Visitors Aren’t Allowed Inside Closets
The Mislabling and Hiding of LGBT People in Museums

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Queer people are in museums. They work in them, they visit them, and their stories and objects are collected in them. But yet they are all too often invisible, or barely visible. Angela Vanegas is blunt in her assessment of this relationship: “Few, if any, museums adequately represent the lesbians and gay men they serve, and most fail to identify their contributions to society.”¹ This lack of representation has repercussions, as Anna Conlan notes. “Omission from the museum does not simply mean marginalization; it formally classifies certain lives, histories, and practices as insignificant, renders them invisible, marks them as unintelligible, and, thereby, casts them into the realm of the unreal.”²

There are five major problems concerning the representation of queer people in museums that this paper will discuss. First, it is hard to project modern labels for gender and sexual identity onto the past. Second, even in places where queerness is clear in an individual, some museums do not talk about this aspect of a person’s life. Third, some attempts to rectify these two problems have led to a conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation, which creates a new set of problems. Fourth, museums that do look at recent queer history often have a near exclusive focus on pain, suffering, and death related to a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation. Finally, museums are inconsistent in what they present to visitors.

¹ Angela Vanegas, “Representing Lesbians and Gay Men in British Social History Museums” in Gender, Sexuality and Museums, Amy K. Levin, ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 163.
² Anna Conlan, “Representing Possibility: Mourning, Memorial, and Queer Museology” in Levin, 257.
My reactions to these problems are bound to be deeply personal. When I offer solutions, I do so with some reticence, as I know that I do not speak for all queer people. At the same time, I also am too young to remember the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which may make me less cautious than others. My generational setting also affects my view on queer history, particularly with respect AIDS. Although I recognize my limitations, I hope this paper will provide insight into ways that museums can act to redress these problems.

The Problem of Naming

It is impossible to fully define past historical figures using modern terms for gender identity and sexual orientation. However, silence on this topic assumes heteronormativity. Naming involves power, but so does not naming. While museums should strive to be historically accurate, they must also realize that most of their visitors will only be familiar with contemporary terms.

One example of the problem of naming can be found in Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House. Lisa Yun Lee, the director of the Jane Addams Hull House Museum, wrote about defining Addams and her relationships.

Sometimes described as a prominent Hull House patron, and at other times as Addams’s companion, lesbian lover, or lifelong partner, Mary Rozet-Smith is conspicuously absent from the dominant narrative about Jane Addams. This is in part due to the fact that intimate relationships between women during the Victorian era were manifold and complex, and there are problems of ahistoricity when applying current understandings of words such as “lesbian” or “life partner” to
historic periods that did not use these terms. Jane Addams’s own complex relationship to sexuality and desire might also be considered.³

Lee’s solution was to place a portrait that Addams owned of Rozet-Smith in Addams’ bedroom, and to have the docents introduce Addams as a lesbian.⁴

The use of the term “lesbian”, after Lee has written about how it is ahistorical, is problematic. But not using “lesbian” is equally problematic. My suggestion is that docents be instructed to say, “Jane Addams and Mary Rozet-Smith were in a relationship that today would be called ‘lesbian’, but that term was not in public use at that time.” Stating how notions of sexuality has changed historically is important both because it is intellectually honest, and shows how notions change, thus showing that our current conceptions will continue to change. At the same time, using modern terminology is powerful for recovering a history that has been intentionally silenced.

The Problem of Hiding

Museums have always kept queer people in closets, as Stuart Frost argues. “The history of the omission and neglect of sex and sexuality as serious subjects stretches back to the formation of public museums in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”⁵ Hiding can take place on many levels. By looking at two museums in Lancaster, Pennsylvania – President James Buchanan’s Wheatland and the Demuth Museum – we can see how the

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⁴ Lee, 184.
individual’s sexuality can be deeply hidden (in the case of Buchanan) or hidden in plain sight (in the case of Demuth).

