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Panels of Power: Exploring the Role of Credit Panels in Museums

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Keywords museum, credit panels, power, hierarchy, exhibition labels

Abstract The topic of power has long been discussed in museums, often in relation to indigenous peoples, representation, and colonialism. While these topics are relevant and important, museum employees have also recently expressed their frustration with existing internal institutional power structures and have begun unionizing, posting on anonymous social media complaint accounts, and filling out salary transparency surveys. As discontent with the traditional hierarchical structure of museums grows, this article asks readers to consider the role of credit panels in reinforcing these structures. While credit panels are widely recognized as a basic part of many exhibitions, this article considers the implicit role that they play in propagating potentially oppressive and undesirable power structures in museums, and analyzes several specific credit panels. Ultimately, this article argues that in order for museums to confront and eventually overcome these power structures, they need to recognize the role that credit panels, however implicit or unintentional, play in normalizing power structures which so many are now fighting against.

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Introduction

My dad has always been a huge fan of The Lord of the Rings, so it was no surprise when he made us sit through all 30 minutes of credits in the extended versions of the movies. We excitedly watched the names of the cast, director, producer, sound, lights, costume design, etc., roll by and by as my father wiggled in his chair, anxiously awaiting the words, "Lord of the Rings Fan Club..." –Hannah Wang

Like cartoons, movies, and theater, museums tell stories through visual means. They use color, light, perspective, and transitions to capture the attention of visitors and move them through a story or journey. They build emotion and create visual experiences that ideally will endure long past the visit. However, unlike many forms of visual media, museums do not

usually have long ending credits. Instead, after visitors finish their experience, they most often only have the opportunity to glance at a brief credit panel near the exit.

Credit panels in museums are theoretically no different than the rolling credits in visual media; they both provide recognition to those who contributed to the final project. Even though credit panels are widely recognized as a given in exhibitions, we consider the overlooked and implicit role that credit panels play in museums. We argue that even though credit panels seem neutral, they reinforce potentially oppressive and unwanted power structures in museums.

Power in the Museum

Questions of power have long been discussed in the museum field. The most common way that power is understood in museums concerns repatriation and decolonization. Anthropology museums in particular grew out of the colonization activities of primarily western countries—and now many art, history, and anthropology museums house looted, or at the very least questionably sourced, objects from around the world. As George Stocking clearly states, “There are relations implicit in the constitution of museums which may be defined as relations of ‘power.’”¹ Beginning in the 1980s, perhaps following the trend of studies of power in general in anthropology and the social sciences, many began to question the role of museums and the potential harm that patronizing museum exhibitions can have on indigenous peoples.² Even though these discussions have led to some reform, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States and other similar legislations around the world (such as France’s recent bill to return looted artifacts to Senegal and Benin³), museums today still struggle with overcoming these and other long-held power structures.

In the United States, following public outrage against monuments commemorating Confederate military leaders, museums again questioned how they may or may not be reinforcing racism and outdated power structures.⁴ At a round table discussion hosted by the Council for Museum Anthropology at the American Anthropological Association meeting in 2017, Gwendolyn Saul and Diana Marsh declared (in summarizing Jodi Byrd⁵), “It is time to question how these monuments continue to inhabit public spaces and normalize racism, first by ignoring the Indigenous lands upon which the United States exists and second by choosing to minimize the impact of a long trajectory of industrial capitalism.”⁶ Even more recently, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and social movement that were sparked by the filming and publicization of the murder of George Floyd by police has again caused museums to reconsider their role in propagating racism, classicism, and colonialism.

In unprecedented ways, non-senior level museum employees are also publicly expressing dissatisfaction with their institutions and the museum field in general. The popular Instagram account @changethemuseum encourages followers to anonymously submit experiences of racism or abuse in museums. This account exposes many examples of racist, sexist, classist behavior being practiced by museum professionals, especially upper management. For example, one post says, “It’s infuriating to hear the leadership at my arts organization talk about dumping money into all kinds of new projects and initiatives for 2021 while they’ve used revenue losses as an excuse to not give their workers any sort of

financial bonus or pay raise for keeping the organization functioning throughout the pandemic.”⁷ In more public news, several museums in the US have unionized for many reasons, “ranging from a mandate to diversify staff to the rising cost of living in urban centers.”⁸ Though speaking specifically about unionizing amongst art museums, this news article points out how power structures are being challenged within the museum field: “Because of this wealth gap, and because art institutions regularly celebrate critiques of capitalism and power abuses in art while failing to engage with the concerns of their own low-paid employees, unionization feels like a critical culture shift.”⁹

We argue that the continuation of these abuses and the frustrations of employees is related to credit panels, which visually reinforce power structures. In this article, we explore the role of credit panels, an underrated and unexplored, yet important mirror of power structures in museums. As Marsh and Saul say, “As the common cliché goes, everyone should have a seat at the table. We argue that everyone should be invited to help build the table, too.”¹⁰ We take their conclusion a step further and argue that we need to also consider how credit is or is not given to those seated at the metaphorical table.

