

MIT Alumni Books Podcast | Inside the Lost Museum

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the *Slice of MIT Podcast*. A production of the MIT Alumni Association.

JOE This is the MIT Alumni books podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni Education.

MCGONEGAL: There are 1 billion objects collected in this country's museums, with the Smithsonian Institution housing over 156 million of them alone.

Steven Lubar, class of '76, is Professor of American Studies and History at Brown University. He's thought a lot about these objects. He's the author of a new book, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating Past and Present*, published in August 2017 by Harvard University Press.

The book tells the story of one of the most innovative lesson plans I've ever read about. One professor's efforts with an artist, and with his students, to recover and re-curate the museum that closed to the public over 100 years ago.

The book reflects on what museums do for this country. And gives us behind the scenes look at a museum curator's craft.

So Steven Lubar, tell us, as an educator, what inspired this project to recover this lost museum. What inspired the book the followed it?

STEVEN LUBAR: The project at Brown University, the lost museum project, was actually started by a student.

One of my students was fascinated by the history of natural history museums and came to me and said, did you know that Brown had a natural history museum at one point? And everything that they had was thrown away into the University's dump.

I said, that's an amazing story. And the more we looked into it, the more we discovered about this museum that had started in the 1870s. Founded by a professor named John Whipple Potter Jenks.

He brought his own collection to the museum. He went all over the country, all over the world, collecting things for the museums, brought them back to Brown.

And then used it to teach natural history, biology, anthropology, to students in the best museum tradition. He died in the traces.

Came back from lunch one day in the 1890s and collapsed on the steps of the museum. After 20 some years of using the museum to teach Brown students. And after that the museum didn't seem as useful and met it's end.

When we discovered this, when we learned about the museum, we pulled together a project. First, to describe it, to find out more about it. And then we got in touch with an artist, named Mark Dion. He's an artist from New York who is fascinated by, and scholar of, the history of natural history museums, history of university collections.

And he agreed to come and join us as a visiting artist. We set up an organization called the Jenks Society for Lost Museums. And worked with him to re-imagine the museum in the building where it had once existed.

I'll say recreate because very little survives from it. But we put on display some of the few objects that did survive.

We recreated, or re-imagined, Professor Jenks' office. As you can imagine a 19th Century Naturalist's office full of traps and nets and various creatures from the sea and land.

And then we brought in some artists, some students at the Rhode Island School of Design, to recreate, in white paper maché, the objects that had been lost forever in the dump. So we really tried to figure out how to re-imagine what this place was to show off to current students. And to bring it back to life a little bit.

MCGONEGAL: It's safe to say that first student did pass his thesis?

LUBAR: She did. [LAUGHTER] She did. And now, in fact, she's working at the RISD museum.

MCGONEGAL: So what inspired the book?

LUBAR: The book is something I've been thinking about for a while. I teach about museums and the history museums. I was trying to figure out a way to pull that together. Partly, it was a book that I wish I had had when I was starting as a curator. There's not a good book that explains why museums do what they do.

There are some books that say what museums do but none of them try to get beyond that. Here's why they do it. And here's what they should be doing.

And the Jenks Museum-- the Lost Museum Project, was the key that let me figure out how to

tell that story in an exciting way. While the Jenks Museum is not an important museum.

It lasted for only a couple of decades. And was never the largest, or the best, or the most prominent; it did all of the things that museums do. It collected. It preserved its materials. It put them on display. It put them to use in other ways.

And by telling the story of that museum and explaining how it represents all museums, and how it fits in the history of museums. I could unlock a bigger story that I wanted to tell.

MCGONEGAL: So we have a great case study in looking at the Jenks Museum. And possibly a cautionary tale.

LUBAR: Well there is a cautionary tale there. One of the morals of the book, one of the stories I'm eager to let folks know, is that museums need to be useful. And they need to keep up with the times. Or they can disappear.

Jenks was, by the end of his life in his 70s, he was an old fashioned museum person. And an old fashioned biologist. He never quite came around to believing in evolution, for example. He never kept up with new ideas in how to teach biology using dissections and laboratory work.

When he died, the museum was not useful. Even before his death he was sort of an old fashioned character on campus. So there's the moral of, museums need to keep up with the times to put their collections to use in ways that are educational.

Ways that are connected to what society, or in this case, what the university needs. But they also need to connect to an audience.

MCGONEGAL: Talk about any museums that have closed, maybe the past couple of decades, any that you take as a grievous loss. Are people even aware of museums closing in the 21st century?

