Multimedia Awards for Museums: MUSE, A Case Study

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Introduction

Multimedia installations, podcasts, blogs, interactive kiosks, image databases, audio tours, video walls, CD-ROMs, and websites. Museums are continually finding creative new ways, such as these examples, to use media and technology to better serve their audiences. Integrating technology into interpretation, exhibitions, and marketing strategies has become a significant element in meeting a museum's mission. Developing and carrying out projects involving technology require new skills and collaborations in the museum, and museum staff is called upon to think of new ways to convey information and to understand audience capabilities, needs, and expectations. The recognition of excellence and innovation in the concept, design, and production of museum media projects is critical for museums, museum professionals, the designers and producers, and the audiences.

Since 1990 the Media and Technology Committee of the American Association of Museums (AAM) has honored outstanding media projects created by and for museums with an annual awards presentation. Known as the MUSE Awards, winners are selected in a variety of categories based on a range of criteria. From films, videos, and CD-ROMs to blogs, cell phone tours, and e-mail campaigns, a wide-range of media formats are submitted from all types of museums to this awards competition. The MUSE awards ceremony, held at AAM's Annual Meeting, attracts museum professionals from around the world. The award-winning projects demonstrate creativity in content, design, and use of technology as well as the highest quality production standards.

The MUSE awards competition and others like it, strive to recognize the innovative work in the ever-growing and rapidly changing field of media and technology.

A Brief Look Back

As early as the 1960s media was being used in museums for educational and interpretive purposes in the form of filmstrips and audio guides. Video, radio, audiotape, and slideshows would soon make an appearance, and media was on its way to becoming integrated into the museum. By the late 1970s members of AAM were formulating an Administrative Committee—the Nonprint Media Committee—to discover how museums were using media. The initial goals of the committee included an assessment of the museum community's use of nonprint media and fostering, "within the museum community, a clear understanding of the appropriate uses of nonprint media and the potential value of archival nonprint materials." They also included in their mission the importance of "encouraging involvement and innovation in the field." A record of the proceedings of an early meeting of the committee at an AAM conference in 1979, outlines potential program ideas for the committee including the need to "recognize outstanding contributions to the nonprint field."

The importance of recognizing what museum professionals were accomplishing in the field of media development and production was clearly acknowledged. Over the years, the Nonprint Media Committee became the Media Committee, which in turn became what is now the Media and

1 Smithsonian Institution Archives, Records, American Association of Museums, 1906-1985, Record Unit 7450, Box 32.
Technology standing professional committee of AAM—the committee name and mission evolved with the times.

The original AAM committee, per their charter, set out to recognize outstanding contributions to the field, however it was in the early 1990s that the MUSE awards—awards that honor excellence in all varieties of media programs produced by or for museums—were formulated and promoted by the committee to identify the distinctive qualities and characteristics of media projects. One of the early goals was to call attention to these projects—the films, videos, interactive kiosks—not just as a contributing factor to an exhibition, for example, but to acknowledge them in their own right as distinct entities requiring a different set of skills and collaborations and engendering a new way of looking at content.

Challenges of Media

Over the last few decades, the incorporation of media and technology into the museum in education, interpretation, communication, promotion, and data management has increased rapidly. As Selma Thomas expressed in her 1997 essay Mediated Realities, "museums have always helped their visitors appreciate the value of objects, primarily by facilitating a direct encounter between visitor and object. New tools make possible new relationships and new insights. In the late 1980s, electronic media was embraced as a convenient and cost-effective tool." Her statement was not without qualification though, as later in her text she remarks that incorporating media in the museum was not always an easy road, as some museum staff might need to be assured that the effort is worth the time and money, while others may need to be convinced that using the latest, flashiest technology will not necessarily meet the goals of the overall project.

