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### From Darkness to Light: Bringing Collections Out of Storage at the History Center in Tompkins County

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THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

From Darkness to Light: Bringing Collections Out of Storage at the History Center in  
Tompkins County

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE  
IN MUSEUM STUDIES

MUSEUM STUDIES PROGRAM

BY

KATIE KEEGAN

MAY 2021

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Katie Keegan submitted on May 7, 2021.

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**Abstract:**

One of the museum's important missions is collecting objects and artifacts to store, preserve, and display. Today, however, museums only have a small portion of their objects out on display. Large institutions have the funds to buy and create new spaces to display more of their collections. With small budgets and small spaces, however, smaller institutions do not have this luxury. I wish to find different ways to bring out collections from storage into the public eye to better serve the community. I apply my investigation to a case study of the History Center in Tompkins County, a local history center in Ithaca, NY. The case study is informed by my internship experience there over the past summer and work that will continue throughout the rest of this year. I will be furthering my thoughts by analyzing a digital exhibition about quilting. In addition to incorporating my first-hand experience with the History Center, this thesis will provide recommendations for bringing collections out from storage. These will include online exhibits, social media usage, marketing, and deaccessioning/loans between institutions. The overall goal of this research is an outline of action for how the History Center can bring artifacts out of storage or make them accessible to their audience. This plan can also serve as an outline to other small institutions.

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## I. Introduction

Decades of museum collecting and acquiring have left institutions with masses of artifacts and objects. From paintings to books, sculptures, and so much more museums and their archives/collections are filled with treasures from the past. These storage centers and archives are there to preserve and protect artifacts and objects in the museum's care, which is a huge part of many institutions' missions, which include collecting and preserving. However, the other important aspect of museums is displaying and exhibiting these materials for public benefit. This is where many museum institutions are falling short of their mission. They are keeping a large portion of their collections tucked away in storage where they never see the light of the museum exhibition floor, and museum-goers don't even know that these artifacts exist. Having these things concealed from the public does not benefit those who come to see all that a museum has to offer. There are a myriad of reasons why museums do not put out their whole collections. These include spatial restrictions, lack of funds, preservation of fragile materials, and fashion. Fashion here refers to how "some holdings no longer fit their institutions' curatorial missions."<sup>1</sup>

In temperature-controlled rooms across the world sit thousands of pieces of art, sculptures, and objects. According to the BBC, "The largest museums typically display about five percent of their collection at any time."<sup>2</sup> Several well-known museums are only displaying small percentages of their overall collections which paints a dramatic picture of the objects that are displayed compared to the ones kept in storage: the Tate

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<sup>1</sup>"Why Museums Hide Masterpieces Away." BBC Culture. BBC, n.d.  
<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150123-7-masterpieces-you-cant-see>.

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Groskopf, "Museums Are Keeping a Ton of the World's Most Famous Art Locked Away in Storage." Quartz. Quartz. Accessed February 11, 2021.  
<https://qz.com/583354/why-is-so-much-of-the-worlds-great-art-in-storage/>.

(a network of four art galleries in the United Kingdom) shows about twenty percent of its permanent collections, the Louvre shows eight percent, and the Guggenheim a lowly three percent.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing wrong per se with museums having objects that do not go on display.

Much of art in storage is part of “study collections” that museums never had any intention of displaying. These items are often of less public interest than those in the “display collections,” but can still have tremendous value for research. Nancy Thomas, who manages the collections of Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), pointed to a collection of Luristan bronzes as an example that is more valuable as a group, even if they can’t all be displayed. “It’s multiple dissertations waiting to be written,” she explained.<sup>4</sup>

However, how will students and researchers know about these collections if they are not advertised to the public, universities, or research institutions? These collections need to be made available in some way to the public so that those who would consider using them for a research project or dissertation know that they are available to them.

For my thesis project, I have chosen to collaborate with the History Center in Tompkins County (NY). I wanted to look into and create recommendations for small museums, like the History Center, that might help them pull those objects sitting on the shelves in storage out and into the public sphere. These recommendations include social media usage, open storage platforms (visible storage to the public), education programs and outreach, and rotation for the institution itself.

This paper details my process of developing recommendations on ways for museum institutions to bring out their dust-collecting objects and artifacts from storage into the eyes of the public. It begins with a literature review that covers the relevance of

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<sup>3</sup>“Why Museums Hide Masterpieces Away.”

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Groskopf.



my thesis to this field. Then I talk about the methods that I took while going through this process. After that, I discuss the recommendations that I believe are important aspects of museums and ways that they could use their already existing programs and outlets to show off their unique collections.

