From Whose Point of View?
Looking Through the Eyes of a Curator

One of the main responsibilities of a curator hired by a museum is to arrange museum exhibits. It is the responsibility of the curator to decide what goes into an exhibit and how the items should be displayed. For example, for an exhibit on hip-hop music, a museum may have hundreds of artifacts that could be shown—photos of concerts, CDs, magazine articles about the growth of hip-hop, statements from people who were affected by this kind of music, and so on. It is the job of the curator to decide which of these artifacts will be displayed because there is room for only a few of them. It is also the curator’s job to decide where to place the items. Which one will catch the eye of the visitor first? Which ones should be large, and which ones small? When curators make these decisions, they are making choices about significance, what is important. They are also usually making decisions about values. For example, if the majority of quotes that the curator uses about hip-hop discuss violence promoted by the music instead of other things about the songs, the curator is basically portraying a negative impression of the music.

There are complications in trying to determine the point of view of the curator. One complication is that it depends on what group you’re looking at. For example, building the missions in California might have been a positive step for Spaniards coming north from Mexico, but it wasn’t a good time for Native Americans who were forced to work for the missionaries. Curators might have objects that show both of these things, but you, as the viewer, will form an overall impression about the Mission period in California based on the curator’s choices and your own previous knowledge and experience.

Most curators try to present multiple sides of a topic—and in the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), this is almost always the case. In fact, OMCA did something that few museums have done. The Museum “co-curated” many of their exhibits in the History Gallery. This means that not only a Museum staff person but also members from the community met together to decide how some exhibits should look and what objects should go in it. However, even though curators and community members try to present more than one perspective, they still have their own points of view. By looking carefully at an exhibit, you can sometimes identify the perspective of the curators.

It will be your job to examine different parts of OMCA and try to determine the points of view of the curators. You will then draw your own conclusions about what you observe and how the curators’ choices influence your own point of view.

Point of View Worksheet

I am examining the time period of: (Circle the correct one.)

- The Gold Rush
- Building of the Railroads
- Building Modern California
- World War II
What evidence is presented in this exhibit that shows that opportunities opened up for people during this time period? (You might note for which people.)

1. _________________________________________________________________________________________
2. _________________________________________________________________________________________
3. _________________________________________________________________________________________
4. _________________________________________________________________________________________

What evidence is presented in this exhibit that shows that life was difficult for people during this time period? (You might note for which people.)

1. _________________________________________________________________________________________
2. _________________________________________________________________________________________
3. _________________________________________________________________________________________
4. _________________________________________________________________________________________

Noticing the Placement of the Exhibit
As you enter the exhibit, what seem to be the things that first catch your eye? Why? Are they large? Colorful? Exciting? List at least three things.

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What seem to be the things that take you a while to notice? Why? List at least three things.

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The Curators’ Point of View
After looking at the exhibit, including the placement of objects, do you think the curators generally thought this was a time of opportunity or a difficult time for people in California? Why?

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Your Point of View

After looking at the exhibit, do you think this was mostly a time of opportunity or a difficult time for the people of California? Why?

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Write your answer in the form of a paragraph that contains a claim, uses evidence, and then reaches a conclusion.

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What questions do you have about this exhibit?

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Follow-Up Questions

After looking at all four exhibits and based on the evidence you found, do you think the curators think that the history of California is a positive or negative one? Give two or three examples to support your conclusion. If you think they thought it was a mixed history, give examples of that as well.

Your essay should include:

• An introduction that has a claim or thesis
• Paragraphs that give evidence to support your claim
• Counter-evidence (if available)
• A conclusion

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What questions do you have about curating an exhibit or about California history after your trip to the Oakland Museum of California?