The effort involved in integrating media into museum programs still exists today, however museums have come a long way in the last few decades. Despite the many challenges, a broad variety of media projects are created and produced by and for museums today. From linear videos and immersive interactive installations in the museum to the extended experiences of online activities, cell phone tours, and podcasts outside the museum, innovative concepts and creative technical achievements are continually being developed and produced. The need to recognize these high-quality achievements is great, and programs such as the MUSE awards competition is established to do just that.

The Awards Process: A Myriad of Questions

Many questions arise in developing an awards program. Will entrants be self or peer nominated? Will there be entry fees? What information is needed in the entry application for appropriate judging? How will the information be gathered? How long should the entry process last? Who is eligible to enter? How will entries be divided into categories to be judged? On what criteria will entries be judged? Will project or museum budget be considered in the judging? How will entries be reviewed? What will the criteria be for the review material that is sent to the judges? How will the judges be selected? How will the competition be advertised? What elements will make up the award ceremony? How will the winners be notified? How will the winners be publicized? How will the award-winning entries be made accessible to the museum community? What type of awards will the winners receive?

These questions have been asked, thought out, and answered, sometimes in different ways, in relation to the MUSE awards competition since it began. As the MUSE awards chair from

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2 Telephone conversations with Ruth Perlin and Selma Thomas, September 2007, regarding the MUSE awards in the 1990s.

2005-2007, I was able to adopt some of the established traditions, and also continue the evolution of the MUSE awards process, along with other members of the Media and Technology Committee Board, to best reflect our current times.

One driving force behind the awards is to honor best practices and acknowledge innovative accomplishments that not only inspire conversation and creativity inside and outside the museum community, but also advance museum goals of understanding and communicating with their audiences. Keeping the competition relevant is critical, and determining categories and criteria that reflect current museum practice and standards is of extreme importance. A continual debate among MUSE organizers has been whether to judge the entries by specific media (e.g., websites, DVDs, CD-ROMS, video, etc.) or by discipline (e.g., art, science, history, etc.). This has never been an easy issue to resolve, and this past year the MUSE committee decided on a new approach to determining entry categories. In an acknowledgment of the proliferation of "user-generated" content and a nod to Web 2.0 practice, we invited our participants to assign their own entry category in the hope that this process would capture projects that might defy the old standards or combine technologies in new and innovative ways. From these self-generated categories, of which there were 53 in 2007, the MUSE committee defined 14 new broader categories from which to judge. This process of determining new categories was time consuming, but rewarding, and we felt that we understood better what type of media and technology projects museums were designing for their audiences and how the field was changing. Our new categories reflected a mixture of media-specific and discipline- or goal-based themes—for example, Interactive Kiosks was one category, while Teaching and Outreach was another. One new category, Extended Experience, particularly reflected a growing desire by the museum to establish a long-lasting relationship with its audiences by extending the museum experience beyond the physical building with the use of technology.

Criteria for judging and selecting appropriate jurors for each category are also critical factors in an awards process and are based on the underlying concepts and considerations of media development. Questions such as why are we using media, who is our target audience, what do we hope to accomplish, what type of technology is appropriate, how accessible will the final product be to its intended audiences and increasing, how will the results of the goal be measured and the outcome be evaluated, are among the topics discussed in the creation of a media and technology project. These are also the topics used to judge the entries, along with aesthetic and interface design; functionality; appropriateness of content; production quality; and overall appeal. Jurors are selected from museum professionals and experts in related fields, who are not only knowledgeable in the topic area of the category they are judging, but are also familiar with current museum trends and activities.

