



An exhibit at the Lowndes Interpretive Center sets an example for museums striving for disability-related content.

True Inclusion

Museums need more disability narratives

BY DAY AL-MOHAMED

Twenty-five years ago, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law, remarking that it was time to “let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down.” Today, we see inclusive approaches to education, housing, transportation and employment. By all means, the work is not over, and many in the disability community

would argue that it has only begun. The law is always “just a beginning,” and just like the Civil Rights movement before it, enforcement of inclusion, acceptance of inclusion and, yes, even embracing inclusion, takes much longer.

The central role of museums and galleries has been collection, preservation and education. It is important to

recognize, however, that the history of museums was built upon a Western colonial interpretation, and that it has been a long and sometimes painful struggle to build inclusive narratives—to be places where all sections of the community can have a voice and be reflected in a museum’s collections and displays,” as suggested by the UK-based Museums Association.

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In 1968, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition campaigned against the Whitney Museum in an effort to have more black artists' work exhibited, more of their work purchased and greater diversity in museum staff and committees. Over the years, we have seen those early efforts expand, and many museum professionals are actively seeking to develop more inclusive portrayals of women and of racial and ethnic minorities.

Representation matters. Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Junot Diaz said in a speech, "There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all.... And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors ... so that kids like me might see themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it."

Diaz is talking about representation in fiction. But can we overstate the importance of representation and its relevance in the real world? Museums, art galleries, local "pop-ups" and historical sites have that same social and political responsibility. When so many of these entities are seeking to better engage with the public and become spaces of community congregation, development and sharing, inclusive

exhibits and programming make a difference.

Although there has been a growth in exhibits for minority groups—particularly in the collection of oral histories, and identification of stories and traditions—there seems to be a dearth of representation for disability narratives. With the exception of occasional "special exhibits" that focus on disability rights and organizations, famous disabled individuals in history or disability narratives that are enmeshed within discussions of medicine or war, there is almost a total preoccupation with accessibility. The "mechanical" aspect of access to exhibits has overshadowed the importance of inclusion in museum content. To reference Junot Diaz, there are no mirrors for me.

In 2004, the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester published a report, *Buried in the Footnotes*, based on a year-long investigation of the absence of disabled people in museum narratives. They surveyed the collections at 26 different museums and galleries in the United Kingdom and discovered that "wide-ranging collections of all kinds do, indeed, contain a wealth of relevant material but ... its significance to disability is not generally considered or understood ... is infrequently displayed, its link to disability is seldom made explicit or is poorly interpreted and, in only a few noteworthy cases, does the interpretation resist stereotypical and reductive representations of disabled people...."

The invisibility of disability

manifests in our general public consciousness, and that cultural exclusion carries over into the museum world.

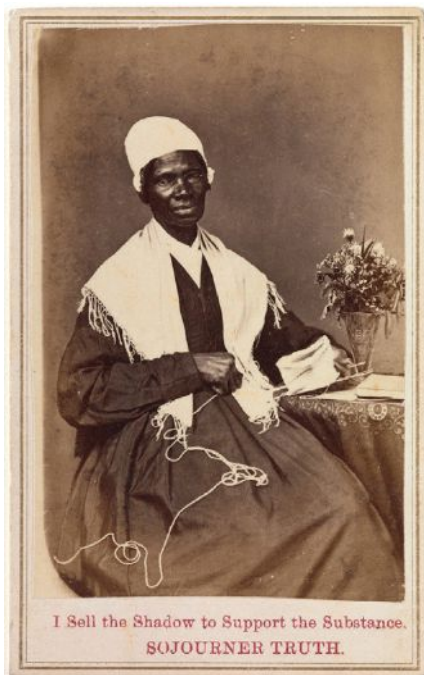
We see this in:

- **narratives of famous or powerful individuals whose disability has been lost**

Mathew Brady is known as the photographer of the Civil War. His thousands of images have given us our vision of the war and of the men who served in it. The photos are ubiquitous—present in books, television programs, on the Internet. But although Brady had courage, funds, his own studio and permission from President Lincoln himself to photograph the battlefield sites, many of these photos were taken by his assistants. Brady had an eye condition, and his vision began to deteriorate in the 1850s, well before the war. He was almost totally blind the last few years of his life. Mathew Brady had a disability.

- **narratives of individuals who purposely suppressed public awareness of their disability during their lifetime**

Sojourner Truth, one of the most powerful voices of the abolition movement, is known for her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech—a 19th-century demand for action and equality. After 30 years as a slave, she gave herself the name Sojourner Truth and spent the rest of her life lecturing on abolition and women's rights, using feminist and racial-pride rhetoric. She created photographs of herself and sold them to fund her public appearances. The most common shows her sitting next



to a table with flowers, holding knitting needles. But because of an injury to her hand years before, she could not actually use those knitting needles. Sojourner Truth had a disability. Because ability and strength were viewed as important during that time period, she actively negated her disability—which is elided from her legacy to this day.

- **narratives in which disability becomes the focus of the exhibition or individual and overwhelms other perspectives**

Helen Keller is the most cogent example of this phenomenon. At a 2009 American Association of People with Disabilities luncheon, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said, “Congress will unveil a statute of Helen Keller in the Capitol. As a deaf-blind individual who was a world leader in disability rights and social justice, and a woman ahead of her time, Helen Keller will be

a proud addition to our halls.” Keller is publicly known as the deaf-blind advocate for people with disabilities. But she was also a radical progressive, a suffragist, a socialist, an advocate for fair pay, a supporter of communism, a pacifist in a time of war. She was pro-civil rights, anti-child labor, a strong supporter of the NAACP, anti-establishment, anti-corporate and one of the founders of the ACLU. All that passion and advocacy is subsumed by her disability and then forgotten.

As exhibitions become more contemporary in outlook, and make more attempts to address issues of political intent, racial bias and inaccurate historical representation, they can also become more controversial, as Moira G. Simpson explains in *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era*. Consider, for example, painter John Currin’s *The Cripple*, which has been on exhibit at several museums. The work depicts a smiling, voluptuous young woman in a low-cut dress, leaning on a cane. Describing the painting in a publication about Currin’s work, art historian Norman Bryson says, “Since Currin’s image of a girl with a walking cane owes so little of its morphology to what a disability or locomotor disorder is actually like in the world, the figure’s misshapen and twisted body evidently originates with the painter, whose attitude toward the deformation he inflicts seems to include enjoyment.” The painting seems to exude excess and, like many of Currin’s disproportionate, asymmetrical figures, invites one to gawk. Many

members of the disability community loathe the work; others embrace it as a recognition of disability even if only as a satirical analogy.

While many examples of disability inclusion are less than perfect, it is sometimes possible to find a positive example. At the National Park Service’s Lowndes Interpretive Center, located along the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail in Alabama, statues illustrate the march and the progress of civil rights through time. Among them is a statue of Jim Letherer, a one-legged Jewish man who marched with Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery. The exhibit is about the march and voting rights, but happens to have disability as a part of the story—not because of any particular agenda or perceived political correctness, but because *disability was there*.

Disability inclusion goes beyond audits of programs and lecture offerings and beyond the desire for a line item in the budget for accessibility. The objects, people and histories are already present in collections; all it takes is a little thought to recognize and actively include them. Museums have the power to create cultural mirrors, like those Diaz spoke of, that can reflect back a world in all its myriad diversity—including disability. «

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