In the mid-1990s, historian James Loewen visited President James Buchanan’s Wheatland. Loewen describes Buchanan’s relationship with William Rufus King, a senator from Alabama, presenting evidence that their relationship was well known among contemporaries in Washington. This stands in contrast to what he found at Wheatland:

Nevertheless the staff at Wheatland never mentions King. Asked directly “was Buchanan gay?”, a staff member replies, “He most definitely was not,” and points to a portrait of Ann Coleman on the wall as evidence. Buchanan was in fact engaged to Coleman, the daughter of a wealthy ironmaker, for several weeks in the late summer and autumn of 1819. He showed so little interest in her however that rumormongers in Lancaster suggested he was only in love with her fortune. She broke their engagement because “Mr. Buchanan did not treat her with that affection that she expected from the man she would marry,” according to a friend. Buchanan didn’t put that portrait of her, either – it was hung there long after his death.⁶

Loewen goes on from here to launch a critique of the house for failing to mention Buchanan as a politician – even though he is known today only because he was a politician. Buchanan, a northerner, held pro-slavery political views, and Loewen attributes this to his relationship with King. Loewen ends his review with this critique: “Wheatland gives out false information about Buchanan’s homosexuality and his views on slavery, and it provides no information about their probable linkage, Buchanan’s foreign policies, his politics, and the role he played as the nation lurched towards secession.”⁷

Upon visiting Wheatland in April of 2012, I did notice some major changes to how the house was interpreted. Loewen noted that he did not see or hear a mention of Buchanan being a Democrat. On my tour, the docent pointed out that the sitting room was

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⁷ Loewen, 370.
essentially the headquarters for the party, although she also presented Buchanan as a reluctant politician, and did not address his failings in office. Slavery was not mentioned in the wall text or tour, but it was referenced in the video, although in a way that glossed over his pro-slavery views. It mentioned that Kansas was admitted as a free state while Buchanan was President, giving him the credit for resolving the strongest and bloodiest battle over slavery in the antebellum period. What is not mentioned, however, is that this took place on January 29, 1861, when Buchanan was a lame duck, and several states had already seceded. It also stated that his refusal to halt the expansion of slavery into territories was a result of the Dred Scott decision, not his personal beliefs that predated that decision.

Buchanan’s sexuality was not discussed during the tour (although my docent did mention that he had “petite handwriting”). His relationship with Coleman is mentioned in the museum exhibits; however, her portrait is no longer on display. During the tour, a strong emphasis was placed on his adoption of his niece and nephew. A queer reading could be given to its presentation of his family, as it shows how there has always been flexibility in defining what a family is.

Wheatland is making some progress towards doing a better job of accurately capturing Buchanan as a human being. But it, like all other presidential sites, exists to honor those who have held this office. Buchanan, however, was ineffective in this role, and is generally considered to have been one of the worst presidents in American history.8 This tension needs to be explored more before the museum can move on to addressing Buchanan’s sexuality. Compared to the problems of the United States in the 1850s, his

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8 For example, in 2000, C-SPAN released a result of two surveys. One asked fifty-eight historians to rank each president. Another survey was made available to C-SPAN viewers. In each survey, Buchanan was ranked the lowest of all presidents who had served until that time. The survey may be found at http://www.americanpresidents.org/survey/.
sexuality is a minor footnote – and how he contributed to these problems. But his relationship with King still provides an important insight into how his political views were formed. Wheatland does sell a book – *Love, Lust, and Longing in the White House* by Webb Garrison – that tells the story of Buchanan’s relationship with King (although it is also sold alongside texts that sentimentalize his relationship with Coleman). The changes made in the past two decades do show that it is possible for Wheatland to offer a more accurate story, but it must come get over its squeamishness about Buchanan’s pro-slavery views before it can get over its squeamishness about his sexuality. Still, it must address his sexuality if it is to show how his politics and his sexuality were intertwined, and it must do this if it wants visitors to be able to understand Buchanan’s political life.