Entry categories and judging criteria are key to a successful awards process, as are many other elements. The many questions that arise in carrying out a competition, some of which are set out above, are too numerous to address here, however a few remain a continual source of discussion among the MUSE committee such as: 1) the need for entry fees; 2) whether to judge projects based on their budgets; and 3) how best to review the entries, particularly those that are interactive. 1) Fees: In brief, the MUSE Awards competition has always been a self-nominating procedure that requires an entry fee. This began as a way for the committee to sustain its activities and this fee structure continues today, with some variation, as a source of income for the committee. Whether or not to offer members a discounted fee as a benefit of membership has also been debated, and last year for the first time, all entrants submitted the same, much-reduced, fee. 2) Project Budget: Media and technology projects being created in the museum community encompass a wide-range of funding and resource allocation. A small in-house project developed by one or two people versus a large production requiring multiple media elements for an interpretative interactive installation will have disparate budget needs. How or whether to account for the budget contrast is an ongoing question. This year the MUSE competition requested a budget amount as part of the application form and it was unofficially considered in
the judging process. In the future, this factor may be looked at more closely; although a method of incorporating it has not yet been established. 3) Review material: The review of the entries by the judges is another challenge for the awards process, particularly for in-museum immersive, interactive experiences. The ideal solution would be to have enough resources for the judges to travel to the various locations and interact with the productions themselves. However, since that is not really feasible, the need for a review copy to simulate the user’s experience is most desirable. Developing criteria for the review copies that do not put too much burden on the entrant, and also offer the judges a true representation of the project is an ongoing challenge.

Facing these questions and continually reviewing and evaluating the awards process are critical to the success of the program. The reward to the organizers and participants, in turn, are of great importance and service to the field. Exhibiting the award-winning entries and publicizing them to the field extends the contribution of these projects to the museum community. The publicity for the MUSE award winners begins with the ceremony itself at the AAM Annual meeting, where the winners are called up to accept the plaque or certificate acknowledging their achievement. A "Marketplace of Ideas," at which the winners demonstrate their projects to conference attendees, offers a wonderful opportunity for other museum professionals and media producers to see a showcase of the most creative concepts, innovative use of media, and technically savvy projects produced in the field. The names of the award winning projects are also published in Museum News, the AAM monthly magazine. The winners are encouraged to download a press release template from the Media and Technology committee’s website, so that their individual institutions can easily publicize receipt of the award. The awards competition, the showcase of winners, and the publicity are all factors that add to the growth and recognition of media and technology in the museum field.

A Selection of Recent Winners

The 18th annual MUSE Awards competition received almost 200 applications from institutions around the world. Entry to the awards requires that a museum or associated individual be a member of the American Association of Museums. Forty awards were presented at the awards ceremony at the 2007 AAM annual meeting—10 gold, 10 silver, 10 bronze and 9 honorable mention plus a special ingenuity award (the Jim Blackaby Ingenuity Award), which was introduced in 2004. The winning entries this past year excelled in the use of media for interpretation, interactivity, online and offline integration, attracting new audiences, new distribution methods, addressing social issues, extending and personalizing the museum experience, and the appropriate and innovative use of technology. The following are short summaries of a selection of these recent winners (arranged by category), as an example of the variety of media and technology projects that museums are creating today to reach diverse audiences in the museum and through extended experiences. Full descriptions, judges comments, images, and credits are available on the Media and Technology Committee website.

Audio and Visual Tours: The Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, with Acoustiguide, Inc., produced an award-winning audio tour that incorporated a diverse set of narratives from the local community, going beyond the voice of the museum expert to convey its message to its audiences. An iPod tour of an exhibition (Saint Louis Art Museum, with Schwartz and Associates Creative), an audio tour for teens (Museum of Modern Art, NY, with Acoustiguide, Inc.), and a city tour based on blues music (Chicago Office of Tourism, with Acoustiguide, Inc.) were also winners in this category.

Extended Experience: The Luce Foundation Center for American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum (with Mediatrons Interactive Studio, Academy Studios, GVI), and Sonett Media

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4 http://www.mediaandtechnology.org/muse/index.html
Group), was honored for its achievement in connecting on-site exhibition kiosks and at-home website visits. The judges were impressed with its in-depth content and well-rounded suite of development and communications tools that encourage visitors to document and share their museum experience. Another winner, mission:CLIMATE Interactive Knowledge Card (Swedish Museum of Natural History, with ahluze Interactive), hoped to empower visitors to extend and personalize their contact with the museum by tagging content of interest in the museum and creating a personalized web experience for home. The Chicago Museum of Science and Industry (with The Iona Group) won for a DVD that allows visitors a way to continue to explore a submarine exhibited in the museum—offering views of the boat that can't be accessed in person. The podcast series of the San Jose Museum of Art was also a winner in this category, extending its interpretive programs outside of the museum.