LUBAR: So museums do close. The kind of museum that's most at risk in the last decade or so are historic house museums.

Many of them were founded at the bicentennial in 1976. And sometimes I say, they last until they need a new roof. They're expensive to maintain. And many of them did not think about connecting to an audience.

They didn't think about how, say, the neighborhood around them has changed. And how they should connect to them.

And there are larger museums that closed. They can't raise the funds. They no longer seem useful to their community. And collections are sold off. And that's sad.

But it's also a cautionary tale perhaps for other museums.

MCGONEGAL: Our listeners will recognize the museums at which you've curated before you joined the Brown faculty. You were at the Charles River Museum of Industry, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, sorry of American History. And then Brown's Museum of Anthropology.

Talk about some of the exhibitions we might have seen where you had that urgency of what museums need to do for people.

LUBAR: The Charles River Museum of Industry is one I should put in a plug for. It's in Wolfram, Massachusetts, founded actually by a Brown professor more than 30 years ago.

At the site of Boston Manufacturing Company textile mills. Perhaps the first cotton cloth manufacturing factory in America.

The museum that is about that history but also more and more about contemporary stories of invention and innovation, connecting to the community in teaching technology skills. And use that history to connect to a larger group. Moving beyond just that 1820s history that it started with.

At the Smithsonian National Museum of American History exhibit that I worked on, put in a plug and suggested that your listeners visit. An exhibit called, *America On The Move*.

An exhibit on transportation that took advantage of a wonderful collection of automobiles, and trains, and trucks. And even street cars and subway cars. And used them to tell a story, not just about the history of the car and-- it's a story that would be interesting to car buffs--

But it's a story of American history and how transportation has shaped America. So again, moving beyond the simple story of the technology. To the technology and society story that is an important story to understand.

Transportation is and will be an important story an important topic that shapes America. Understanding the history would allow visitors to understand some of the issues they face today. It's all a way of getting beyond just the history, just the technology, and into the bigger questions of technology and culture and society.

MCGONEGAL: As I was reading about your work there, I wondered if the Smithsonian had acquired a Tesla yet for its collection.

LUBAR: [LAUGHTER] I don't know. Some of the recent cars that they've acquired, though, are part of that same question of how do you document recent history.

It does have one of the EV1, the General Motor electric car. That was controversial in its day and then withdrawn from general public use.

And it went, and I think in a quite smart acquisition acquired one of the self-driving cars from DARPA grand challenge to create a self-driving car. That was an excellent call.

In the book, I talk a lot about the challenges, especially of collecting contemporary technology, contemporary politics. And the challenge of thinking, what will be important 50 years from now?

Something like the Tesla, they'll be saved. If they turn out to be the key car that is changing the future of the automobile, they'll be around. The harder things to collect are things like the EV1, which might not have been around.

MCGONEGAL: Yeah, there was a window of a few years to collect one of those.

LUBAR: Exactly.

MCGONEGAL: There's a lot of soul searching in that first part of the book.

LUBAR: The question for museum collecting is, what's worth saving? Museums don't necessarily save things forever. But idea behind collecting is that it's worth saving forever.

If you brought it into the museum, you're going to take care of it. You're going to give it space. You're going to find ways to use it on exhibits. Or in research.

It's a commitment that museums make.

MCGONEGAL: You talk a lot about one of my favorite museums, of course, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Outside of the Smithsonian, probably one of the most important in America.

I'm curious what you think of some of the controversies. The admission. The charging of admission.

LUBAR:

The MET has a wonderful policy of saying there's a recommended, or suggested, admission. And which word is used has been controversial. But that in fact, anybody can pay whatever they want or go in for free. And that's because they are supported by the City of New York. And that was the arrangement.

I know that what they're planning to do right now is to have it free for New Yorkers. And then charge people who aren't from New York. I have to say I'm a great believer in free museums. They are wonderful.

That's the Smithsonian notion, that it's important to be free. But on the other hand, museums need the funding. And I can see why they'd like to charge.

The interesting statistic that surprised me is that in general the admission fee for museums is not what keeps visitors away. When you ask people who don't go to museums why they don't go, it's not usually an admission charge. But rather it just doesn't seem like the sort of thing they do.

The museums have a reputation of not being very welcoming. And not being very friendly. There are many people who don't feel at home or comfortable in a museum. And that's a real challenge that museums need to overcome.

MCGONEGAL:

You discussed Museums react to Ferguson movement that started on Twitter. Where outreach to the public and making themselves relevant to public crises and debates. Did do some work for museums.