The Demuth Museum preserves and interprets the home of Charles Demuth, an artist working in the early twentieth century. It is a small museum, having just three rooms. The first opens with Demuth’s connections to Albert Barnes, while the latter two contain wall text that tells his biography interspersed with his paintings. The timeline of Demuth’s life mentions that he met Marsden Hartley and Gertrude Stein during a trip to Europe, and that he later summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with Hartley. A later panel mentions that Demuth and Hartley stayed in the house of John Reed (explicitly mentioning Reed’s socialism), and that Eugene O’Neil was having an affair with Reed’s girlfriend.

The Demuth Museum is clearly not afraid of talking about sexuality in general. But it is afraid of talking about Demuth’s sexuality explicitly. However, it does offer the observant visitor hints that Demuth was gay. This is not uncommon, as Joshua Adair writes.

In some situations, museums obliquely refer to the homosexuality of the owner of a historic home – but visitors consistently decode the obfuscating language used to describe such a man. Curators and docents alike might intimate some “difference”
about a “bachelor” who helped collect the items in the museum, but such references seem to be delivered as a kid of aside, the verbal equivalent of a “wink-wink, nudge-nudge” that is meant to signal either disapproval or a sophisticated acceptance *sotto voce*.

Demuth himself offered hints in his work to those who knew what to look for. Jonathan Katz, describing one of his paintings, writes, “the portrait would have been meaningful only among a cohort of friends who would have understood and enjoyed its many internal references.” Visitors to the museum might pick up clues about Demuth’s sexuality from the mentions of Provincetown and Hartley. However, many more would not draw any inference, and thus wrongly assume that Demuth was a heterosexual.

The catalog for “Hide/Seek” is more open about Demuth, stating that he “was as ‘out’ as the early twentieth century enabled, and as we’ve seen, since queerness was associated with gender cross-identification, he was framed as effeminate and delicate.” While recognizing that notions of sexual orientation have changed since Demuth’s lifetime, Katz recognizes that Demuth was still identified by others as queer. He even argues that this had an impact on how his art was received by others.

So pervasive was the sense that Demuth’s art drew its impact, for better and for worse, from his sexuality, that his critics worked hard to frame his pictorial style in terms of the negative consequences of same-sex desire – one of the very first instances of the imposition of a homophobic critical frame over an artist.

The public perception of Demuth is an interesting topic for exploration, and can also be used to avoid placing contemporary labels on a historic figure (even though “Hide/Seek” did

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11 Katz, 25.
12 Katz, 25.
this in its wall text for one of Demuth’s paintings – loaned by the Demuth Museum –,
simply calling him “a gay man”).

The example of the Demuth Museum shows that museums can admit the queerness
of the individuals they interpret with only minor changes. It would need to do much less
work than Wheatland to be honest with its visitors. Unlike Buchanan, who died before the
word “homosexual” was coined, Demuth lived at a time where gayness existed as an identity,
which allows the museum to avoid the problem of naming. Making this change will allow all
visitors to better understand Demuth and his work.

The Problem of Gender

There are three problems faced by museums under the larger subset of gender and
queerness. The first is one faced by museums in general – women are not included. The
other two are more queer specific. First, definitions of queerness used in the museum world
have conflated gender identity and sexual orientation, and, second, transgender people are
not included in exhibits on queer people.

Queer museology, like all museology, must make sure to include the lives and works
of more women in collections and exhibitions. “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in
American Portraiture” only included female artists from 1920s Paris and from the 1990s to
the present. Two of the queer museum theorists surveyed for this paper, Michael Petry and
Adair, both state that they intentionally did not include women in their work.13 Although
Petry did not include lesbians in his exhibition, he still noted their absence from cultural

13 Michael Petry, “Hidden Histories: The Experience of Curating a Male Same-Sex
Exhibitions and the Problems Encountered” in Levin, 154, and Adair, 266-267.
settings. “Lesbians in many senses became invisible to the dominant population except as objects of male lust.” There are some exceptions to this trend, such as the exhibition “Seeing Gertrude Stein” at the National Portrait Gallery. But, in general, museums must do a better job at including women into exhibits on queer people.

