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ARTICLES

The Challenge of Making US Museums Multilingual

Which languages should institutions prioritize? Should choices be based on current patrons or on visitors they'd like to reach?

By Julie Schwieter Collazo | January 4, 2017

When *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910–1950* opened on October 25, it represented the culmination of four years of intense work and close, cross-border collaboration between the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) and Mexico City's Museum of the Palacio de Bellas Artes, as well as more than 60 other institutions and collectors who loaned work for the ambitious exhibit. "This is the first survey of Mexican art at this museum in more than seven decades," PMA Director Timothy Rub told reporters who previewed the show, adding that while the museum has what he considers "one of the finest and most extensive collections of Mexican art outside Mexico," it hadn't organized an exhibit of Mexican works since 1943, when it presented *Mexican Art Today*.

PMA had been building buzz for this show for quite some time. A full year earlier, I had attended a media luncheon hosted by the museum at New York's Standard hotel at the High Line. There, staff made clear that while Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera would be among the key draws of *Paint the Revolution*, it was their hope that the show would expand museumgoers' awareness and understanding of the fuller sweep of Mexican modernism.

The exhibition demonstrates that staff from both PMA and Palacio de Bellas Artes invested considerable effort into providing viewers with multiple tools for fostering such understanding. The most impressive of these is a massive digital touch screen that allows visitors to get interactive, literally zooming in on some of the finer details, both visual and textual, of Mexican modernist art. Then there's the show's catalogue, written by 14 authors — seven Mexicans, seven Americans ("not a coincidence," said Miguel Fernández Félix, the general coordinator of the Bellas Artes museum) — and available in PMA's gift shop in an English or Spanish edition — if, of course, one can afford it, at \$65. By the end of the show's run, the museum will also have hosted a variety of events and ancillary programs surrounding it, including free visits and tours for 5,000 Philadelphia public school

Of note, however, is what is *not* included in the exhibit as a way of fostering understanding: the translation of the wall text into Spanish. As I walked through *Paint the Revolution*, I was

struck by the complete absence of Spanish — even the titles of the artworks appear in English only. Given that the exhibit will move to Bellas Artes after it closes at PMA, one imagines that the wall text has already been written in Spanish. Why, then, was it not included in Philadelphia, a city whose Latinx communities comprise 13% of the total population?

While touring the exhibit, I asked Project Assistant Curator Mark Castro about the rationale for English-only wall text and titling. It was a decision, he said, based partly on space and “partly about the ways in which museum visitors interact with text.” Castro explained that the staff had surveyed museum patrons and determined that they neither expected nor would they necessarily use wall text in Spanish, thus the decision was made to go with English only.

Castro’s answer and PMA’s decision strike me as deeply flawed. If a survey is administered only to people who are *already* patrons of the museum, it’s logical to expect that their answers will reflect their experiences in the institution to date. Such a survey fails to consider *prospective* patrons, those who might come to the museum if they felt they could access its richness and experience it fully. Increasingly, language is an important part of the “full” museum experience.

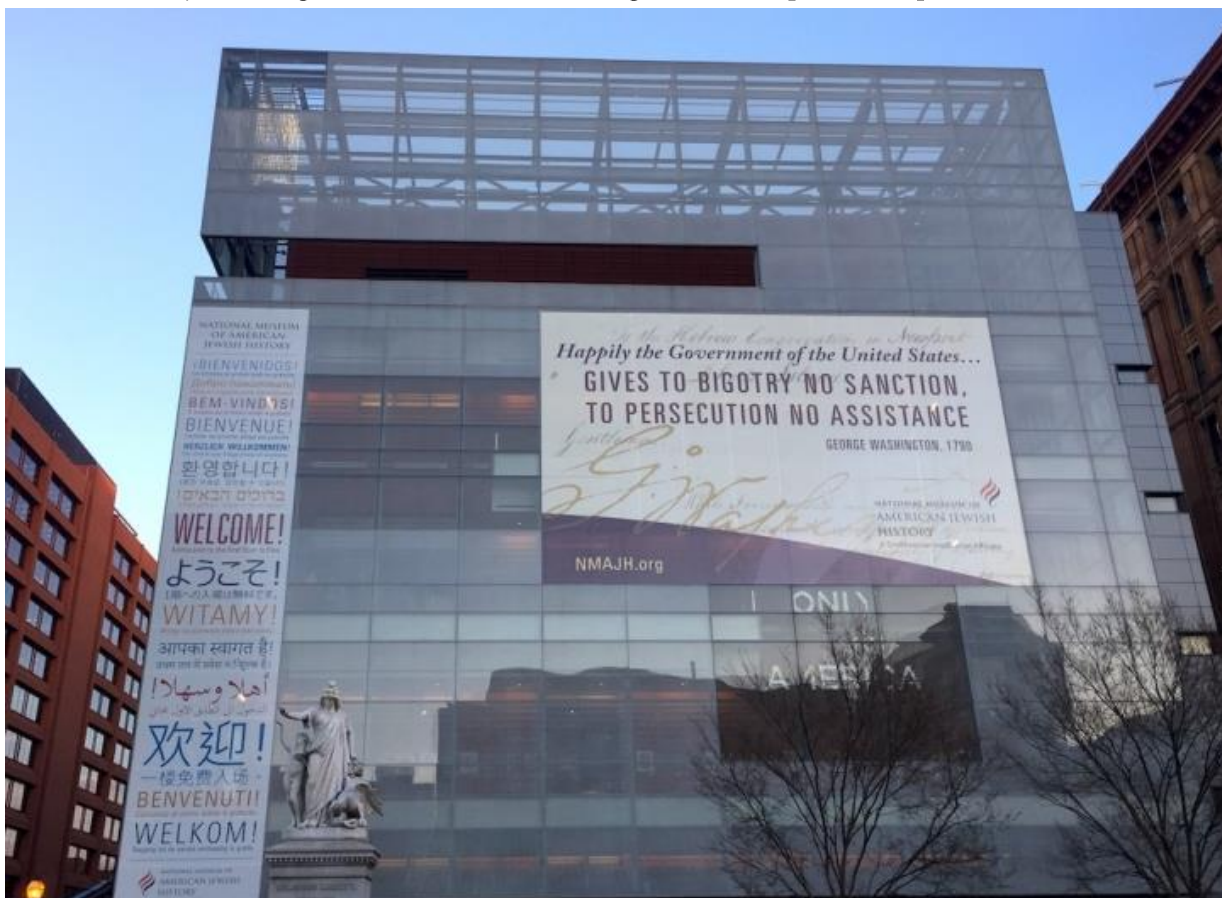
Admittedly, making museums multilingual (and not just via wall text) is a gargantuan task. It’s resource-intensive, requiring the investment of capital as well as time and, in best-case scenarios, incorporation into the museum’s overall strategic, marketing, acquisitions, programming, and hiring plans, says Kathryn Potts, director of education at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where language inclusiveness is a major action item. For the most part, we’ve moved beyond the old model of exhibit planning, in which directors and curators would organize an occasional survey targeted to a particular audience, usually based upon a specific cultural or demographic identity. Now, Potts says, museums engaged in the work of inclusion are looking at culture and language across the full spectrum of acquisitions, planning, programming, and outreach.

