



TASK FORCE FOR TRANSGENDER INCLUSION

Interpreting Transgender Stories in Museums and Cultural Heritage Institutions



**American
Alliance of
Museums**



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THIS GUIDE?

The American Alliance of Museums has recognized that reflecting the diversity of our cultural heritage is a critical part of museum work. Part of that diversity includes transgender and gender-nonconforming people, who represent a growing number of museum visitors, employees, and stakeholders. These constituents deserve dignified and respectful representation of their lives and communities in museums and cultural institutions. Yet museum professionals may have difficulty confidently representing them in museum exhibitions and programs due to the rapid evolution of language, the marginalization of transgender identities throughout history, and the politicization of transgender identity in the twenty-first century.

This guide is designed to recognize and address these challenges. It is intended to support museums, libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage institutions in recognizing queer and transgender possibilities within their collections, advocating for these possibilities within their institutions, and forming meaningful relationships with their local queer and transgender communities. In doing so, it focuses on interpretation and advocacy through exhibitions and programs. For comprehensive resources on transgender inclusion in employment policies and practices, please see the [Transgender Inclusion Toolkits](#), released in 2019.

This guide was created by the American Alliance of Museums' LGBTQ+ Alliance Task Force for Transgender Inclusion between the summers of 2021 and 2022. The task force consists of professionals working in museums, archives, libraries, and transgender advocacy organizations, led by Co-Chairs Tony Pankuch and Samantha E. Eisenberg.

In addition to researching current scholarship on LGBTQ+ history and interpretation within the cultural heritage fields, task force members consulted with representatives from twelve museums, archives, and academic institutions about their experiences creating exhibitions and programming focused on transgender narratives. These interviews revealed a variety of issues, concerns, and approaches relating to transgender inclusion in cultural heritage interpretation. We have worked to convey and address these ideas to the best of our ability in this guide.

We are indebted to the work of dedicated museum curators, exhibition designers, and historians who have worked to increase the visibility of queer and transgender identity in cultural heritage institutions and the historical record. Our deepest thanks to the scholars whose work informed this guide, and the professionals who spoke with us directly about their experiences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANS-INCLUSIVE EXHIBITIONS AND PROGRAMS IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS



Transgender people have existed for thousands of years (Herdt 1993, Ramet 1996), but uncovering their stories can be challenging due to their marginalization and erasure throughout history. It is important that cultural institutions do the work to elevate their stories and demonstrate that their identities are not a new phenomenon but have a long and rich history.

Featuring queer narratives is an important part of fostering true inclusion in your institution, at a time when many are striving to center diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI). The LGBTQ+ community is vast and intersectional, and queer people come from all cultures, traditions, backgrounds, and heritages. Learning how to approach these narratives further supports DEAI initiatives by discussing the intersections of queer people's identities.

As cultural heritage institutions widely seek to establish themselves as “third places”—fully engaged social settings separate from the home or workplace—it is important to recognize the distinct need for such settings among the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ people, particularly youth, lack sufficient safe spaces in the United States and abroad. This is particularly true for transgender people, who face elevated incidence of harassment and, in recent years, record rates of violence and murder (Human Rights Campaign 2021). Cultural heritage institutions can help by becoming openly welcoming spaces for these communities, and creating inclusive exhibitions and programming is one of the best ways to extend a direct invitation.

“Some of the most fruitful parts of our work have been hearing from transgender elders about their experiences and knowing that they're there. As cultural institutions, we can elevate them because mainstream queer media is not going to.”

Umi Hsu, Director of Content Strategy, ONE Archives Foundation

GETTING STARTED

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to be used in community. This includes:

- Your institution's internal community, from volunteers and front-line staff to trustees
- Your institution's core audience, who can both learn from and help in developing the exhibitions and programs
- Your local transgender and LGBTQ+ community: artists, activists, archivists, and people who can find the exhibitions or programs as a community gathering space

Local resources, institutional size, and other factors will be under consideration, of course, but people are key to progress.

You can use this guide in concert with existing resources in your communities, as well as those in the resource list here. There's no single best way to include transgender narratives in exhibitions and programming. Instead, this guide suggests potential best practices for your institution based on this project's interviews, published studies, and related tools and examples. Our goal is to help you bring them together as you identify your (and your institution's) approach and summarize knowledge from other professionals and institutions. From historical societies to contemporary art museums, there is a vibrant and growing assortment of institutions hosting these exhibitions and programs, with an equally wide-ranging spectrum of transgender representations to draw on.