## **II.Literature Review:**

### **The History Center in Tompkins County**

The institution I studied is the History Center in Tompkins County. Their mission is to “serve as a community hub that celebrates our rich history, heritage, and culture, inviting participation and engagement from both county residents and visitors to our community, a place like no other in upstate New York.”<sup>5</sup> The History Center has had a long tenure in the Tompkins County community, going all the way back to 1863 when Ezra Cornell helped initiate the first Ithaca Historical Society.<sup>6</sup> Although the organization only lasted two years, it was the beginning of a long line of historical societies to come.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the History Center has been changing and evolving to cater to the community. Back in 2018 the History Center moved from its previous location onto the Commons in Downtown Ithaca. The Commons is a pedestrian only section of Downtown, home to many unique shops and restaurants that are very popular with locals and tourists alike. Before moving to the Commons, the History Center was located in the Gateway building, a few blocks up the hill from the Commons. This old space was smaller and although close to the center of downtown, not as well known. In

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<sup>5</sup> “About The Center,” Tompkins Center for History & Culture, August 14, 2020, <https://www.tompkins-center.net/about-us/>.

<sup>6</sup> “About the Center.”

<sup>7</sup> “About the Center.”

their new space they have a bigger exhibition space and are also in a more central location to provide for the public. The space consists of the main exhibition room where exhibits about Tompkins County local history are displayed. Another room displays art by local artists which are regularly changed. The space is also a research center for those who wish to learn more about the community and surrounding towns.

### **Importance of Small Museums**

Small museums provide a vital function in their communities. They serve as cultural institutions that bring together their community and that community's past. According to Kevin Britz, who believes that small institutions have so much more to teach us,

although beleaguered, these organizations depict history at its most personal and emotional. Herein lies the contribution of small museums. What are often seen as liabilities by more professional agencies—limited staffing and budget, heavy reliance on volunteers for specialized tasks, adapted facilities, and heavy emphasis on artifact exhibition—may actually be the small museum's greatest assets, because they provide insight into the emotional power of local memories and about the construction of the community.<sup>8</sup>

By this he means that small museum institutions can provide exhibitions and conversations as meaningful as—if not more than—their large institutional counterparts.

### **Bringing out Museum Storage into the Public Eye**

Museums have thousands of objects in their protection and care. Many of these items sit in storage inaccessible to the public. Sjarel Ex, a co-director of the Boijmans

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Britz, "MEMORY, Meaning and Small Museums." *History News* 50, no. 4 (1995): 15-18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42656064>.

van Beuningen Museum in the Netherlands, estimated that about six to seven percent of most major museum holdings are on view at any moment.<sup>9</sup> This is not beneficial for the public, as there are many interesting and unique objects and items that they may never see in their lifetime. Also, museums are housing thousands of objects that will never be seen on display but are being preserved, at considerable cost, in climate-controlled storage spaces.<sup>10</sup> While museums exist to preserve they also need to display and showcase what they have. Many believe that even though museums provide protection of objects, the public is the true owner and therefore should have access to all the museum's resources. Others believe that museum workers are "hiding" the best pieces and objects in storage for themselves and scholars.<sup>11</sup> Many museums state that they must preserve these objects for future generations to see, but if visitors are the reason that museums exist in the first place why can't this generation enjoy these objects?<sup>12</sup>

There are several options as to how to bring out these collections and display them. One method is creating an open storage plan or visible storage where visitors are able to go through the collections in storage. Visitors have the opportunity to walk through storage units and pull out items with guidance, learn first hand how exhibitions are planned, and watch conservators at work.<sup>13</sup> The Museum of Modern Art reopened its doors in 2004 after building a new space to give artists and collections more space.

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<sup>9</sup> Nina Siegal, "Museums Throw Open the Storage Rooms, Letting in the Public." *The New York Times*, December 18, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Clean House to Survive? Museums Confront Their Crowded Basements." *The New York Times*, March 10, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Simon J. Knell, "Visible Storage for the Small Museum." In *Care of Collections*. London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Ron M. Potvin, "Chasing the White Whale? Flexible Use of Museum Collection," *History News* 69, no.4 (2014): 11-16.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43503120>.

<sup>13</sup> Siegal, "Museums Throw Open the Storage Rooms, Letting in the Public."

The exhibition space was increased from 85,000 square feet to 125,000 square feet.<sup>14</sup> Neal Benezra, an architecture critic, says that the collections feel much better and fresher and he has seen things he has never seen displayed before.<sup>15</sup> However, this process of erecting a new building to display collections is very expensive and takes time. These are both things that small museums and local history centers do not have the ability to do as their budget does not permit such an expensive project.

These small museums that do not have the budget or funds to create a new space to hold objects or renovate the space they already have, can turn to alternative options to display their collections. These institutions with smaller budgets need to create an online experience with their objects. All institutions have a website and social media because today that is an important way to reach an audience. They need to expand these experiences and use technology to their advantage and show off collections items in storage. Online exhibitions are already popular with institutions, but they could be used to show off those items in storage. Another option is to create virtual exhibit rooms: a virtual learning space where the objects of the collection would be compiled and available to visitors at any time and anywhere.<sup>16</sup> A third option is to record videos of objects in the collections to highlight items. This would be a more fun experience. One example of this would be the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia. Here, each week an object from the collections is presented to the viewers. Viewers have the

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<sup>14</sup>Kim Campbell, "Space to Elaborate ; the Museum of Modern Art Reopens in Newly Expanded Glory, Bringing Works Out of Storage and into the Spotlight: [ALL Edition]," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 19, 2004, 11.