Games: This new category—one which we expect will grow—yielded winners who developed creative ways to explore the usefulness and importance of maps in everyday life (The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, with Bean Creative), a way to discover the diversity of frog life in the Taiwanese environment (National Museum of Natural Science, Taiwan, with Bright Ideas Design Co., Ltd.), a role-playing adventure to help a work of art find its home (Smithsonian American Art Museum, with Bean Creative), and an interactive learning game about butterflies and their habitats (The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, with Night Kitchen Interactive and Metcalfe Architecture and Design).

Interactive Kiosks: "Be a Photographer," an interactive kiosk produced by the Newseum in Washington, D.C., allows visitors to become quick-thinking photojournalists on the scene of a breaking news story by selecting locations, taking pictures and choosing which photo appears on the front page. It immerses the user in the subject matter of the museum. Other winners in this category included "Pizza Run" (New Mexico Museum of Natural History, with WEATHERHEAD Experience Design Group), which offers visitors a direct experience in software programming; "The Lagoda of New Bedford," a kiosk with a 3D virtual tour of the world's largest ship model and opportunities to explore a myriad of related features, such as logbooks, crew accounts, letters, paintings, prints, photos, scrimshaw, music, and dances (New Bedford Whaling Museum, with Second Story Interactive Studios); and "Black Holes: Gravity's Relentless Pull" (Space Telescope Science Institute Office of Public Outreach, with Roeland van der Marel, Gijs Verdoes Kleijn, and eduweb) that explains the astronomy and physics of black holes through interactivity, video, and audio features—presenting complicated information in a visitor-friendly way.

Interpretive Interactive Installations: A multiplayer experience developed by the Museo Interactivo de Economia, Mexico (with Magian Design Studio), educates visitors about the forces that influence stock market prices, recreating the energy of a contemporary stock market through a guided group activity in the museum using handheld devices. Other winners in this category included an innovative interactive autopsy slab, video presentations, and other interactives that brought to life the history of forensic medicine (National Library of Medicine, Maryland, with Second Story Interactive Studios); extensive technology additions and improvements for a building expansion (Denver Art Museum); and a 30-foot long video wall, kiosks and interactive installations to engage visitors and groups in learning about First Amendment rights (McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum, Chicago, with Second Story Interactive Studios).

Multimedia Installations: "Rise of the Machines—Artifact Theater" (New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, with WEATHERHEAD Experience Design Group), an immersive multimedia experience, won in this category for its combination of motion graphics, multi-track audio, music, archival video and theatrical lighting, in an installation that humorously tells the story of the beginning of the personal computer industry. Another winner, "The Wall" (New-York Historical Society, with KPC Design's Experience Media Group, American History Workshop, and Northern Light Productions) opens up a new window into the lives of slaves in early New York
City. As visitors look into an installation of a well they first hear and then see the reflections of four female slaves in the water below. As the slaves discuss their daily lives, they look back at the visitor. Another winner in this category was “Blue Planet Theater” at the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center in Atlanta, Georgia, (with Van Sickie & Rolleri, Cortina Productions, Mad Systems, and Exhibit Concepts) that provides visitors with an educational experience about protecting the precious resource of water. Its technical achievements, according to the judges, set a standard that should be used as a benchmark for future development of these experiences. “Tribute” (Tribute WTC Visitor Center, with Monadnock Media, Inc.), three film installations about the people impacted by 9/11 also won in this category.