From the task force's interviews and research, we believe that building a coalition within and across your communities is essential to success in presenting transgender narratives in exhibitions and programs. Coalition-building is a process, and conversations will take time. But from initial consultation with stakeholders to post-launch assessments and long-term planning afterwards, we hope you will find the process rewarding and adopt a long-term investment in transgender representation. Before leaving the initial discussion stage, everyone should be on the same page about the intersections of transgender narratives, institutional identities, and the professional and personal capacities of the people involved in your proposal.

A Note on Terminology: *Transgender is an umbrella term covering a wide spectrum of identities, including many non-binary and gender-nonconforming people. In the interest of brevity, we have chosen to use "transgender" throughout the guide in reference to the broader transgender, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming community.*

WHAT TO EXPECT

Being on the same page doesn't mean conforming to a single viewpoint, but it does mean recognizing a baseline understanding and the central goal(s) of the project. Everyone in your institution—and in surrounding communities—will have a different perspective and knowledge base on the language, history, and lives of transgender people. Everyone has something to bring to the table; professional and personal experiences and expertise contribute to every exhibition or program. Everyone can have a meaningful understanding of transgender narratives, which is, we hope, why you are reading this guide.

While assessing the opportunities and challenges in getting a trans-inclusive exhibition or program off the ground, make sure you really do include everyone. Public-facing staff and volunteers are key stakeholders. From volunteer docents to communications administrators, these colleagues are key to consistent, clear messaging. And while support from institutional leadership is important, think about who is building relationships with transgender people behind the scenes. Do the people handling paperwork for exhibiting transgender artists, speakers, and other people your museum works with use the right names and pronouns for them? Does the front desk staff offer directions to gender-neutral (or single-occupancy) restrooms?

Getting everyone on the same page means having conversations, so don't assume—ask, with cultural humility in mind. Cultural humility, a concept developed by clinicians Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García, prioritizes long-term assessment of the self and power dynamics among cultural groups, championing “mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic” community partnerships. As an approach, it is a more community-centered alternative to what is known as cultural competence (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998).

You can also share this guide and associated resources with your institution's administration and other stakeholders who aren't directly involved in putting on exhibitions and programs. Just knowing there is a guide—that other institutions have done this before—can be helpful for those who haven't considered the possibilities of transgender inclusion in cultural heritage work before.

While you may be familiar with some of the resources in the *Additional Resources* section already, others may be new. We have sought to provide sources that go beyond the “101” of transgender inclusion in cultural heritage for those looking for more in-depth or theoretical approaches. And if there's a resource you don't see here that you've found helpful, please reach out to share it with us as well as with your team—if you found it relevant, chances are we will too.

GATHERING INTERNAL SUPPORT

Gaining the support of your institutional leadership is a crucial early step in the process. Before approaching leadership with a proposal, take a moment to evaluate your organizational culture and the context of your institution's audience. Has your institution done past audience research relating to diverse identities that you can refer to? Can you reach out to local LGBTQ+ organizations to do a needs assessment? What kinds of exhibitions and programs has your institution created in the past? What is the process by which proposals are developed? Gather documents like proposal forms, creative briefs, or project templates. Inquire about your institution's program calendar and see where your project could fit in. Take some time to understand your organization's structure:

- Does your board have subcommittees?
- How are new programs and exhibitions approved?
- What is the timeframe for proposing, approving, and realizing your project?
- Who has to sign off?
- What kinds of reporting structures are you expected to fit into?
- Is an impact report expected of this program?

Leverage existing resources to support community partnerships. Consider bringing in an outside voice to help navigate the politics of and facilitate diplomacy within your institution. This can help build community between various stakeholders of your organization. Go into the community, assess the interest in your program, gauge the temperature, and identify potential allies who may volunteer to support your initiative. Cultivate these relationships and build a coalition of supporters around your project to build community within your institution.

Another part of this process can include identifying, collecting, and curating existing resources and comparable cases. Do you have transgender narratives represented in your collections? (See the section below, *Exploring Transgender Histories & Narratives in Your Institution*.) If so, what steps has your institution taken to care for and identify materials relating to transgender identity? How can you increase access to these materials and awareness that they exist? What is the culture and attitude around transgender and queer identity where your museum is located? Are there any other organizations in your community who are actively working to support transgender people?