<sup>15</sup>Campbell, "Space to Elaborate."

<sup>16</sup>R.G. Martini, Guimarães, M., Librelotto, G.R. *et al.* "Creating virtual exhibition rooms from emigration digital archives," *Univ Access Inf Soc* 16 (2017): 823–833.

entire week to guess what the object is and its function.<sup>17</sup> Then in the next video the object is explained and a new object is released. This process continues to go on and can be repeated with storage collections. This idea is great for small museums because it costs them almost nothing to record and edit a video of their collections and upload it to Youtube or another video platform.

The convergence of technology is changing the way that information is collected, stored, and accessed. There are three main principal reasons why this is happening, reducing cost and increasing quality.<sup>18</sup> Digital information preserves content accuracy in a way other systems do not and also is globally accessible.<sup>19</sup> “Technology has given institutions a global platform and connection device; facilitated communication with its audience, and provided tools to build a community that can collaborate, converse, and take action.”<sup>20</sup> When it comes to the History Center’s audience they tend to focus on the local community. However, being a college hub with a huge diaspora of international students coming into that community each year, they are able to reach a wider selection of people.

A central/important question about displaying items from collections virtually is what is the best way to showcase them? There are many ways to present collections digitally ranging from simple two-dimensional photography to complicated

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<sup>17</sup>Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, “Guess What’s on the Curator’s Desk: 19th Century Coffin Stand,” April 16, 2015, Youtube video, 1:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwy4y9GNtQU>.

<sup>18</sup>M. Deegan and S. Tanner, “Some Key Issues in Digital Preservation,” in Earnshaw R., Vince J. (eds.) *Digital Convergence – Libraries of the Future* (London: Springer, 2008).

<sup>19</sup>Deegan, Tanner, “Digital Convergence,” 24

<sup>20</sup>Katherine Whitney, “Going Virtual to Engage a Global Museum Community,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 36, no.3 (2011): 289-96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23118053>

three-dimensional scanning and rendering.<sup>21</sup> Small museums will most likely only be able to afford two dimensional photography because it is easy enough for anyone to take photos of objects. Also, recording videos is easy for anyone to do.

## Social Media

Social media is an immense part of everyday life in this day and age. Most people get their news and information from different social media platforms. "In this age of social media, when we can instantly understand how our audience reacts to content, it is easier to evaluate feedback and adjust, unlike a new exhibit, which is temporary."<sup>22</sup> With so much online content and the traffic online, institutions would benefit from putting their content online specifically on social media. "For heritage organizations, social media is not just an avenue to get people to visit our museums and sites; it is also a way to tell our story and the stories of our past."<sup>23</sup> An example of this is a Civil War reenactment that took place on Twitter related to Quantrill's Raid. This story has already been told through other media, but for the 150th anniversary of the Civil War it was told a new way. Those who participated received scripts and then took to Twitter to tweet their character's story, in "real time."<sup>24</sup> Along with Twitter, the tweets were also posted on a website not only for those who do not have a Twitter account, but also to archive the reenactment since the posts would quickly become buried in other content on social

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<sup>21</sup>Tanya M. Johnson, "Let's Get Virtual: Examination of Best Practices to Provide Public Access to Digital Versions of Three-Dimensional Objects." *Information Technology and Libraries (Online)* 35, no. 2 (06, 2016): 39-55.

<sup>22</sup>Shannon Haltiwanger, "Embracing Social Media As Part Of A Storyteller's Toolkit." *History News* 69, no. 4 (2014): 7-10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43503119>.

<sup>23</sup>Haltiwanger. "Embracing Social Media As Part Of A Storyteller's Toolkit."

<sup>24</sup>Shannon Haltiwanger.

media. The hashtag trended worldwide on Twitter reaching 1.3 million people, and the website reached an additional 4,600 individuals.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Pew Research Center, upwards of 75% of millennials maintain a profile on at least one social media site.<sup>26</sup> Not only millennials but the whole market is moving toward mobile technologies being their primary means of accessing the web.<sup>27</sup> Digital engagement is essential to maintain relevance these days, especially with the younger generations. Institutions must connect on these platforms if they wish to remain relevant. This involves not only being active on social media platforms, but also engaging in social customer relationship management or responding to questions and interactions that take place on the organization's social sites.<sup>28</sup> Becoming conversant within digital platforms ultimately expands not only your audience but the time in which your institution is available. Not only are social media a great way to connect with a new audience, they also make a great platform to showcase those items in storage that may not be seen in the regular exhibit space.