**Online Presence:** This category’s winners included “The Calligraphic World of Mi Fu’s Art” (National Palace Museum, Taiwan), an elegant, bilingual website that appeals equally to intellectual, visual and auditory sensibilities; “Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting” (National Gallery of Art, Washington), an online demonstration of how conservators and curators use infrared reflectograms and x-radiography to study the underdrawings and compositional shifts made beneath the surface of the paintings; “Extremophiles in Kamchatka” (Exploratorium), reveals real-world processes for gathering scientific evidence through slideshows and video collections in both English and Russian; and Arago: People, Postage, and the Post (National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution, with Second Story Interactive Studios) a powerful, in-depth online resource for searching, viewing, investigating, and gathering stamps in the museum’s collection.

**PR and Development:** Television commercials, e-mail campaigns, and a donor development video were winners in this category in 2007. The “Melbourne Museum Dinosaur Television Commercial Campaign” (Museum Victoria with Act3Animation Pty Ltd.) appealed to the judges because of its high-quality graphics and animation, clear message, and sense of humor. The Frist Center for the Visual Arts (with Paramore Redd Online Marketing) created a special website to promote an Egyptian exhibition that allowed visitors to send an e-mail in hieroglyphics to their friends and family—a fun and educational activity that also served as a viral marketing tool. Also looking to e-mail as a marketing device, the Minneapolis Museum of Art developed a project that centered on the creation of single-topic e-mail newsletters to engage specific audiences more effectively. Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh (with New Perspective) won for its “Building the Future” campaign video—a short, inspirational video that expressed its message of the importance of the museums and their place in the community through powerful visual imagery.

**Teaching and Outreach:** The Museum of Science, Boston, a winner in this category, goes beyond the museum experience with a weekly podcast series on science and technology that brings cutting-edge, unbiased research to the public. The Conner Prairie Museum, Indiana (with Creative Street Media Group), focused on an in-house audience with an innovative training tool, “The Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences” DVD, geared to front-line staff and volunteers, who are actively engaging guests in learning through conversation in the museum. The judges believed that this DVD “represents a new and successful approach in sharing and demonstrating best practices” and complimented it as “an amazing compilation and demonstration of museum education philosophy, theory, and practice.” Another award-winning interactive DVD, produced by The Carnegie Center for Art & History, Indiana (with Solid Light, Inc.), brings the history of the Underground Railroad and its effects on the local community to life. The producers state, “by humanizing this story and bringing a central facet of local history to life, the project serves as a springboard for discussion and a multitude of educational outreach programs.” Also winning in this category was an electronic field trip produced by Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. This interactive classroom, “Remember the Ladies,” a nationally televised hour long story that introduces students nationwide to the compelling stories of ordinary people who created America, uses primary sources, web adventures, e-mail and discussion forums to encourage students to interact with historians, experts, teachers and one another to debate and discuss the past and
how it affects the future.

Video: The winners in this category included an animated folktale (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, with Cortina Productions); a tightly-scripted, collage-style survey of 250+ years of the history of Minneapolis (Minneosta Historical Society's Mill City Museum); and a film about Muhammad Ali's illustrious professional boxing career (Muhammad Ali Center, with Cortina Productions). The film about Ali is presented in the museum so that visitors stand above and around the screen and view it by looking down through an opening in the floor—giving viewers the same thrill and excitement of watching a live boxing match.

Jim Blackaby Ingenuity Award: This award was introduced at the 2004 MUSE awards ceremony as a tribute to a board member of the Media and Technology Committee, who had passed away in the summer of 2003. Conceived in his memory, this award recognizes a project that exemplifies the power of creative imagination in the use of media and technology—a project that has a powerful effect on its audience, and one that stands above the others in inventiveness and quality. The winner is selected from submissions to the MUSE awards of all categories and does not have to be a winner within the category to which it was submitted. In 2007 "Sonic Scenery: Music for Collections" (Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County) was awarded this honor for its creation of an innovative in-museum experience that allows visitors to explore the collection while listening to original, collections-inspired compositions on personal audio players. Compositions were created in a variety of styles by mostly local musicians responding to the objects within the galleries. The project was recognized for its interdisciplinary approach and acknowledgment of various learning styles among visitors, as well as its use of new distribution methods such as MySpace, YouTube, and iTunes, to reach a wider audience.