Next, you can evaluate your institutional culture and community and gauge their readiness to support inclusive projects. What kinds of cultural competencies, training, and experiences are there at the institution? Do existing exhibitions and programming, paperwork, spaces, etc. already acknowledge and include transgender people? Evaluate what already exists and

identify individual and institutional partners who have a vested interest in either supporting or opposing transgender inclusion.

Once you understand the current climate around transgender identity in your community and at your institution, consider the context of your institution within the community. Focus on presenting a concrete plan grounded in your prior assessment. Connect your proposal to the mission of your institution. If your institution has a statement about justice, diversity, equity, accessibility, and/or inclusion, cite this statement to show how your proposal helps fulfill the organization's goals. You should also tie your proposal back to your organization's mission statement.

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

In some cases, despite a well-prepared proposal, you may face pushback or reservations from institutional leadership. This is not uncommon—you are not alone! You can anticipate these challenges and prepare for them in advance. Some tactics include:

- Brainstorming potential criticisms and creating counterarguments in advance
- Collecting statements from the community about how your proposal would be impactful
- Pointing to other peer institutions who may have had successful programs similar to your own
- Bringing in a third party, such as a project partner, community member, or consultant, to talk about the idea. (Information from someone outside the institution may be better received and help circumvent challenges you may face within your institutional culture.)

Your project may require a change to the institution's practices. For example, you may want to provide context about a transgender artist when the institution habitually lists only a work's creator, title, materials, date, and credit line. Be prepared to defend requests like these or

*To overcome generational differences in terminology and language, the Washington State Historical Society met with local LGBTQ+ advocacy groups like the Rainbow Center to develop its exhibition **Crossing Boundaries: Portraits of a Transgender West** (pictured), shown at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, Washington.*



Interpreting Transgender Stories in Museums and Cultural Heritage Institutions

develop compromises. Many institutional policies are built around the assumption of cisgender, binary identity. Fostering transgender inclusivity within your exhibitions and programs will likely require you to advocate for exceptions or, more ideally, permanent changes to these policies.

Additionally, we would like to acknowledge that facing pushback and resistance from institutional leadership, and responding appropriately, is an incredibly challenging task that involves personal and emotional labor. Often, institutions lean on the lived experience of marginalized individuals' labor and leadership in working with exhibitions, descriptions, materials (on multiple axes of race, gender, ability) and DEAI work. This expectation can be an added emotional burden and compound when the subject matter of your proposal directly intersects with your own identities.

As you manage this emotional labor, consider ways to share the load. Are there other members of your community at your organization that you can bring in as early supporters? Have other colleagues taken the lead on inclusive exhibitions and programming from other marginalized communities? If you can, identify flag-bearers, allies who can help address emotionally charged conversations that might be more taxing for marginalized staff members.

Lastly, consider the context, experience, and background of your institution's leadership. Would informational training help to get leadership on the same page? Consider asking a consultant or community organizer to provide some training. Has your leadership had the opportunity to meet and interact with transgender communities? Consider collecting examples from peer institutions and creating a presentation to highlight best practices or other examples.

Engaging in this work can be challenging for everyone, especially those that face the kinds of marginalization that might be discussed and addressed in your exhibition or program. When developing your plan, consider incorporating trauma-informed practices for both staff members and visitors, such as trigger warnings or content warnings for sensitive issues, or disclaimers about any challenging topics you may be addressing (Katrikh 2018, Armstrong, et al. 2021, Price, et al. 2022).

Most importantly, take care of yourself and protect your own time, energy, and health!

BUILDING YOUR PROJECT

SELECTING TERMINOLOGY



When discussing the transgender community and transgender narratives in your collections, it is important to be mindful about the terminology that you are using. Terminology around transgender identity has evolved rapidly over the last half-century, and the use of outdated terminology in your exhibition, program, or related marketing materials may alienate or offend your audience. Numerous resources exist to help you understand current terminology around transgender identity and other LGBTQ+ identities. We've included a few in the *Additional Resources* section below.

Community partners within the LGBTQ+ community can help you to make informed choices about the terminology you use in your exhibition or program. Don't be afraid to ask questions and open a dialogue if you're not sure what words to use!

For more information on historic terminology, see the section *Exploring Transgender Histories & Narratives in Your Institution* below.

PRESENTING A GLOSSARY

Creating a glossary provides an excellent opportunity to gain community input while also forming valuable connections with existing organizations. A glossary that's compiled with community members will reflect your audience's specific needs and interests.