### **Education with Artifacts**

Institutions can also use their collections in storage for educational purposes. Students are always fascinated when something new that they can touch and examine is put in front of them. "Engaging students with artifacts and special collections enriches

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<sup>25</sup>Shannon Haltiwanger.

<sup>26</sup>Colleen Dilenschneider, "Reaching the Next Generation(s): Three Millennial Characteristics That Challenge Business as Usual for Museums and History Organizations." *History News* 69, no. 3 (2014): 5-6.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43503107>.

<sup>27</sup>Colleen Dilenschneider, "Reaching the Next Generation(s): Three Millennial Characteristics That Challenge Business as Usual for Museums and History Organizations."

<sup>28</sup>Colleen Dilenschneider.

student learning, stimulates critical thinking, and increases historical literacy.”<sup>29</sup> Students gain skills in problem solving, analyzing and synthesizing evidence, and communicating the found result.<sup>30</sup> These artifacts make history real and humanized for students. Not only does this process benefit students and teachers, but also the institution. By bringing out these artifacts for use, they are coming out of the storage collections and into the eyes—and occasionally the hands—of the public.

### III. Background on the History Center in Tompkins County

The History Center of Tompkins County is an education and research center focused on engaging with the public.<sup>31</sup> The current name, The History Center in Tompkins County, came about in 2004 to “more accurately reflect its changing identity as a historical society, research space, and public museum space.”<sup>32</sup> The Center’s exhibit hall focuses on the history of Tompkins County and the Finger Lakes region, highlighting several different parts of the community’s history, starting with a video representation of the Gayoghó:nq’ (more often known by the mispronunciation Cayuga) creation myth.<sup>33</sup> They also have a one hundred-year old Tommy Plane, which is one of the most popular attractions in the space. “Tommy is a Thomas Morse Scout S4-B which was manufactured right in Ithaca by the Thomas Morse Aviation Corporation in 1918.”<sup>34</sup> The six P.L.A.C.E (People, Land, Architecture, Culture, and

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<sup>29</sup> Lois Hendrickson. “Teaching with Artifacts and Special Collections.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine; Baltimore* 90, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 136–40.

<sup>30</sup>Lois Hendrickson. “Teaching with Artifacts and Special Collections.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine; Baltimore* 90, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 136–40.

<sup>31</sup>“About the Center.”

<sup>32</sup>“About the Center.”

<sup>33</sup>“About the Center.”

<sup>34</sup>“About the Center.”



Enterprise) exhibit towers within the exhibit space explore two local aspects of the community's history.<sup>35</sup> Below each tower is a tablet that holds more information to further what is shown within the tower. These tablets not only provide more information on what is shown, but also visitors can get more of a glimpse on similar objects that are not out on display. The History Center "helps people use the tools of history to understand the past, gain perspective on the present, and play an informed role in shaping the future."<sup>36</sup>

## **IV. Methodology**

### **A. Choosing a Topic**

When I first started this thesis process I had no idea what I would write about or complete a project on. I was intimidated by the fact that everyone else in the class had an idea or concept on day one. I had a very difficult time coming up with an idea at first. I spent time brainstorming with my parents about potential topic ideas. With my interest in collections management and collections objects in general, I concluded that my thesis would address artifacts and objects. From there, I looked into ideas that included my interests, and I remembered an article that I had read for an earlier class about museum storage and all the objects and artifacts that are tucked away in storage rooms and buildings kept from the public. It was in that moment that I had a bit of a realization and everything clicked into place. It was at that moment that I realized my concept was bringing out museum collections from storage into the public eye.

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<sup>35</sup>"About the Center."

<sup>36</sup>"About the Center."

After figuring out my concept and topic I reached out to Cindy Kjellander-Cantu, Design and Support Specialist, as well as a curator at the History Center in Tompkins County. Cindy and I have worked together in the past in different settings. I first met her when I was volunteering in high school at our community cafe in Dryden, NY. I also saw her quite a few times when I volunteered at the History Center in high school as well. It was in both of these settings where I built my relationship with her and was able to reach out to her again last summer (2020) for an internship opportunity. Over the summer we worked together on an exhibit (*Women Working*), and I also transcribed oral histories. I shared my idea for my thesis with Cindy, and she was more than willing to help. We talked about my ideas, how she could help, and the thesis process in general. She asked a lot of thought-provoking questions which made me think deeper about my ideas. Cindy told me how perfect my thesis concept was for the History Center because of their commitment to the community.