A more complex problem involves how one defines queerness. Adair, quoting Will Fellows, agrees with him when he writes that the term “gay” is problematic because of its equation with sex alone. “For this reason, it’s not an ideal term to use with looking at a person’s nature beyond the scope of his sexual orientation per se.” Fellows offers a new definition for “gay”: “a male who is gender atypical (psychologically and perhaps physically androgynous or effeminate) and decidedly homosexual in orientation if not in practice. Thus, my use of the term gay encompasses both gender identity and sexual orientation.” Adair argues in support of using this definition because, instead of “forcing gender atypical men . . . into contemporary definitions of sexuality”, it instead “encompasses a wide range of lived experience while resisting a certain rigidity which might exclude men who lived prior to the twentieth century.”

Adair and Fellows are attempting to sidestep the problem of historicity discussed in the first section of this paper. More importantly, Adair seeks to use museums as a site for discussing and deconstructing heteronormative gender roles.

In light of Fellows’s definition of gayness, the standard of proof need not be sexual contact with another male. Rather, the focus can become an examination of gender atypicality in light of evidence from the owner’s life and his collection. In this way, house museums can begin to foster discussions of gender, its construction, implications, and enforcement in society, while destabilizing visitors’ preconceived

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14 Petry, 153.
15 Fellows in Adair, 268. Emphasis in original.
16 Adair, 268.
notions about what it means to be male in Western societies. This shift in focus from prurient sexual details to gender roles can help museum audiences move towards more inclusive and accepting views of others.17

I agree with Adair when he says that museums should reconsider gender roles. I am disturbed, however, with the ease at which he conflates sexual orientation and gender identity. This definition excludes queer people who may fit comfortably into the normative gender roles for their assigned sex. It confirms stereotypes that gay men are effeminate and lesbians are masculine. And it is unclear if the average museum visitor – or even curator – would be able to understand his distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation.

One example of a conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity can be found in the exhibition “Seeing Gertrude Stein”. This exhibition shows the problems inherent in using his definition. The wall text conflated gender identity with sexual orientation several times. Next to a portrait of Stein and Alice B. Toklas, one text mentioned that they “created a homme-femme style, a lesbian mode of dressing still in fashion today.”18 With another portrait, the claim is made that Stein adopted “a more masculine style of dress that publically expressed her lesbian sexuality.” Another text, regarding what was referred to as their wedding portrait, says that it shows the “gendered poses they performed for the rest of their lives.”

Although Stein and Toklas had their own personal gender expressions, all queer people do not share these. More critical attention needs to be used before presenting a same-sex relationship as one that contains a “man” and a “woman”. Heteronormative

17 Adair, 274.
18 Vanegas noted in her essay on including LGBT people in an exhibition in Croydon, England, that the interviewer for the lesbian community, Rachel Hasted, ran into problems when conducting research because some older lesbians, who embraced butch/femme roles, were defensive, because they rightly perceived her as being from a younger generation that rejected this role playing. Vanegas, 165.
gender roles should not be forced onto queer relationships, and if the couple identified that way, then the unique nature of their identification should be made clear. Indicating that their gender roles were “poses they performed” is an important step. But I was left with the impression that the curators had conflated Stein and Toklas’ sexual orientations and gender identities. Based on the language used in the exhibition, it would be easy for a visitor to assume that all same-sex relationships replicate heteronormative gender roles.

Cass Bird’s “I Look Just Like My Daddy”, featured in “Hide/Seek”, offers an interesting contrast to “Seeing Gertrude Stein”. My first reaction upon seeing this large, striking portrait was go take a closer look to try to determine the gender of the sitter. The ambiguity is even addressed in the wall text – and the gender is only revealed through the use of the pronoun “her”. The text also emphasizes the variety in ways in which queer people “push the perceived boundaries of gender.” We also do not know how Macaulay identifies in terms of sexual orientation from the wall text, leaving the viewer with lingering questions. The text for this photograph shows how queer people have pushed the boundaries of heteronormative gender roles, but it does not imply that all queer people do this.

