

*Interpreting Historic House Museums.* Edited by Jessica Foy Donnelly. (Walnut Creek, California: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, AltaMira Press, 2002. Pp. viii, 326. Index. Cloth, \$70.00; Paper, \$24.95).

*Adult Museum Programs: Designing Meaningful Experiences.* By Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer and others. (Walnut Creek, California: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, AltaMira Press, 2002. Pp. xxvii, 209. Appendices, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$63.00; Paper, \$24.95).

In a 1972 work, *What Time Is This Place?*, Kevin Lynch underscored the special role of material culture in teaching people about history. "Historical knowledge must be communicated to the public for its enjoyment and education. Words and pictures convey much, but real things make the deepest impression" (51-52). Authors of the books under review here confirm Lynch's judgement as they advance recommendations to museum personnel about how best to use their "real things" in engaging the public with the past. movement, for example, is limited at best. She simply states "the role of

*Interpreting Historic House Museums* had its genesis in two conferences hosted and financed during the 1990s by the McFaddin-Ward House Museum in Beaumont, Texas. Conference speakers—all experienced museum professionals—revised their presentations into the collection of articles that constitute this book. The editor's preliminary observations underscore the import of the not-so-new social history—with its interest in the not-so rich and famous—for those who would chronicle the story of a historic property and all of its inhabitants with balance, dynamism, and the broadest possible appeal. The introduction also summarizes each essay and articulates a common theme: careful scholarship and thorough planning are key in crafting a thoughtful, well-executed interpretation of the tale that a place has to tell.<sup>(3)</sup> Contributors then deliver on the promise that they will offer concrete advice about forging such programs.

Its practical nature in fact is the chief virtue of *Interpreting Historic House Museums*. In chapters whose topics range from landscape interpretation to the achievement of perspective in dealing with issues like gender, from the pros and cons of different types of tours to the re-creation of "moment-in-time" interpretive vignettes, and from the treatment of controversial subjects to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, writers draw on their backgrounds to counsel house museum staff about "creating experiences and telling stories within the *context* (emphasis mine) of the lives represented by the house and its collection and about things that mean something to visitors."<sup>(9)</sup> Mere recitation of facts about objects and people will not do, they say, when the objective is "making what ... (the house) says interesting and relevant to the people it serves."<sup>(10)</sup> Rich in case studies, this book—like the symposia that spawned it—targets "the small, understaffed, and underfunded" (3) institution. It holds useful information for house museums of all types, however, while its integrative approach to interpretation renders many of its lessons pertinent to an assortment of historic sites.

Wide applicability also characterizes *Adult Museum Programs*, which discloses the findings of a Department of Education-funded, nationwide study (1996-99) "to explore the nature of museum programs for adults and identify what makes such programs not only successful, but transformative."<sup>(ix)</sup> The value of this veritable handbook for museum personnel lies mainly its focus on the *adult* learner, an important user of museums who nonetheless can get lost in the shuffle as institutions tend to gear their educational offerings to schoolchildren and families. (xix, 86, 104) To set the stage, one of the lead researchers details the parameters of the project, in which team members scrutinized—through interview and observation—"a variety of successful adult ... programs" (xx) in museums of different kinds and sizes. A handy summary of the study's conclusions in the introductory remarks then reports

that effective museum programs provide "first and foremost a learning opportunity." (xxii) But the coauthors also stress the acquisition of "new perspectives, attitudes, insights, and appreciations" (xxii) as a benchmark of fine programming for adults; as they put it, such programming "change(s) adult lives." (xxiv) The subsequent chapters form a "how-to" manual with abundant case studies and one whose insights into teaching and learning has relevance for educators in any number of situations and venues.

A fundamental premise of *Adult Museum Programs* is that adult participants value "experiences, memorable events, and activities that engage individuals in very personal ways." (19) While *Interpreting Historic House Museums* discusses diverse age groups, its emphasis on the creation of "experiences through which ... visitors can actively learn ... and engage in the re-created past in believable ways" (3) echoes the former work's admonition to museum education staff: make programs personal to make them meaningful. Presenting numerous examples of how to promote that goal, both volumes merit inclusion in the reference collections of the facilities that they would serve.

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