A glossary can be valuable for both visitors to your exhibition or program and your internal team. You may choose to create an overarching glossary for your institution to ensure consistency between exhibitions and programs, or a glossary for your specific exhibition or program. It should be available to all staff members, from senior leadership to front-line staff. Ensure that the glossary is accessible to those who need it. Glossaries relating to exhibition or program content should be made available to visitors through

handouts, wall displays, interactive screens, or other means. Consider how you might make your glossary engaging. It doesn't need to be a wall of dictionary definitions—creative design, color palettes, and imagery can help draw attention to important definitions. And be sure that all gallery texts and captions (labels) use the terminology as defined in the glossary. Consistency is important.

CHOOSING A TITLE

You should be particularly careful in your choice of terminology when choosing a title for your exhibition or program. Many of the words and phrases that you use within the content may require cultural or historical context, but out of context, they can come across as outdated or offensive. For example, the term “transsexual” was commonly used to refer to transgender people in the mid-twentieth century, but is now considered outdated. While you may include this term in a historical exhibition or program about someone who used it to describe themselves, placing it in the title can create a negative pre-conception about how that project will address transgender identity. Confrontational language may intrigue some audiences, but others will find it offensive and alienating.

EXPLORING TRANSGENDER HISTORIES & NARRATIVES IN YOUR INSTITUTION

The field of transgender history owes an enormous debt to the work of historians and archivists within the broader LGBTQ+ community, as well as the fields of gender studies and queer theory. Transgender histories were first investigated not by mainstream institutions and trained academic historians, but largely by transgender individuals who struggled to find their own place in the historical record (Skidmore 2021, Stryker 2017).

By choosing to explore transgender history and narratives in your institution, you are opening the door to explore the social phenomenon of gender from new and exciting perspectives. Rather than viewing gender in connection with the boundaries of a strict binary, transgender identities present the opportunity to explore it as a dynamic, ever-changing form of social categorization. What does it mean to be a man or a woman? How have those boundaries been transgressed by individuals, groups, and communities, and how has society responded to these transgressions? Gender is a lens through which we can explore the ordering of society, and transgender histories help us to expand that lens (Scott 1986, Miller 2015).

Within museums and cultural heritage institutions, this wider lens may be an exciting opportunity to reevaluate existing collections and well-known narratives. Viewing gender as a mutable social category rather than an unambiguous biological binary can give cultural heritage workers greater freedom in interpreting the past and envisioning the future. When we look beyond men and women and instead explore various conceptions of masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and queerness, our collections take on new layers of complexity and possibility.

IDENTITY AND TERMINOLOGY IN HISTORY

Among the primary issues of exploring transgender historical narratives is the rapid evolution of terminology in recent history. The term “transgender” only rose to prominence in the late decades of the twentieth century, and its usage has only evolved further in the twenty-first century. Therefore, even if your collections do contain documentation pertaining to individuals who expressly identified as a gender other than the one that they were assigned at birth, the terminology that they used to describe themselves—and the terms that others used to describe them—may not match modern linguistic standards. These disparities extend to standardized subject terms and metadata within the cultural heritage fields, which often use outdated terminology to refer to segments of the LGBTQ+ community (see the *Terminology* section above).

This creates two challenges for the museum interpreter. First, identifying transgender individuals and narratives in your collections may require a foundational knowledge of historical terminology relating to gender identity in the culture and time period that you are discussing. Second, deciding how to deploy terminology to describe people can be difficult, as there are varying opinions about whether it is appropriate to apply modern terminology like “transgender” to subjects who existed before the terms were popularized. Genny Beemyn (2013) asks:

“Do we include individuals in past centuries who might appear to be transgender from our vantage point, but who would quite likely not have conceptualized their lives in such a way? And what about individuals today who have the ability to describe themselves as transgender, but choose not to for a variety of reasons, including the perception that it is a White, middle-class, Western term?”

Despite these doubts about applicability, refraining from using such terminology can also be problematic, amounting to a form of erasure. Margaret Middleton (2020) argues against assuming cisgender, heterosexual identity as a default state for historical subjects:

“The fear of erroneously describing a straight, cisgender historical figure as queer looms large behind the demand for evidence. If queerness were not seen as shameful, there would be no reason for this fear; this fear is rooted in queerphobia.”

