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**HOW CAN WOMEN BE BETTER INTERPRETED IN AUTOMOTIVE MUSEUMS AND HOW CAN THIS INFORMATION BE USED TO CREATE A VIABLE PIECE OF EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL THAT CAN BE USED BY AUTOMOTIVE MUSEUMS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES**

**Overview**

This report emerges from my inquiry into how women are being interpreted and represented in automotive museums across the United States and how can these mediums of interpretation be improved through a template. There are many different automotive museums that span across the United States and each museum has its own theme and story to tell, whether it be about the evolution of the automobile, design or mechanics. Often, the story of the automobile and its founders primarily focus on the works and accomplishments of men. However, if one takes a closer look at the accomplishments of pioneering women in the automotive industry as well as their social compact the results are quite impressive. By speaking with curatorial and educational officers at these different museums associated with the National Automotive Association of Museums (NAAM) I attempted to figure out how women have been interpreted in automotive museums and how they can be better represented.

In order to get an overall and comprehensive view of women in museums I analyzed how women are being interpreted in other museums, primarily house museums where the main focus of interpretation is women. I also conducted historical research to find examples of women in automotive history that will fit in to current exhibits at automotive museums and add as a basis for the template that I plan on conceiving for the many different and eclectic automotive museums in the United States.

**How did I come up with this topic?**

The definition of a museum is “a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.”<sup>1</sup> After five years of working in many different types of museums I have discovered but it is not just objects that are on display but people as well. People and their stories, these stories bring history and the museum itself to life. However, many of these stories have come from the male perspective.

When I first entered into the automotive museum world I found it interesting that the topic of women and the automobile never surfaced. It was not until a lecture at my museum by Denise McCluggage that I began to further my interest in this new world of women and the automobile. It turns out that this woman in her eighties had been a prolific automotive racer who was taking the racing world by storm at a time when women were not allowed to race. She was also a journalist and photographer. I was inspired!

How come I have never heard of McCluggage before? After doing my own research I discovered a lot more about her as well as other women in the automotive world. There was so much information about women and the automobile, including scores of books and scholarly websites and articles. However, when I brought it up to a professor in the women studies department at a local college she had no idea of Ms. McCluggage or the role of women in this often male dominated world. Why is this so? More specifically, why hasn't my museum tapped into this issue? I wanted to know if other automotive museums tapped into this issue and what was their approach.

There is so much information on this topic that it would be difficult to incorporate everything into a museum exhibit. It was not until I took the initiative and presented a lecture on women and the automobile that I became aware of the possibility of creating a thorough and concise template for my museum as well as other automotive museums to use regarding this topic. If the many different topics and layers of automotive history are broken down then this topic can be easily accessible to curators and educators of other automotive museums.

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<sup>1</sup> “Museum.” *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, 2008. Web. 11 May 2013.

Through this template information, text, audio and visuals will be readily available and easily accessible to museum professionals and they can incorporate these topics into their exhibiting exhibits. In the end, a whole new spectrum of the automotive world will be opened up to a general public and a new demographic can experience a new and thought provoking part of the automotive world.

Through analyzing how other non-automotive museums interpret women in their own exhibits and then analyzing the different topics that can be used by automotive museums I have laid the ground work for my research. As I began contacting automotive museum professionals I had the background to ask the serious questions and I have gained an insight into how other museums have grappled with this topic and through their own experiences I have come to the conclusion that a template is needed and will be readily embraced.

However, it will be a long process before a final template can be formed, I will analyze how to move forward in the future and what are the necessary steps to take in order to create solid templates for future use.

### **Background: The Interpretation of Women in Non-Automotive Museums**

To develop a well thought out analysis of women in automotive museums I thought it was important to explore the roles of women in other museums in order to get an overarching view of how women are being interpreted overall. A prominent aspect of the interpretation of women in museums lays primarily with historic house museums. Personally, I have my own experience regarding the interpretation of women in historic houses. Before I began my position at my current museum, I worked for two years interpreting historic houses all over the greater Boston area.