What is a Credit Panel?

Credit panels are used to “recognize the contributions and efforts of all the people who worked on the exhibition ... as well as for reference and accountability.”¹¹ Usually placed at the beginning or end of an exhibition, credit panels may contain a list of individuals that took part in the creation of the exhibition, including sponsors, staff, volunteers, organizations, and communities. Whether it was in the form of financial aid, research and resources, design, or physical labor, acknowledgement is given for their contribution to the exhibition. The design of these panels varies, and often match or closely mirror the style of the exhibition. Museums seem to generally agree on what a credit panel is and how it should be used. However, even though credit panels are considered important in museums, they are underrepresented in museum literature, especially compared to the many books and guides on introduction panels, other text panels, or object labels.

In our review of available credit panel information, we examined more than ten books on exhibition labels and museum exhibitions, and none of them sufficiently addressed or provided guidelines for the creation or purpose of credit panels.¹² We were also unable to locate a statement on credit panels by the American Alliance of Museums. The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) does offer some guidance on credit panels as a means to provide civility, marketing, interpretation, and transparency. They “help build and sustain critical relationships and make clear that we understand the value of promoting good manners and a culture of civility both within our institutions and in the community at large.”¹³ The marketing side of credit panels is responsible for acknowledging the involvement of the community with the museum and vice versa. In addition, like a reference or citation guide, credit panels not only offer information for the public to deepen “their understanding of the subject under consideration,” but also gives validation to the information presented in the exhibition.¹⁴ Finally, the AASLH suggests that credit panels are important because they provide transparency about the information provided by the museum.

Linda Norris, a Senior Specialist of Methodology and Practice for the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, comments on this topic in a social media survey. The object of the survey was to obtain credit panel samples and any comments from museums about who and what they do or do not recognize on their credit panels. In her survey, she received images of credit panels from a variety of museums in places including Finland, the Netherlands, and the United States. In her findings, the amount of information and recognition on the panels varied from museum to museum, and so did the reasoning:

“It's a complicated creative process and that process is made of real live people, working together.” Other museums felt that there was only a need to recognize the contributing sponsors of the exhibit. “We seem to fall on the no need to print a thank you for doing your job. I don't see how you can thank exhibit staff without acknowledging development staff who raised the funds, education staff who carry out programming for the duration of the exhibit, marketing staff who make sure we're covered in the press, etc. We publicly acknowledge exhibit staff at opening event where donors and sponsors are present. We reserve panels for sponsors and donors.”¹⁵

In this post, Norris exposes differing ideas about the purpose of a credit panel—to some, panels are a nice way to recognize the work of many; to others, credit panels are not necessary for staff recognition. Between the AASLH, Linda Norris, and the lack of information in other museum literature, it is clear that the purpose and structure of credit panels are not uniformly understood within the museum field.

Methods: The Exhibitions and their Museums

As part of a larger research project on museum exhibitions, author Hannah Wang surveyed and conducted observational research in over twenty-five museum exhibitions in a metropolitan area of the eastern United States. Data for this article specifically focuses on credit panels from four of these exhibitions. Each of these exhibitions is historical or anthropological in subject matter, and therefore our observations, analysis, and conclusions may not be directly applicable to other types of museums such as science, art, and zoos, though we still expect our conclusions to be broadly relatable. While these credit panels are also all from museums in the United States, our conclusions are likely applicable to museums around the world, based on the international responses to Norris' project. In addition to this study, we reviewed those described by Norris and observed the four museums funded by our university. However, these were only used for contextual research purposes and will not be specifically addressed in this paper.

After initial examination of the four selected credit panels, we systematically analyzed the content, form, messaging, design, and placement of these credit panels, using data analysis software and coding for emergent themes and patterns. Three of the four exhibitions and their credit panels which will be discussed are from larger history and ethnographic museums, and the last is from a smaller university museum, though it is also ethnographic in nature. The first exhibition, which we call Exhibition #1, is about cosmologies of indigenous peoples across the Americas. This exhibition features several rooms that each focuses on a different group, while the hallway in the center more generally talks about

indigenous myths (we use the term ‘myth’ in the anthropological sense, as a traditional story, not the more colloquial meaning of a false belief) and cosmology. The credit panel is featured at the end of the exhibition.