The History Center in Tompkins County has as its purpose to serve its community and surrounding areas. In order to accomplish this purpose,

we preserve and encourage access to The History Center's unique collections; seek out the diverse needs and interests of our community; design learning experiences and provide services that respond to those needs; create opportunities for people to learn about themselves and their place in the world; and provide a neutral environment for public discussions that bring historical perspective to current issues.<sup>37</sup>

The History Center is dedicated to providing access to the people in their community in the best ways possible. They have shown this already with their move from their previous location in the Gateway Building, where they resided for more than two decades. That building made the History Center hidden away from visitors due to its

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<sup>37</sup>"About the Center."

physical location, and it also had spatial issues as a small space. Their new space within the Tompkins Center for History and Culture is located within the vibrant and busy Commons, right in the heart of downtown Ithaca. This new heritage tourism center opened to the public in May of 2019 with eleven partner organizations in the building.<sup>38</sup> This new space allows the History Center more space for exhibitions and displays, while also being in a more visitor-friendly environment.

### **B. Original Idea**

Deciding on what to include in my work has been more difficult than I originally thought. When I first started thinking about this thesis idea, I wanted it to be broad in a sense so therefore museum institutions would be able to adapt the suggestions to their unique institution. However, I quickly realized that this topic is very large and even too broad for me to handle in this one project. After this realization, I took the time to think about what I wanted to include and talk about in my thesis, more in depth. I found that I wanted to use different aspects of the museum to bring out stored artifacts and objects. The main aspects that stood out to me that I wanted to incorporate were rotation of the physical exhibition space, online exhibits, education within schools, outreach with programs, usage of social media platforms, and accessible/open storage options. I also asked myself some questions to inspire thoughts. How can museums be flexible? How do they include education while still keeping the audience engaged? How do they use collections in online or oral programs? How do they reach specific audiences? Keeping these questions in mind I begin my research.

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<sup>38</sup>“About the Center.”

After I developed these ideas, I met with Cindy at the History Center. We talked about what I was thinking and how to move forward. She also told me about an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which is a nationwide effort to support local cultural nonprofits and educational programming. This grant, that they had just received from the Museum Association of New York (MANY), will allow for virtual accessibility to four different oral history collections from the History Center archives. After hearing and reading about this project I thought that it would be a great opportunity to include in my thesis because of the accessibility to collections that it will be providing when it is finally finished. Not only are they making oral histories available, but also lending equipment to communities so they can create their own oral history projects.

After meeting with Cindy, I took the time to look through the comments and suggestions that I received from the faculty at a meeting before the end of the fall semester. One of the ones that stood out to me the most was Dr. Tamar Carroll's suggestion to research and survey museums to see what has worked in the past as this would truly be helpful for museums. I looked at MANY for inspiration. MANY is an institution that "inspires, connects, and strengthens New York's cultural community statewide by advocating, educating, collaborating, and supporting professional standards and organizational development."<sup>39</sup> This organization ensures that museums within New York State are operating at their highest level and has information and opportunities to help them do so. I found upon this search that MANY has many resources for museums and grant opportunities to help them fulfill their projects. Here I

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<sup>39</sup>MANY News. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://nysmuseums.org/MANYnews>.

also found more information from MANY's website regarding "Building Capacity, Creating Sustainability, Growing Accessibility," which is the grant program that the History Center has been chosen to be a part of. This IMLS CARES Act grant project is designed to help museums impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic share their collections and reach those who are not physically able to visit the museums.<sup>40</sup> The History Center was one of ninety-eight museums from across New York State selected for a grant and chosen to participate in this project.<sup>41</sup> This original idea to include the IMLS CARES grant that the History Center received from MANY fell through. When I started the actual writing process I quickly realized this project would not be my best option to include. My original aim of bringing objects out of storage and this grant did not necessarily line up exactly as I originally thought. Also, as the outline of the project is two years and just beginning, I will not have the necessary resources and information to include the project in my thesis. In realizing that this project would not fit into my original scope it has forced me to be flexible and take advantage of opportunities when they arise.

### **C. New Idea:**

In my first thesis board meeting Cindy brought up another grant that the History Center received from the National Endowment for the Humanities CARES Act Funding. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is an independent federal agency that was created in 1965 and is one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the

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<sup>40</sup>MANY News.

<sup>41</sup>MANY News.

United States.<sup>42</sup> Their mission statement is: “because democracy demands wisdom, NEH serves and strengthens our republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans.”<sup>43</sup> NEH grants typically go to cultural institutions, such as museums, archives, libraries, colleges, universities, public television and radio stations, and to individual scholars. The grants:

- Strengthen teaching and learning in schools and colleges
- Facilitate research and original scholarship
- Provide opportunities for lifelong learning
- Preserve and provide access to cultural and educational resources
- Strengthen the institutional base of the humanities<sup>44</sup>

This grant has allowed the History Center to do three projects: a small film series on the Tommy plane, which was made in Tompkins County, and two exhibits, one about quilts and the other about the Woman Suffrage Movement. The main focus that I will be working with is the exhibit on quilting. I found that this project process fits more into the scope of my research, as this exhibit is based on a collection that has been sitting in the History Center’s storage for some time.