Finally, this conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity further excludes transgender people. Robert Mills noted the lack of transgender people in the exhibition “Queer is Here” at the Museum of London, then went on to argue for the broadness of the trans community.

Just as there is the potential for queer desire, defined by same-sex object choice, to be experienced by all human beings in all times and places . . ., so transgender identification, defined by powerful desire for particular gendered selfhood that may be queerly at odds with one’s sex, has been a powerful force for much of human history. In recovering this history, attention needs to be drawn to the manifold ways
in which trans people accomplish what they experience as their true gendered selves.\textsuperscript{19}

This diversity of expression, however, is not found, even in the exhibits that look at how queers have transgressed gender boundaries. In “Hide/Seek”, for example, this is limited to portraits of men in drag. In the other exhibits I visited for this paper, transgender people are not present at all. If museums want to serve all members of queer communities, then they must begin to look at how gender is transgressed. By looking at gender expression in its fullness, we can see how both sexual orientation and gender identity are fluid, and both take place along a spectrum. Neither are fixed categories. At the same time, careful attention must be paid to the specific social and legal challenges faced by transgender people.\textsuperscript{20}

These issues lead me to another definition for queerness, from Erica Rand. Unlike Adair, she aims for inclusion in what it means to be queer. “By ‘queerness and variety’ I refer here not just to homosex categorized by sex/gender identity – men together, women together – but to all sorts of sexual identities, practices, and tastes that often have been labelled queer, perverse, ‘outside the box.’”\textsuperscript{21} Although her definition might not be as historically accurate as Adair’s, I prefer it because it is more encompassing. It is a reminder that gender identity and sexual orientation are two different things, and that women and transgender people need to be included in discussions of queerness.

\textsuperscript{19} Robert Mills, “Queer is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture” in Levin, 82-83. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{20} This paper has discussed how museums have left the L and T out of LGBT. They have also left the B out. However, bisexuals talked about less in queer museology than even lesbians and transgender people, making it hard to include them in this paper. Regrettably, I have continued their exclusion.
\textsuperscript{21} Erica Rand, “Breeders on a Golf Ball: Normalizing Sex at Ellis Island” in Levin, 284.
The Problem of Suffering

When queer people have been brought up in museums, they have far too often been brought up in the context of suffering directly related to their sexuality. As Conlan notes, “the persistent association of homosexuality with death and oppression contributes to a negative stereotype of LGBTQ lives as unhappy and unhealthy.”

Many major events in queer history have been tragic, such as the Holocaust and AIDS. It is impossible to ignore these events. This problem arises, however, when museums focus on them exclusively.

Homosexuality is brought up twice at the International Spy Museum. The first instance was the Cambridge Five, a group of British men who provided secrets to the Soviet Union. The homosexuality of one of them, Guy Burgess, comes up in the context of his code name – Madchen, the German word for girl – and because the Soviets exploited his fear of prosecution of his homosexuality to ensure he continued to provide them with information. The other mention was Alan Turing, a British codebreaker during the Second World War. After telling the story of Turning’s involvement in these activities, the museum recounts, in smaller text, what happened to him after the war. In 1952, after being convicted of indecency, he agreed to undergo hormonal treatment. This treatment led to his suicide in 1954. In both cases, the homosexuality of the subjects leads to their downfall.

The other major problem for museums is AIDS. AIDS had and continues to have an enormous impact in queer communities. It would be irresponsible to not include AIDS when talking about LGBT people in the last thirty years. However, it is also irresponsible if AIDS is all that is talked about during this time period. Vanegas, in her work in British museums, noted the importance of museum exhibits that discussed AIDS. But she added an
important caveat: “the real danger occurs if this is the only place in such institutions that gay men are represented, when the implied message is that gay men are sick and they are sick because of their sexuality.”