Indeed, concern over labeling a straight, cisgender historical figure as queer should be balanced against a similar concern for labeling a queer historical figure as straight and cisgender. There is often no definitive right answer for when it is okay to apply modern language to individuals. Doing transgender history means reading between the lines and embracing ambiguity.

NARRATIVE TROPES

There are common narrative tropes about transgender people that appear frequently in popular media, biographies, and historical texts. While these tropes often reflect legitimate and common experiences for the transgender community, the emphasis on them can create a limited view of the transgender experience and reinforce stereotypes about transgender identity. Common examples include:

- “Coming out” narratives
- Narratives that emphasize physical or cosmetic changes
- Narratives that emphasize medical transition, including surgeries and hormone therapies
- Narratives that focus on physical or emotional abuse, trauma, and transphobia

Despite the prevalence of these tropes, there is no singular “transgender narrative.” Instead of trying to tell a universal story of transgender experience based on themes like these, embrace the specificity of your subject, whether an individual, a group, or a period of time.

ACKNOWLEDGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

It is important to acknowledge that different cultures have different conceptions of gender identity beyond the binary. When exploring gender identity in diverse contemporary cultural contexts, consider how individual identities are shaped by culture. Don’t immediately assume that communities and individuals from different cultural backgrounds think of their identities through the dominant constructs of your own culture. You’re likely to examine how these identities compare to those that you and your audience are more familiar with. Be sure to consult with members of the culture or community that you are discussing to ensure that you are representing their identities accurately and respectfully. For further exploration of this topic, see Towle and Morgan (2002).

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Sexual orientation and gender identity are separate but related social constructs. When writing about transgender identity, be mindful not to make assumptions about the sexual orientation of transgender subjects. Transgender identity is not inherently related to homosexuality, or any sexual orientation, and transgender people exist along the same spectrum of sexual orientations as cisgender people.

Despite this, the constructs of gender and sexuality have intersected throughout history and in worldwide cultures, meaning you may confront ambiguities in the historical record. For example, the late-nineteenth-century construct of “sexual inversion” combined different attributes that we today associate separately with gender identity and sexual orientation. When interpreting the life of a subject who identified their gender or sexuality in terms that seem ambiguous by today’s standards, be mindful that your subject may have seen their sexual orientation and gender identity as one and the same.

SCARCITY OF DOCUMENTATION & OBJECTS

Evidence of transgender identity or gender-nonconforming behaviors can be sparse in many collections and the historical record as a whole. For institutions dedicated to interpreting historical materials, this poses a unique challenge. Yet a lack of objects explicitly related to transgender identity does not mean that your institution cannot adopt transgender perspectives in its exhibitions and programming. Consider how the materials in your collections reflect masculinity, femininity, both, or neither. How have the people and communities in your collections challenged gendered norms? What overlaps do you see between your collections and the experiences of the modern transgender community?

Making these less direct connections can be challenging, particularly if you are not a member of the transgender community yourself. This is where community partnerships can pay off. Invite guest curators to share their perspectives on your collections. Bring transgender voices into the process of designing your exhibition or program, even if they are not explicitly represented in your collections.

“OUTING” AND RETROACTIVE VIOLENCE

Many transgender people throughout history did not have the opportunity to come out on their own terms. Some were outed as transgender after their death, often through media coverage that sensationalized and invalidated their identities. On rare occasions, you or another researcher may discover that a subject was transgender despite never being “out” during their lifetime.

You should carefully consider whether to reveal your subject’s transgender status. There are a wide range of conflicting ideas about how to handle this situation. One is that “outing” a subject in this way may amount to retroactive violence, stripping them of their own agency in coming out. Even if the person is not alive to experience that violence, it can still reverberate for contemporary audiences. Many transgender people have experienced a forced or unexpected outing, and seeing this happen in an exhibition or program could be triggering. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for historians and cultural heritage institutions to reveal the secrets of deceased subjects, exposing affairs, legal troubles, and other hidden details as part of the interpretive process. In addition to considering the wishes of the deceased, it is important to consider how exposing and interpreting gender-nonconforming behaviors may benefit your audience and our understanding of history. With this issue in particular, it is important to work in conversation with your team and the local LGBTQ+ community.

DEADNAMING

“Deadnaming” is the act of referring to a transgender person by a name that they no longer use, such as their birth name. When talking or writing about a contemporary transgender subject, you should almost always avoid using their deadname. Even when discussing a subject’s life prior to transition, it’s best to use the name they adopted afterward.

