponentially, doubling at least three times in 10 years,” says Rosenthal. “In fact, efforts are narrowing somewhat to avoid collections too thinly distributed or too vast for affordable storage and maintenance.”

Collecting artifacts that reflect social history rather than saving the relics typical of earlier history museum collections has had a profound impact on the Society’s registration department, within the Museum Division. Objects collected recently such as mill tools, an embroidered silk canopy, a printing press, a glass-cutting shop, even a diner, have led to unprecedented questions of care and storage. Kathleen Wendell, head of registration, explains: “The storage areas have expanded from the closets of the old Bigelow Boulevard headquarters to 21,000 square feet of storage in two off-site buildings, but conservation remains a challenge. Grime now must be preserved along with patina. And staff must recognize asbestos fibers along with the more familiar cotton and silk.”

The time needed to process these new collections is also more intensive. “Simply recording a number and donor name has been succeeded by a quest for learning about the context of objects,” Wendell says. “This can be as simple as a photograph or as complex as recording oral histories and collecting related receipts and record books. We learn who used an object, how they used it, and why.” Entering this information on computer also takes more time, but the resulting cross-referencing abilities makes it possible to “search” for objects in the collection without physically entering the storage areas.

The Museum Division actively strives to collect not only industrial history, but artifacts and stories of the workers and the families. Some of the most active collecting initiatives in recent years have been in conjunction with various ethnic groups. Presently, there are five such initiatives — Jewish, Italian American, Polish American, Slovak American, and African American. The focus of each varies depending on needs and preferences; for example, the Jewish initiative is based in HSWP’s Library and Archives Division, Italian American in the Museum Division, and the African American in the Public Programs Division. The most ambitious project so far was the acquisition of a house and its contents owned by the Kins family, Polish immigrants to Lawrenceville: the house will become a museum itself.

Cathy Cerrone, coordinator of the Italian American Program, says that “many ethnic groups have historically not felt included by the auspices of privately funded ‘cultural’ institutions. Some were naturally suspicious of the Historical Society’s intentions, so it is often the role of the ethnic coordinator to make inroads into the community, often in a very personal way. These efforts are essential in gaining the trust of people who might not understand what the Society does and why it’s interested in them.”

Cerrone is also glad that the personal contacts lead to better collections and exhibits. “Landscaper Guido Cardillo,” she recalls, “beamed with pride when he learned that his hedge clippers and client account book would be displayed in an exhibit. But I also recorded an oral history and he donated photos that greatly aid the Society’s ability to tell a story that will enrich the visitor’s experience.”

For earlier accessions, and even some recently acquired objects, the stories behind them are missing. Curators comb through the computerized files as well as delicate papers in the Society’s Archives to piece together an artifact’s history. “I love mysteries,” says Curator Anne Madarasz, “and some of the best ones I’ve read lately have sat on our shelves for decades. One of the most interesting concerned a coin silver teapot given to the Society in 1980. Marked on one side is ‘A. OSTHOFF’ and PITTSBURG on the other. We discovered this silversmith arrived in Pittsburgh about 1814 and died in 1818. A newspaper ad then announced his wife Modelena taking over the business. It’s a wonderful story showing demand for luxury goods at an early date, plus insights into gender roles.”

After finishing that research, new information turned up that linked Osthoff and another Pittsburgh silversmith, Joseph Lukey. He had run a silversmith shop across Diamond Alley from Osthoff’s. Searching city directories and wills, Madarasz found that he died in 1822, four years after Osthoff, and that he also left his business to a wife — a wife with the name “Magdelena.”
“Could they be the same woman? We’ll keep digging and see what other clues turn up,” Madarasz vows.

All of these new methods for collecting and displaying have also greatly affected museum exhibits. According to Museum Division Director Bill Keyes, “The acceptance of social history as a legitimate historical discipline has been followed by an increased interest on the part of history museums to develop and install social history exhibitions. The challenge lies in developing a variety of presentation techniques to convey the incredible amount of information essential to telling a social history story.”

Don Traub, director for exhibits, says that exhibit design “has developed into a rigorous decision-making process that is well grounded in learning theory and contains specific goals and objectives that are formulated at the beginning of the development process. The current design process has five phases — research, development of content, setting of educational goals, exhibit design, fabrication, and installation.” Traub says many other elements are involved too, including “visitor traffic flow, pacing/tempo of exhibit flow, color schemes, use of interactive devices, compliance with the Americans with Disability Act, and the use of technology to alleviate conservation concerns.”

The processes of collecting for museums and then mounting exhibits have come a long way since the first American museum opened in 1786 in Baltimore. These processes will continue to evolve as curators, registrars, and designers learn more about what visitors want, and what future researchers may need. The goals, however, will remain the same — to provide the museum visitor with as entertaining and educational experience as possible.

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N MARCH 7, 1973, then-Congressman John Heinz III presented a lecture for the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania titled “Great Grandfather’s Pittsburgh.” It was probably a tie-in to the release of Robert Alberts’ The Good Provider, which chronicled the life of food company founder H.J. Heinz.

Stirrings of change were affecting the Historical Society that year. The Post Gazette reported the previous fall that Director Joseph Smith was aware the institution had an image of “an exclusive club where aged historians potter about in the dust of the past.” He and the Board of Trustees wanted to increase storage space and raise public awareness and interest, especially with young people. Other plans included launching a “lively” newsletter and a program to preserve local ethnic history, but concern remained whether the plans would “be sufficient to maintain the society’s intellectual significance and to attract vital new members.” There were even suggestions that other, more active, local organizations could absorb the Society.

Of course, progress in addressing those concerns was made over the following two decades, culminating in a new museum facility. It is named for the late Senator Heinz, a man who was widely respected for his integrity and compassion. We are inspired by his efforts, and we keep in mind his great grandfather’s favorite maxim: “To do a common thing uncommonly well brings success.”

— Text by Brian Butko, photograph from HSWP archives.