The Benefits of Awards

The MUSE awards competition and others like it are significant in many ways to the content creators, media developers, the museum, and the museum community at large. The development of media projects often requires the work of collaborative teams of people, specific skill sets, and an appreciation of new ways of looking at collections, exhibitions, and the extension of the museum into the local and global community through the use of media and technology. Creating a museum blog, for instance, might involve many professionals across the museum. According to Jeff Gates, managing editor for the Smithsonian American Art Museum's blog Eye Level (a 2006 MUSE award-winner), the creation of the blog "documents the extraordinary collaboration between curators, conservators, handlers, historians, enthusiasts, critics, exhibition and new media designers, and of course bloggers..." He goes on to say, "Producing a blog requires a high level of team work that touches departments across the museum—from developing story ideas to final publication." The collaborative nature of media projects is important for museum professionals to recognize. Museum educators and curators creating content, exhibition designers determining placement of a kiosk, technology specialists programming applications, as well as editorial experts, graphic designers, and fundraisers may easily find themselves part of a media project development team. The award then benefits a whole host of professionals across the institution personally and as a team.

In interviewing some recent MUSE winners, the importance of receiving this award includes and goes beyond the recognition of internal staff accomplishments to encompass validation of a museum’s creative concepts, proof of appropriate resource allocation, increased publicity, and a greater possibility of outside collaborations and funding opportunities. According to Sally Newkirk, Director of Carnegie Center for Art & History in Indiana, "this award has had a huge impact on not just our morale, but also on how we are perceived by others. I believe that receiving this award has opened doors for us because as a small museum, we do not have the name recognition

5 http://www.mediaandtechnology.org/muse/2006muse_twoway.html
that the larger institutions enjoy. The MUSE award is a sort of “stamp of approval” that others recognize and respect, especially those in the media. The media recognition we’ve received is invaluable and something we would never have been able to afford. We were recently invited to install our multimedia program, Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage: Men and Women of the Underground Railroad at the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, England. While the planning for this started before receiving the award, I believe that the recognition by our colleagues that the award represents sealed the deal."

Georgina Bath, manager of the Luce Foundation Center of American Art, states that “winning the gold Muse award for the Luce Foundation Center kiosks and related websites in 2007 meant a great deal to the staff at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and to the producers at Mediatrope. I think that both the Museum and the producers underestimated the true scale of the project. Battling Smithsonian policy, staff departures, unforeseen network changes, and an array of interlinking databases each with their own issues—it was a miracle that we had a product to present to the public at all! Winning the award told me that it was worth all of those late nights and hours of frustration, especially when visitors don’t realize what goes into the apparently simple and seamless interface. The award helps to reward the efforts of the people behind the scenes and I only wish I could display a plaque in every corner of the Museum.”

Bruce Wyman, Director of New Technologies at the Denver Art Museum, also believes that the award recognizes the efforts of those behind the scenes and validates the museum’s approach to its project. He reports that “Because the team working on our submission was so small and almost entirely in-house, it was nice to receive some external validation from the rest of the museum community that our approach and efforts were competitive with projects five to ten times the cost of ours. One of our underlying goals is to set a different standard ‘or what’s possible in museums, by museums, that’s innovative and unique. The award helped validate that we’re generally headed in the right direction.”

Another 2007 Muse winner states, “When a peer from the museum community congratulates you on your work by giving you an award—then you feel like you did something, many things, very well. You feel encouraged to find new ways to use technology to deliver your messages, to reach your audiences.”

**Conclusion**

Media projects in museums have become an ever-increasing way for museums to advance their educational goals, to reach a diverse public, to connect to their audiences in meaningful ways, and develop long-lasting relationships. Recognition of the award-winning multimedia projects that support the evolving mission of museums today, not only acknowledges the hard work of the creators and producers, but also energizes the field with new ideas, new concepts, new ways of integrating media and technology into the museum, and new ways of reaching audiences.