This practice can be more complicated when dealing with historical subjects. Because of the scarcity of records documenting transgender lives (see *Scarcity of Documentation & Objects* above), it may be easier to find records that feature a subject’s deadname than their chosen name. Therefore, you may need to include some materials that reveal their deadname. If so, make it clear to visitors who it is that these documents refer to and what their chosen name was. If it is unclear what name your subject preferred, use your best judgment in choosing how to refer to them. This may involve using multiple names, or selecting the name that your subject used most recently. You might adapt your institution’s format for pen or professional names, adding a parenthetical note for clarity. For example:

Autobiography of an Androgyne was written by Jennie June (who published under the name Ralph Werther) in 1918.

PRONOUNS

Similar to deadnames, it can be challenging to know what pronouns to use to describe historical subjects. In general, it is a commonly accepted best practice to use the pronouns that your subject used to describe themselves. However, due to the evolution of language around transgender identity, these may not align with modern expectations. Just as there is disagreement over the application of modern terms to historical subjects, historians and activists disagree over when it is appropriate to apply modern expectations about pronouns to historical subjects. Some may default to gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., they/them/theirs) for subjects whose preference is unclear, while others may exclusively use the pronouns that their subject used for themselves, regardless of whether those pronouns align with our modern expectations. Others may entirely avoid using pronouns for their subject. Use your best judgment in respecting the expressed identities of historical subjects, and engage in conversation about this issue with your community partners.

It is also important to recognize that respect for pronouns should apply to *all* people, not just transgender people. If you choose to specify the pronouns of transgender individuals in your exhibition or program, be sure to specify the pronouns of cisgender individuals as well. One common way of doing this is through a parenthetical after each person’s name:

Susan (she/her/hers) is a historian specializing in the history of transgender people.

Whether or not you choose to spotlight individuals' pronouns throughout your exhibition or program, be consistent. While you may occasionally need to explain your use of pronouns for individuals whose identities are contested or unclear (see Appendix C), you should not over-analyze transgender individuals' pronouns just because they identify as transgender. Often the clearest way to present a transgender person's pronouns is simply to use them in your writing—just like with cisgender people. For example:

Jonathan has spent decades creating art in their studio in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

From this one sentence, the reader can clearly see that Jonathan's pronouns are they/them/theirs.

PRACTICING DUE DILIGENCE & TRANSPARENCY

As you may have noticed, there are conflicting ideas about the “correct” way to talk about transgender historical subjects. Rather than looking for a single correct answer, you should focus on exercising due diligence in researching and understanding your subjects' identities. Interpret their identities as accurately and respectfully as you are able to with the information that is available to you.

Regardless of your decision, be transparent with your visitors. Explain *why* you made your choices in good faith. You can preempt anticipated controversy or critique by addressing the challenges that you faced upfront. You may include an introductory disclaimer or content warning at the start of your exhibition or program, or address these challenges individually in labels and displays.

For an example label demonstrating some of the principles discussed within this section, see Appendix C.

“Institutions should be trying not just to accommodate transgender and nonbinary folks, but to bring transgender and nonbinary ways of thinking into the institution.”

Molly Alloy, Co-Director, Five Oaks Museum

PREPARING FOR LAUNCH



Display from the Washington State Historical Society's *Crossing Boundaries: Portraits of a Transgender West* exhibit, shown at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, Washington.

You have worked with your community, identified the most appropriate approach for exploring transgender identity in your exhibition or program, and gained the support of your key stakeholders. The next step is launching your project and preparing to collect feedback!

If this is your first time addressing transgender identity in your exhibitions or programs, or even at all, collecting feedback and assessing your audience's response will be a key step. Regardless of the quality of your project, you should expect some pushback, both from those disinterested in transgender identity entirely and those deeply invested in portrayals of the transgender community.

Taking the time to listen to and understand feedback is critical to improving transgender-inclusive exhibitions and programs going forward. Additionally, you can use your community outreach efforts prior to launch to anticipate and preempt some feedback.

CONSULTING WITH PARTNERS

As with all other stages of your project, frank discussions with community leaders are critical at the pre-launch stage. If you have any lingering concerns about terminology, inclusion, or any other issues, this is your last chance to address them before your work goes public. A difficult conversation with a trusted partner will probably be more comfortable than sudden public criticism.