I'm thinking also this summer was, let's look at five versions of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* on Facebook Live from the galleries.

LUBAR:

The museums respond to Ferguson was really a moment for museums to think about what they can do that is useful. There is debate in the museum community. On the one hand, one could say these are fairly wealthy institutions with lots of resources.

Everything from meeting spaces, to money. And they could do very useful things for the communities that they're located in with those resources.

And then on the other hand, they also have skilled staff. They have collections. They have ways of reaching the community that they can work with what makes museums special. Their

collections. Their expertise. Their knowledge about engagement can be useful to community that way.

And that's an ongoing discussion. What is the right way for a museum to be useful to the community?

The second question you raise about virtual museums and virtual connections. And ways in which museums can use new technology is absolutely fascinating. Museums have a reputation, perhaps for being a little bit stodgy and old fashioned.

But when you start looking into the history in the present day, in fact, they are today on the cutting edge of lots of different kinds of technology. If you go back 100 years, they were eager to have photographs, and video, and movies in the exhibit spaces.

Today, lots of museums are doing interesting work with, not just interactive connections to their visitors, connecting them to art in new ways, but also online opportunities. Whether they're putting all their collections online.

Many of the large museums have now put as many of their images of their collections that are not copyrighted. As many as they can available for free download. And there's lots of amazing educational programs that museums have put online.

MCGONEGAL: You write about crowdsourcing, too, as a means of [INAUDIBLE].

LUBAR: Exactly. So one of the things that museums have done for a long time but found new ways to do in the age of the internet, is to work with a large group of people. Anybody who was interested in ask some questions.

What can we collect? What should we collect? What's important to you? Or more and more making collections useful.

A lot of museums are crowdsourcing the documentation of collection. If you've got a natural history museum with tens or tens of millions of specimens of insects, each of them with a handwritten label. There are folks out there who enjoy the process of reading those and typing them in.

Museums have always thought big. Natural history museums could have tens of millions of specimens in their collections. And now they're thinking about new ways to use the internet, in

this case crowdsourcing, to make those collections even more useful.

MCGONEGAL: John Jenks was living in the shadow of Louis Agassiz at Harvard. And was all about quantity too. Not just quantity.

LUBAR: Yes. So that's another good question for museums. How many do you need? The largest single collection in any museum, as far as I know, are the collections that Dr. Kinsey, who later became famous for his work on insects, collected at the Natural History Museum in New York. The American Museum of Natural History.

Before he moved on his new topic he was a specialist in Gall wasps. And he collected for the museum 7.5 million Gall wasps. He believed that the more objects you collected, the better a person you were.

And his nickname was, Get-A-Million Kinsey. He got 7.5 million.

MCGONEGAL: You teach Introduction to Public Humanities at Brown. What does this course aim at? And where are former students of that course nowadays?

LUBAR: Public humanities program at Brown that aims to teach students who are interested in working with the public in the arts and the humanities. It's a master's program that gives a master's in public humanities.

Start off by thinking, what does it mean when we refer to the public? What's the difference between public and public? And community in communities? That kind of questions. Words like public and community or thrown around a lot.

And it's good for students who are going to be working with the public or with the communities to think about what those words really mean. We then go on to think about how museums and other institutions have worked with people who aren't like those who are working there now.

So how Native Americans have been collecting. And how anthropology museums have worked with groups around the world. We think a lot about what exhibits look like. What other kinds of programs look like. And how those are designed. And talk about issues like crowdsourcing, for example.

The folks who have graduated from the program, many of them have ended up working in museums. We have an impressive group of alumni at places from the Smithsonian, to small

house museums.

As well as jobs working for cities in cultural policy. We have folks who are consultants in public art. It's a pretty wide range of jobs that help the public understand culture, work in organizations, that do that kind of work.

MCGONEGAL: What else are you reading right now?

LUBAR: Most of it is tied to the classes I'm teaching. I'm teaching a class on the topic of still, for some first year students at Brown. And so I've been reading books that are written by crafts people writing about what they do, to prepare for lectures and classes there.

So the book that I was reading this morning is called, *The Lost Carving*, by David Esterly. Who was a woodcarver in the 17th century tradition. And describes how he does his carving, what he does.

So I'm reading a lot of books about carving. And lock picking. And welding. And thinking about writing a book on that topic myself. That's my next book project.

MCGONEGAL: The book is, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating Past and Present*, by Steven Lubar, class of '76. And it's available now at your favorite local bookstore or online. Steven, thanks for chatting.

LUBAR: My pleasure. Thanks for the conversation.

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