After my meeting with all of my advisors and discussing the exhibit briefly, I set up an individual meeting with Cindy so she could tell me more about the quilting exhibit. There she told me how the History Center applied for this grant pre-COVID and, with the craziness of the pandemic, forgot about the grant until they received word that the History Center was a recipient. After this announcement it was a scramble to develop a plan of action and come up with ideas to complete the grant.

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<sup>42</sup>“About the National Endowment for the Humanities,” The National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.neh.gov/about>.

<sup>43</sup>“About the National Endowment for the Humanities.”

<sup>44</sup>“About the National Endowment for the Humanities.”

## V: Case Study: Quilting Exhibit

### A: Planning

With the National Endowment for the Humanities grant now available to the History Center, an idea for the grant was needed. Cindy stated in one of our conversations that with the pandemic raging on, the History Center and other cultural institutions have been forced to quickly adapt to the ongoing events to serve their communities. With this in mind, those at the History Center decided to start a digital trend that supported the community with opportunities to educate and connect people across the world.<sup>45</sup> In order to expand its digital content during a time where visitation is at a low, the History Center opted for a digital exhibit featuring its quilt collection that acknowledged a previous physical exhibit.

The quilt exhibit came about from another exhibition in the History Center's past (2012) titled, *Historic Quilts UnWrapped*. "This exhibit was an opportunity to showcase our quilt collection while also re-housing the collection."<sup>46</sup> During this exhibit, however, only a small number of the quilts in the collection were showcased and this collection within the History Center is the largest textile collection. This previous exhibit was a part of a larger preservation project between the History Center and the Tompkins County Quilters Guild to photograph quilts, document their history, and rehouse them in the collection within archival storage boxes to better conserve them.<sup>47</sup> Members of the

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<sup>45</sup>Cindy Kjellander-Cantu, Email to author, March 2, 2021.

<sup>46</sup>Cindy Kjellander-Cantu.

<sup>47</sup>Donna Eschenbrenner, "History Center Gets 19th Century Quilts Off Beds and On Exhibits," *The Ithaca Journal*, February 12, 2012.

Quilters Guild were also on site doing this work where visitors to the History Center could come and watch them work on the project.<sup>48</sup>

The conclusion was made that with the challenges of COVID-19, expanding this past exhibit with new technologies and a combination of the quilts from the 2012 exhibit and other quilts could demonstrate resilience by finding new ways to reach the public. Also, “digitizing the small percentage of the quilt collection made the quilts more widely available to an audience that otherwise would not have access to them or even known they exist. It was a great opportunity to preserve the quilts in an electronic format that can outlast the original fibers and colors, which eventually fade and degrade.”<sup>49</sup>

The planning stage was much shorter than for a normal exhibition process because of the fact that much of the information was taken from the previous *UnWrapped* exhibit. Cindy informed me that she added detailed photographs of each quilt used in that exhibit to the new, digital one. Also, the research was updated and edited from the previous information, which also included some genealogy for particular quilts. Then, the History Center hired an actress to voice record the updated information to narrate the text accompanying the quilts in the digital exhibit. The overall planning stage was freshening up the previous information and adding some new research aspects.

## **B. Marketing**

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<sup>48</sup>Donna Eschenbrenner, “History Center Gets 19th Century Quilts Off Beds and On Exhibits.”

<sup>49</sup>Cindy Kjellander-Cantu.



The exhibit is finished and ready to release to the public. However, before it is released and made available, word needs to reach the target audience so they know about it: where to find it, how to interact with it. Cindy has told me that the History Center will announce the online exhibit in their April 2021 newsletter that goes out to all patrons.

Another marketing strategy could be getting in contact with the Tompkins County Quilters Guild and informing them about the exhibit. They will have the connections and individuals who would be interested in the content within the exhibit. Their website has a lot of information about previous quilt shows, programs, and workshops.<sup>50</sup> I believe that they would be more than happy to help promote the History Center's quilting exhibit. The Quilters Guild group also has so many events and meetings, even over Zoom with the pandemic, that could possibly become a program to go along with the exhibit or just a space to promote the quilt exhibit.

### **C. Social Media**

In today's day and age almost everyone is on one form of social media. The History Center has a website, a YouTube channel, and Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn accounts. Each of these platforms can be used to spread the word and raise awareness for the exhibit. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter can be used to reach a multitude of people as their following is extensive.

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<sup>50</sup>"Tompkins County Quilters Guild," Tompkins County Quilters Guild, accessed April 12, 2021, <http://www.tcwg.org/>.