When I received my training at these institutions much emphasis was placed on women in the household as mothers and their everyday lives of cooking, cleaning and the general needs of the family. Very little emphasis was placed on the lives of these women outside of these spheres and their roles in the community and as a strong presence at this time. However, I do not place blame on the

museums I worked at for not providing this information, at the time there was not much information regarding these alternative roles for women. I have noticed since my time at these museums, books, articles and new findings into the roles of women have surfaced and these museums are embracing them with open arms.

Perhaps if the same is applied to automotive museums there will be more emphasis placed on women, if the information is readily available and easy to access, this is my thought process behind the proposed template. However, much like the different topics explored in a historic house the different topics of women's history in the automotive world must be diverse in order to accommodate the different themes and needs of the different automotive museums in the United States.

### **Women and The Automotive World**

Every museum has a theme that they focus on regarding interpretation of an exhibit. Historic houses focus on the lives of women in the household, science museums may focus on the roles of women in the science and math arenas and art museums can cover different female artists encompassing their lives and artwork. As the Education Manager and teacher at an automotive museum I have discovered through my own research that there is an array of topics that can be covered when interpreting women. When I began my own research on a lecture I was developing about women and the electric car there were so many subcategories that popped up during my research; advertising to women, female mechanics, women and the driver's license, women operating their own cars, separate spheres, automotive design and women, this is just to name a few.

The interpretation of women in the automotive world is so vast it can be hard to develop a starting point and not get distracted by other topics. *The Automobile in American Life and Society* is an informative and well organized website created and developed by the University of Michigan. The website covers a variety of topics regarding the automobile including gender. The gender section breaks down women's role in relation to the automobile from the brass area all the way to the 1960's. The website also boasts an impressive bibliography that can be used to do one's own personal

research on any given topic. However, there is still a lot of information regarding women and the automobile that can be hard to sift through.

This is where my idea developed of creating different templates that take all of these different topics and each one is individually focused on in one concise piece. Text is available for museums to use in exhibits as well as audio and visual. Also, information will be available to tour guides and curators to study for background information, sources will be available as well. For a template to be used by a museum the museums must be in need of such a template. My next step is to find out the role of women in automotive interpretation across the United States.

### **Interview Data: Questions and Concept**

The National Association of Automotive Museums is an organization that brings together automotive museums from all over the United States. It is a great way for these different museums to interact with one another and once a year they hold a conference to bring the representatives of these many different museums together for an open dialogue. This would serve as a great jumping off point for my project. On the website for the National Association of Automotive Museums there is a directory of all of the museums associated with this group and their contacts.

The museums vary from being large with ample budgets to much smaller museums with only a curator and no other support staff. It was important to me to contact museums on both spectrums in order to get an overall view of how each museum interprets. Another factor that would come into play was all automotive museums are not the same, some museums are just showcases where they display cars without a common theme, and others are the complete opposite. By analyzing the responses to these different museums I can determine whether or not a template is needed, perhaps some museums it may be accepted while others they may not have the budget or man power to use a template.

For the interview process I emailed the curators and education managers of these different institutions. As I began to receive answers I realized that my questions needed to be refined and I added on additional questions as well as edited those previous questions that I sent out. The end result

of these questionnaires would be used to determine whether or not women were being interpreted in the museum and if a template would be needed to assist in this interpretation. (*Questions are posted in the Appendix of the Report*)

### **Interviews and Data: Smaller Automotive Museums**

Smaller automotive museums typically have a smaller staff and budget but not necessarily a smaller collection. The museum, Dicks Classic Car Garage is set up like a warehouse with cars displayed everywhere from different time periods. The curator of Dick's told me they recently launched a new educational program on twenty of the men who helped build the automotive industry in America. He goes on to say that this piece does incorporate a couple women but unfortunately there are very few. He is also currently working on a project that is a timeline of the history of American transportation and will be adding several advancements that women have contributed to regarding this topic. He goes on to say that women have played a large part in how the industry has changed as the times changed. "The industry was dominated by men but several women left their mark and their stories are not well known. We like to show the lesser known aspects of the early automotive industry, to challenge and educate our guests."