Potts, who is also a member of the Whitney’s Equity and Inclusion Committee, says attentive and responsive handling of languages in museums is a structural issue, and one that raises many questions. Which languages should a museum prioritize? Should choices be based, as PMA’s appear to be, on current patrons or on visitors the institution would like to reach? How fully should the selected languages be incorporated into the museum: Wall text? Audio? Catalogues? Tours? Ancillary programming? Outreach?

Potts acknowledges the difficulty of making these decisions and says that one way the Whitney has responded is by focusing on staff development, rather than ad hoc decisions that vary from one exhibit to the next. “Our priority is to build capacity among staff,” she says, “to hire educators and docents who speak the [target] language” and to find the “nexus of language and education” that will allow museumgoers to really experience the museum in a meaningful way — not solely through translation.

Potts offers an example, explaining how the museum picked “voice talent” for the audio guide for a specific exhibit. “It was a fascinating process,” she says of coming to realize that it wasn’t only fluency that would make the guide engaging; just as important was a speaker’s grasp of the target culture. The museum’s ultimate choice was someone who embodied both. In other words: it’s not language alone that makes an experience rich and resonant.

But what happens when an institution doesn’t have the resources for new hires and ambitious, culturally sensitive programming, or is just at the beginning of its strategic planning in this area? Potts says small gestures can still have a significant impact. She points to museum



The façade of the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia (photo courtesy the National Museum of American Jewish History)

websites and banners with the word “Welcome” printed in multiple languages as one example. These, she says, are a way of saying to existing *and* prospective visitors, “We value you and we welcome you.”

Yael Eytan, director of marketing and communications at National Museum of American Jewish History, also in Philadelphia, agrees. She notes that a welcome sign in multiple languages is one of the first and most visible invitations to enter a museum, even when it may still be hard at work figuring out how, exactly, to embrace audiences that are increasingly diverse in every way. “We have a welcome sign on our building in 14 different languages,” she says, adding that admission to the first floor, café, and store are all free. This encourages people to wander in and get a feel for the museum before committing to buying a ticket. If and when they do, they’ll find an array of ways to engage linguistically with the museum. “Right now we have materials in different languages as part of exhibits,” says Eytan, “and in our public programs, we attempt to incorporate other languages, too.” The museum also conducts language-specific tours upon request. Linguistic inclusion, she explains, “is very important to us because we are a museum that’s largely about immigration, and most people who came here at some point spoke other languages, so we want to make everyone feel welcome.”

Of course, the strategies of a single institution won’t work as a one-size-fits-all plan for another, particularly as demographics vary from city to city and institutional finances, staff availability, and a host of other resources must be factored into the equation. And then, too, there is the issue of not assuming that the presence of a particular community signifies that they *would* want to engage with an institution in a language other than English. In Latinx communities in the US, for example, fascinating patterns of language fluency and use may complicate institutions’ decisions about how to invest accordingly ... which brings us back to that PMA survey. If you’re not asking the right questions of the right people, it’s unlikely the answers you receive will reflect the needs and wants of your target audiences. As more museums begin grappling with the issue of multilingual services, community outreach will be a critical tool for ensuring that resources are invested in a way that will be truly useful.

Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910–1950 continues at the *Philadelphia Museum of Art* (2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia) through January 8.