- Posts informing the public that the exhibit will soon be available are a great way to start
- Informing them about the exhibit and what they can expect to see
- Posting a countdown to the exhibit to get people excited and also to let them know when it goes live

After the exhibit is live:

- Reminder post that the exhibit is live for viewing
- Put out a poll and survey to see what the audience thought
  - This is a great way to gauge thoughts and ideas to help improve future digital exhibitions

As it is very difficult to host in-person programs right now with the current circumstances, the YouTube channel could be used to further the ideas brought about in the digital exhibit. As I mentioned in the marketing portion, working with the Quilters Guild again could bring another aspect to the exhibit and make it more real and relatable. Videos could be recorded and uploaded to show the quilting process and to showcase the amazing work of others.

- Members could give short tutorials on the steps to make a quilt and possibly one of the examples from the exhibit
- Give advice on how to get into quilting and acquire the materials necessary

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) put out tips and suggestions for social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic to help museums continue to reach their

audience and hopefully beyond. The suggestions I have listed above come from their website where they list examples of how museums are using Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms in innovative ways.<sup>51</sup> The AAM provides headers with a social media suggestion and then supplies links to museums that have done this to give a further example.

#### **D. Analytics:**

The *Patterns, Quilting in Tompkins County* digital exhibit went live on the History Center website on March 12, 2021. However, the exhibit is only visible through the website and there has been no push or marketing on social media and the April newsletter has not yet been sent out. Therefore, these interaction numbers only relate to those who already know it is live (such as employees, family, friends, etc.) or have found it on the History Center website. Figure 1 shows the interaction with the exhibit as of March 23, 2021 at 10:10am. As of then the exhibit was viewed sixty-six times. The number of users who have viewed the exhibit is twenty one readers. The average read time refers to the average time spent by a user interacting with the exhibit, and at the time of this screen shot it was 08:47 minutes. The total read time is the total time by all users while actively viewing the exhibit, which at this time was 09:49:29 minutes.

The exhibit will be announced more publicly in the History Center's April newsletter and the plan is to advertise on social media as well. It will be interesting to compare these early numbers with the numbers after the exhibit is announced to the

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<sup>51</sup>Josette Souza and Rachel Lee, "How Your Museum Can Use Social Media during Covid-19," April 9, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/03/24/how-your-museum-can-use-social-media-during-covid-19/>.

public. Will the interaction spike quickly after the marketing or will the numbers continue to slowly increase? It will also be compelling to see if the time averages go up or down. People have short attention spans and if they are not interested in the content in front of them they will leave the exhibit page. The early numbers of this analysis show that objects being made visible does not necessarily mean they are being seen. That being said, the public is the main piece in this, and if they are not aware of this exhibit they cannot interact with it. Therefore, the marketing strategies need to be implemented to ultimately get a better sense of engagement and benefit the public.

### **E. Future Plans**

The History Center plans to take this digital exhibit and transform it into the physical space. As of right now, the plan is to make this available in the space in February of 2022. However, with the current unknowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is always a chance that this could not go according to plan. In a perfect world, however, this will come out next year.

Expanding the exhibit into the physical space should allow for more opportunities than the digital, online exhibit. The quilts will be on full display in the space for visitors to come in and get a better/closer look at. Also, with the tablets under the towers it will allow for a more in-depth dive into the world of quilting.

### **VII: Deaccessioning/Loans**

Bringing items out of storage permanently, however, is a much more complicated issue. Museums and other collections-focused institutions claim that a primary reason collections are stored, rather than on view, is related to their current display practices or focus. This means that while collections policies or practices may change, the collections have not been audited to reflect those changes. However, museums have processes to allow for a close examination of collections, their purpose, and fit within the institution. After careful consideration, the institution may determine that deaccessioning should be undertaken. The definition of deaccessioning is “the process used to remove permanently an object from the collection or to document the reasons for an involuntary removal.”<sup>52</sup> The problem institutions run into with deaccessioning is that “accessioned objects are held in perpetuity as long as”:

- They support the Museum mission statement
- They retain physical integrity, their identity, and their authenticity
- They can be properly stored, preserved, and used

This last bullet is the problem for many institutions to be able to deaccession and find new homes for these collections.<sup>53</sup> Because most institutions have the means to care for and preserve the items they fit this criteria and therefore they remain at their current location, although unseen. However, if museum institutions can develop a deaccessioning, or even a long-term-loan, strategy rather than retaining items and keeping collections that may be outside of scope or otherwise burdensome, institutions could identify specific objects that may be beneficial to another institution where they could be exhibited and made available to the public.

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<sup>52</sup>“Deaccessioning & Disposal,” Deaccessioning & Disposal | Museum | Museum of the North, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.uaf.edu/museum/collections/ethno/policies/deaccessioning/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Deaccessioning & Disposal.”