This problem, identified by Vanegas, can be found in the United States as well. “The Struggle for Justice”, the National Portrait Gallery’s permanent exhibition on leaders of social change, featured, in April of 2012, one queer activist, Larry Kramer. The wall text focuses on Kramer’s activism related to AIDS, and the portrait features him wearing a shirt that says “Silence = Death” and a button for ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Through both the text and the portrait, the museum associates queer activism with AIDS activism.

This focus on AIDS was repeated in “Hide/Seek”. Katz, in the catalog, points out that AIDS gave homophobia a new bully pulpit to make its arguments about “homosexual contagion, misery, promiscuity, dissipation, threat to children, and of course early death.” However, the last gallery had a strong focus on art inspired by and related to AIDS. Some of the most powerful works of art in the exhibition were found here. But, by presenting AIDS as the endpoint of the exhibition, the viewer can be left with a feeling that equates homosexuality with suffering and death. The accomplishments of queer communities in the past twenty years are not exhibited, with the exception of a portrait of Ellen DeGeneres.

In addressing this, museums must be careful not to overact too much by presenting an image of queer life as overwhelmingly positive. Mills, in his critique of “Queer is Here”, quoted Carolyn Dinshaw, who was worried that the exhibits presented queer Londoners

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24 Katz, 53.
simply as “a feel-good collectivity of happy homos.” The challenge that museums face is finding a middle ground between focusing on suffering and focusing on triumph.

The Problem of Consistency

In October of 2012, I visited Fallingwater, the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright designed house in Pennsylvania. Adair includes it in his list of houses that are not open about the sexuality of their owners:

no mention is made of the fact that Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., the man responsible for the house being open to the public, was a homosexual. He was an important figure in the art world, and one can imagine the potential impact of museum tours which address his sexuality in a frank, productive manner.

Remembering this, I was pleased when our docent mentioned that Kaufmann’s partner, Paul Mayén, had designed the visitor pavilion. Her description was simple and avoided the problems discussed earlier in this paper. The simple act of mentioning a relationship between two men, and the impact both had on the property, tangible to visitors today, was a perfect solution to the problems Adair saw when he visited.

A recent entry on a queer group blog provides evidence that not every visitor has a similar experience to mine, however. Comments from visitors reflected a variety of approaches taken by docents. One was told that Kaufmann had life partner, but the gender of this partner was not disclosed. Another was simply told that Kaufmann never married.

After reading these comments, it becomes clear that the solution presented by the docent on

25 Carolyn Dinshaw in Mills, 82.
26 Adair, 272.
my visit will only work if it applied consistently by all guides during all tours. Guides may resist providing this information for reasons ranging from outright homophobia to the idea that such information is irrelevant to the museum. At Fallingwater, the latter could be challenging, because most visitors come to experience the architecture, not to learn about the Kaufmann family. But this information makes the house feel more real. Visitors cannot truly understand the property if they do not understand the lives of those who built and preserved the house, and then ensured that it would be open to visitors.

**Conclusion: Why Do All of This Work?**

This paper has presented several challenges to be considered by museum professionals. Considering all of the challenges that face museums today, it would be easy to push the concerns of queer people to the side. But this would do disservice not just to queer communities, but also to museums themselves. Visitors are interested in seeking out the information that can be found in exhibits about queer people. In 2000, visitors to “Pride and Prejudice”, an exhibition at the Museum of London, were surveyed. “95 per cent of all visitors . . . thought the museum was right to stage the exhibition and 87 per cent agreed that lesbian and gay history should be integrated into the museum’s permanent displays.”28 The desire for this information exists, and museums have a responsibility to provide the publics they serve with it.

Queer people are in museums, but they have not been treated truthfully. Museums must be truthful if they want to retain public trust and their role as custodians of knowledge. The public want museums to reflect who they are, including their diversity of sexual

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28 Vanegas, 168.
orientation and gender identity. Museums must represent the queer people in their collections. They must also be careful in their representation. But this task is within the realm of the possible, and those that engage in it will be liberated. It is time for museums to come out of the closet.
Bibliography