You may also look beyond your existing pool of partners and share your exhibition or program with other community leaders. Inviting community leaders to a pre-launch event or to share feedback on a final draft of your content may help you to incorporate a wider range of perspectives into any final revisions. You may be able to

address divergent perspectives at the last minute through handouts and other relatively inexpensive supplementary materials.

ANTICIPATING THE RESPONSE

Prior to even announcing your exhibition or program, you can take small steps to anticipate how your audience is likely to respond. Smaller social media initiatives, one-day programs, or even community surveys can be used to gauge your audience's familiarity and comfort level with transgender identity. Steps like these can also be used to conduct further outreach to your local transgender community and identify local perspectives relating to representation and transgender experience.

The closer you are to the launch of your exhibition or program, the more you can tailor these assessment tools to the specific topics or approaches that you've included in your project. For example, if you're concerned about your approach to the experience of medicalization and transgender health care, you can conduct pre-launch assessments relating to these specific issues.

It is also important to include your front-line staff in this process. They know your audience and may be able to anticipate outside perspectives on your content. Conduct a walkthrough of your exhibition or program with them and all members of your staff. This will help you to get a wide range of perspectives on your work.

PREPARING A PRESS KIT

It may be helpful to identify and address anticipated questions and feedback toward your exhibition or program via a short press kit or handout. A press kit can address why your institution chose to create this project and how you approached the challenges of exploring transgender narratives and provide educational information on transgender identity. In addition to providing this document to media and visitors, it will be helpful to share your press kit with community partners and your front-line staff. Partners and front-line staff may be the first to hear from visitors and other members of the community who have questions and comments about the exhibition or program, so it's important to give them the information necessary to respond in an informed manner.

CREATING THE RIGHT FIRST IMPRESSION

As discussed above, it is important to situate your approach to transgender history and narratives within the proper context. While there is plenty of room to build context in the

exhibition or program itself, it can be challenging to outline the logic behind your interpretive decisions in a flier or social media post. Carefully consider the language and images that you use in marketing. It can be tempting to use controversial or eye-catching images to get your audience's attention, but don't lead with language or images that reinforce stereotypes or focus on the trauma of transgender individuals.

BEING UPFRONT

It is important to be upfront and honest about the content of your exhibition or program. A well-designed opening panel or chat can prepare visitors for what they are about to see. No exhibition or program is perfect, and none will appeal to everyone. To tell your story fully, it may be necessary for you to display some stereotypical ideas or images, to use some outdated language, or to include some traumatic imagery, for instance. If so, you can use your opening panel to explain your reasoning for these choices, to ground them in established precedents, and to provide a trigger warning for your audience. Establish the wideness or narrowness of your project's scope: Who is included? Who were you unable to include? You can also use this space to welcome feedback and generate further conversations with your audience.

PLANNING TO COLLECT DATA

If this is your institution's first time addressing transgender identity in an exhibition or program, treat it as such! Pay close attention to feedback from your audience. At this point, you should have a clear idea of what your exhibition or program is trying to accomplish and how it connects to your institutional goals. Prior to launch, discuss how you will measure the success of the project, and prepare to collect the information that you will need for this measurement. You should consider evaluations, visitor observations, and surveys once your project launches.

MAKING REPRESENTATION AN ONGOING EFFORT

While special programs, events, and exhibitions can be a great way to spotlight transgender voices within your institution, remember that this representation should not be limited to temporary projects. You should work with your institutional leadership, colleagues, and community partners to ensure that these narratives and perspectives are integrated into your institution's day-to-day interpretive work. Find ways to normalize transgender identity in your regular programs, main exhibition spaces, and institutional policies.

POST-LAUNCH

Learn the institution's protocol for documenting exhibitions (or related projects) and follow the procedures and schedules for feedback to be received and archived. Establish follow-up guidelines for your next program or exhibition by reviewing feedback. Update those in your institution and community who gave feedback to facilitate future planning.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many museums were forced to convert scheduled exhibitions and related programming into virtual or hybrid entities. For some institutions, this meant that exhibitions could have much longer (or even unlimited) lives online. Given this development, and assuming that the art, artifacts, and components can be used in digital formats, your exhibition may have an afterlife that you should consider. You may need to expand the glossary, for instance, and an introductory text for a wider, more general audience.