Museums need to come to an agreement with one another to either deaccession these items so they can go to a place where they could be used or share or lend these unseen objects to institutions where they would be put on display. The transfer of storage collection items from a museum where they do not fit the mission, and as a result, do not leave the storage area, to a museum where they do fit in and ultimately would go on display, is an inter-institutional approach to begin addressing the collections storage problem. For example, The San José Museum of Art (SJMA) and the City of San José were looking to boost their cultural institutions and approached the Whitney Museum in New York. It worked out that the Whitney wanted to find a venue to house some of their collections. The SJMA Redevelopment Agency agreed to pay the Whitney \$3 million in return for four exhibitions of work from the Whitney's permanent collection.<sup>54</sup> This loan agreement allowed for items to be showcased at another institution for a period of time. This agreement was mutually beneficial as the two institutions decided to curate the exhibitions jointly, "so that the project combined the Whitney's knowledge of its collections with SJMA's knowledge of its audience."<sup>55</sup> This type of cooperation between institutions could lead to a future in which museum storage is far more public than tucked away.

### **VIII: Conclusion:**

Collections are meant to help the museum, but how can they do this if they are kept tucked away? If objects are only subject to storage and are not available to the public

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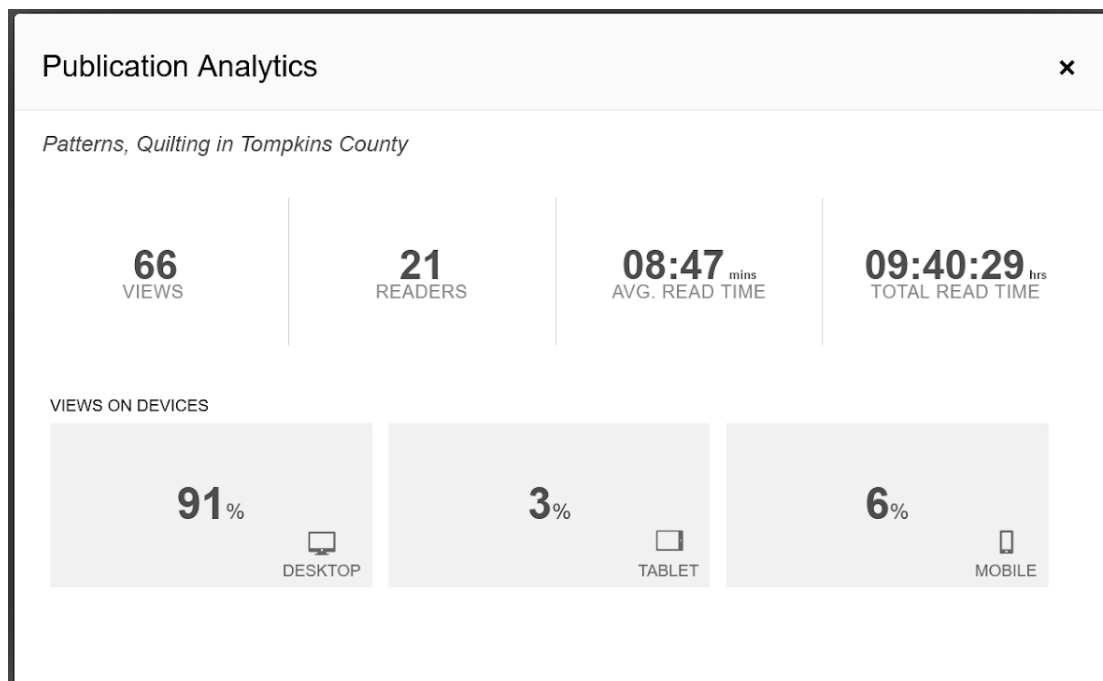
<sup>54</sup>"Acquisition & Disposal of Collections," Smithsonian Institution, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.si.edu/content/opanda/docs/Rpts2005/05.04.ConcernAtTheCore.Disposal.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup>"Acquisition & Disposal of Collections."

through display or digital means, perhaps an institution should consider deaccessioning or loaning the items to another institution. Every aspect of the museum has to in a sense “work” to further the museum’s overall mission statement. If objects are sitting in storage, they are not working to earn and keep their place in storage and the museum. Therefore, they should be taken to an institution where they can “work” and be put into use again. Also, collections are not static, they should change over time with what is happening in the world and revolve around the public’s interests.

My research began with a simple question, of how can museums bring collections objects out of storage into the public eye? The problem I started with was how does one single institution (the History Center in Tompkins County) deal with bringing collections items out of storage. Throughout my research and writing however, I have come to the surprising conclusion that the problem does not lie within one institution but institutions collectively. It ties into the museum’s mission, values, collections management policy, and also other museum institutions and therefore needs a nuanced approach to bring collections from the darkness of storage to the light of day.

## IX: Appendix A



**Figure 1: Interaction with exhibit.** This is a screenshot as of March 23, 2021 of the interactivity with the quilting exhibit. Screen capture courtesy of Cindy Kjellander-Cantu.

## X: Appendix B

<https://indd.adobe.com/view/fd4c680f-d132-4add-a5c8-986a4781ab04>

Link to: Patterns: Quilting in Tompkins County. This link is the exhibition that I reference in the case study portion.



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