The response from the Seal Cove Museum was just as promising; the current Executive Director is also a history professor and knows the importance of women and the automobile and also the need to incorporate them into the interpretation of the automobile. The museum covers women and bicycles, electric autos, and the affect that women had on clothing worn to travel. Their most prominent story in the museum is that of the electric automobile, which contains most of the information. They only have two electric cars on display but she would like to see an entire exhibit devoted to women and the early automobile. For Mother's Day of 2013 the Director would like to display 175 auto inventions that were created by women. She is very passionate about this subject and goes on to speak about how she has created a lecture series about women and the automobile that she has taken to local libraries. Her final thoughts, "the auto no doubt looms as the largest cultural icon that we have in our North American culture--and it cannot stand for one gender alone--it must be

both--so women deserve to be a part of that story as active mechanics, drivers, owners of autos even though they had chauffeurs, and also as lovers of technology!”

The Boyertown Museum curator speaks of the collector mindset, where the focus in the automotive museum is not on the bigger picture, signs for the cars and the exhibits are written by car collectors, meaning they are only interested in specifications. She goes on to say that due to a lack of time and staff it is hard to develop such subjects; she is the only one with proper training in order to do this type of interpretation. However, her final comments show optimism for the possibility of the interpretation of women in their museum, “knowing that a car has a four cylinder engine and brass headlights do nothing to tell our visitors about the year 1909. Women’s history is a component in allowing us to dig deeper.”

#### **Interviews and Data: Larger Automotive Museums**

Larger auto museums are those with more staff and typically bigger budgets. The Black Hawk Museum commented that women are used in the context of science and technology and there is a small focus on them regarding racing but not much more was given about specific exhibits. This representative from this museum went on to say that they have only honored two men so far and said they have not honored any women yet but that is not saying they won’t in the future. This particular museum is like Dicks Classic Car Garage where it is just a warehouse of cars and they are just beginning to add a social element to the story as a whole.

The Chrysler Museum, as I am writing my paper, shut their doors and is no longer open for tours or visits. Their Director spoke with me and said they did interpret women through lectures and touched on topics involving women in their exhibits including women’s roles during World War II and Chryslers attempt at marketing to women through the design of cars and new advertising. She went on to say that these exhibits and lectures were well received. This museums angle is different from others because it covers women and the marketing of cars rather than women as pioneers; however, it is an interesting angle and another spin on interpretation.

The Auburn Cord Duesenberg Automobile Museum has a strong connection to interpreting women in their museum. They currently have an exhibit of Auburn Automobile Company factory mementos which include patch-work quilts made of remnants of interior fabric which many women working in the upholstery shop would create. They also have on display an original 1910 Zimmerman automobile, first purchased by Mrs. Rosella Crofford who used this car to make doctor house calls and until recently a photo display of celebrity women with their Auburn, Cord and Duesenberg vehicles. They have also started a lecture series highlighting women in automotive history, specifically racing history.

When asked what changes or improvements could be made the curator of the museum goes on to say that “drastic improvement is needed in our interpretation of women in automotive history. Women were an important part of automobile production, specifically in upholstery and exterior finishing such as pin-stripping paint work. Unfortunately what we have done is minimal and disjointed. It is not for lack of information, but the ease by which automotive history is currently interpreted through a male perspective.” In the future she would like to round out their current interpretive material in this area but they lack the time and money to do so. She goes on to say that research a takes time, and it is difficult to prioritize review and re-writing of current interpretation on display. They hope through new programming they can fix this issue and dedicate exhibitions to the interoperation of women. Her final thought, “Our hope is we can encourage future benefactors to see the importance of created a broad and balanced view of history.”

Along the same lines, the Tupelo Auto Museum does not specifically highlight women’s automotive history in the museum. The Executive Director explains that the museums mission is to illustrate the development of the automobile and their 150 plus collection does so with a car from 1886 all the way to a 2012 vehicle. An interesting sentiment she expresses is that due to limited funds and display material it is hard to develop such exhibits, especially exhibits that will fit in with their mission.