If the project was designed as a small first step into transgender narratives, such as focusing on one figure in particular when the institution's collection could support a broader exploration gender identity, make sure that you document your goals and your collection's potential. Suggest it in media interviews, add a question about it to the visitor survey, and be prepared to work on a new, expanded proposal. A further or expanded project, even if not immediate, can maintain the community partnerships that served your project.

To continue momentum following a short-term project, especially if you are not on the full-time staff of the institution, develop a parallel report or article that can be circulated to the museum field in publications or conference talks and in the transgender community.

Demonstrate how the project achieved success (or how it could have been more successful) and detail processes that can be copied or adapted by other institutions.

"There were several people who said they were skeptical and didn't think there was anything in [the exhibition] for them, but came out of it with a better understanding of how people identify themselves and how wide identity can be."

René Paul Barilleaux, Head of Curatorial Affairs, McNay Art Museum
Co-curator, *Transamerica/n: Gender, Identity, Appearance Today*

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APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS RESOURCES

American Alliance of Museums LGBTQ+ Alliance. <https://www.aam-us.org/professional-networks/lgbtq-alliance/>.

“A Coworker’s Guide to: Gender Transition and Transgender Inclusion in the Museum Field.” American Alliance of Museums.” American Alliance of Museums. 2019. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A-coworkers-guide-to-gender-transition.pdf>.

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“A Transitioning Professional’s Guide to: Gender Transition and Transgender Inclusion in the Museum Field.” American Alliance of Museums. 2019. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A-transitioning-professionals-guide-to-gender-transition.pdf>.

“Welcoming Guidelines for Museums.” American Alliance of Museums. 2019. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Welcoming-Guidelines.pdf>.

GLOSSARIES & STYLE GUIDES

“Glossary of Terms.” Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>.

“Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ.” GLAAD Media Reference Guide 11th Edition. <https://www.glaad.org/reference/terms>.

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GLSEN Key Concepts and Terms <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/GLSEN%20Terms%20and%20Concepts%20Thematic.pdf>.

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APPENDIX B: SAMPLE OUTREACH LETTER

Below is a sample letter that you might send to an organization to request feedback and input.

[Salutation]

I am writing on behalf of [YOUR INSTITUTION] regarding our planned upcoming [EXHIBITION/PROGRAM/PROJECT], which includes representations of [transgender figures, the LGBTQ+ community, etc.]. As an institution committed to serving the public, we value the experience, expertise, and engagement [ORGANIZATION YOU ARE CONTACTING] has with the lives of people in these communities. In order to respectfully serve and represent this community, we would like to request your input and feedback on our [EXHIBITION/PROGRAM/PROJECT] prior to a public launch.

[In the following paragraph, take a few sentences to explain your project, exhibition, or program holistically. Give a broad overview, and keep in mind that your audience may not come from a museum, library, university, or other academic background. Focus on parts that may be relevant to the organization you are inquiring about—consider what kinds of feedback they are able to provide you by researching the organization.]

[In this paragraph, discuss how this program came about. Talk about what you have already done to collect and respond to input. Demonstrate respect, authenticity, and goodwill in your intentions—it is possible your request may be met with skepticism. It is not uncommon for solicitous journalists to contact LGBTQ+ organizations looking for easy headlines about the transgender community. Highlight gaps in you and your team's knowledge that could potentially be filled in by this organization.]

As mentioned above, we would like to request your feedback and input on [EXHIBITION/PROGRAM/PROJECT] to ensure it is inclusive of the communities [YOUR INSTITUTION] serves. If you would like to know more about our work, I invite you to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns. I hope you will consider our request and I look forward to future correspondence with [ORGANIZATION YOU ARE CONTACTING]. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

[SIGNATURE]

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERPRETIVE TEXT

Below is an example of interpretive text addressing transgender identity in a historical exhibition.

The Evening Mail, Stockton, California, October 9, 1897

Jack Bee Garland was a celebrity around Stockton, California, and contributed regularly to the *Stockton Evening Mail*. Today we might describe Garland as transmasculine; he was assigned female at birth and presented himself in traditionally male clothing. He lived much of his life as a man, stowing away as a pantry-boy on a steamer during the Spanish-American War and working as a male nurse in the Philippines.

Garland contributed to *The Evening Mail* under the name "Babe Bean," using she/her pronouns. This was necessary to avoid being arrested for disguising his sex. Nonetheless, we have chosen to refer to Garland using "he/him" pronouns throughout this exhibition, as we believe that these pronouns best reflect his gender presentation and identity.