## **Common Themes**

Throughout my research and analysis of answers I have noticed themes that correlate between the different museums. Regarding a lack of interpretation, many museum professionals point out that the automotive world is very male-centric, focusing primarily on the male contributions to this industry. One particular curator pointed out an interesting topic that I have seen at my own museum, automotive museums can be collector car themed, meaning the interpretation of the vehicles focuses primarily on statistics and specifications of the car rather than the social and cultural impact of the car. This can lead to many visitors who don't have any interest in this interpretation to forgo a visit to the museum because they feel as if they are entering a club of sorts. Many automotive museums have had to close their doors due to lack of visitation and interest.

Lack of time for research and money was also another issue that continued to emerge from the answers I was given. Many of these museums do not have the man power to do such in depth research into the history of women or any topic. On top of that, even for bigger museums money can be tight and often it can be the difference between being open or closed. It takes money to create exhibits and even acquire resources such as artifacts or printing displays. That is an obstacle that can be hard to overcome, even with a template. Yet, it is refreshing to learn that there is a need and a want for more interpretation of women. None of the answers were dismissive and many were even excited at the idea of furthering the interpretation of women at their museums.

## **Template**

To conclude my investigation as to whether a template would be needed and used by automotive museums I emailed the museums that answered my questionnaire and asked them for their input. The Auburn, Cord, Duesenburg museum exclaimed that they would be delighted to receive such a template and to keep them posted. The curator from the Chrysler Museum remarked that if they were still open they would gladly accept a template. The Seal Cove Museum had some concerns that this would

be “a very large undertaking since women changed drastically during all these time periods--from the Brass Era with the corset issue to the muscle cars with clothing not an issue at all.” However, she goes on to say that any information on women and auto technology is wonderful to have for use with their staff and visitors. Although there is apprehension as to whether or not this can be achieved there is an overall sense of anticipation at a project like this that can be put into use.

### **Next Steps**

Responses from museum officials at the automotive museums I contacted have been overwhelming in favor of a template. The template would be a packet of information that will be composed of different topics ranging of women’s automotive racing history to fashion, early female automotive pioneers and so on. Each section will compose of background information, text for the exhibit, historical pictures and sources for artifacts. There will also be a bibliography given to the creators of the exhibit for further research.

The next steps in this process will to begin compiling the different topics for the template. After this I will pick a topic that many of the museums have expressed interest in and begin my research and outline one this topic. The subject of women’s automotive racing popped up in many of my interviews, I will create a template for this topic and use it as a ‘test template’. After the completion of the outline I will send it the curators of a few museums who have expressed interest in this topic and get their opinions on how the template can be improved or expanded upon. I will use their comments to improve upon my own pieces. Finally, once approved I will contact the head of the National Association of Automotive Museums and have them post it up on their information blog, this will give me the opportunity to view the reactions of other museums and if it is positive I will continue with the template process for other subjects. To create the most beneficial template I will need to work together with other museum officials.

This project is exciting and after the many responses I have received regarding the template process I have decided this is necessary for the success of these cultural institutions. I will continue with this

process in order to benefit the different museums I have spoken to as well as benefit the visitors of these museums and expand the horizons of museum interpretation.

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## Appendix

*Questions are a piece of the Interview Data: Questions and Concepts portion of the report.*

### Initial Questions:

- 1. Have you interpreted women in your museum before? If so what avenues have you used? (exhibits, lectures, etc.)*
- 2. What were the topics that you covered involving women?*
- 3. What made you and the curatorial team decide to incorporate women in your museum?*
- 4. Where there any concerns you had to address before deciding on this topic?*
- 5. What kind of mediums did you use to represent these women/topic? (video, text, audio, etc)*
- 6. What kind of research did you do? Where did you get your information?*
- 7. What was the public's reaction? Would you do this again?*
- 8. If your museum has not interpreted women through exhibits, lectures or other avenues why is that?*

### Revised Questions:

- 1. What topics in automotive women's history are covered in your museum's displays or lectures?*
- 2. What improvements or changes, if any, would you like to see in this coverage?*
- 3. What factors influence the ways the topics are covered and the possibility for change?*
- 4. Why do you feel that the interpretation of women in the automotive world is important to convey in an automotive museum?*