The second exhibition, Exhibition #2, is about a particularly atrocious part of world history presented from the perspective of a child. The tragedy is presented as an immersive experience where visitors explore different rooms which represent different stages of a child experiencing this event. At the end of the exhibition a very large credit panel is featured.

The third exhibition, Exhibition #3, is part of a museum about architecture. The exhibition tells the stories of several historic cities in the United States whose purpose was to house employees working on secret government projects. The exhibition explores both the design of these cities and the impact of the work that went on within them. The credit panel is featured at the end of the exhibition.

The fourth exhibition is at a university museum. Exhibition #4 features a collection of textiles from various peoples around the world. Textiles include large tapestries, rugs, and clothing. There is also a children’s room with interactive activities. Since this museum is university affiliated and the university has a museum studies program, we assumed that this exhibition was at least in part executed by university students. Through further investigation of the museum’s annual reports, we confirmed that students are involved in various capacities. The small credit panel is at the end of the exhibition.

Observations: The Power of a Credit Panel

During analysis of these credit panels we asked ourselves if and how these panels contribute to museum power structures. We identified several elements that appeared relevant to power structures, including size and noticeability, length and level of detail, credit content, and placement.

Size and Noticeability

Of the four credit panels, Exhibition #2’s panel was the largest. The panel has two sides and is designed to look like an open book, similar to the rest of the exhibition which plays on a story-like structure. On the left side donors and sponsors are listed. The right-side credits are names associated with positions such as exhibition design, graphics, fabrication, and installation.

On the other end of the spectrum, Exhibition #4’s credit panel is only about the size of a sheet of printer paper. It is very easy to miss due to its small size and color, which camouflages into the wall. Most of the credit panel is dedicated to thanking a few donors, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ logo stands out the largest. The credit panels from Exhibitions #1 and #3 are medium-sized. Both are at the end of the exhibition and match the style of other text panels throughout the exhibition. Both of them are centered on the final wall of the exhibition so that as visitors exit, they first see the credit panel before they turn to go out the exit. We observed that the credit panels that were the most detailed were also more likely to be noticed by visitors and employees, though we do not yet have systematic ethnographic data to support this conjecture.

Length and Detail

As mentioned above, Exhibition #2's credit panel was the largest, and upon first glance appears to be the most detailed as well. The left side lists a variety of organizations and individuals or families who have contributed to this exhibition. Of the sixteen listed sponsors, four are called "Exhibition Sponsors" and the rest are "Additional Support." Finally, there is a note at the bottom of this side of the credit panel that thanks another charitable endowment fund for supporting the continued maintenance of the exhibition. While it appears detailed at first glance, further inspection shows that this panel, like the other ones, credits few museum employees.

The right side of Exhibition #2's credit panel credits graphics, design, fabrication, and artifacts and pictures. Most of these are associated with various design, installation, and fabrication contractors. Only the high-level management of the exhibition, with the titles "Project Director," "Project Coordinator," and "Research" are credited on this panel. While we understand that it is important to recognize the contributions of these organizations and the efforts of directing staff, a museum with more than 45 million annual visitors most likely utilizes the work of more than three employees in the various stages of researching, designing, and installing this exhibition. Additionally, since the titles "Director" and "Coordinator" exist, we can also assume that there are others who are being directed or coordinated.

Again, Exhibition #4's credit panel was extremely short. It was also sorely lacking in description. While there are several names listed, it is unclear if these are employees or donors. However, since there is a short statement that says, "This exhibition was developed through the collaborative efforts of the museum staff, an advisory group, and the exhibitions and programs committee of the museum's board of trustees," we initially assumed that the names listed were those who are not included in the previously mentioned statement, such as donors and sponsors. However, after further investigation into publicly available annual reports, we were able to identify the names as financial donors, though some also volunteered and/or served on the advisory board. We recognize that there may be several reasons for the vague and un-descriptive nature of this credit panel. The most unique aspect of this credit panel was that it specifically credited "The Museum Docents," which according to this museum's website are volunteers who regularly assist in training and tours. None of the other credit panels in this study specifically credited docents. We found this especially unusual since it is not clear how the docents contributed to the creation of the exhibition.

The length and content of Exhibitions #1 and #3 were similar. They both provide information about those involved in preparing the exhibition. However, unlike the other three exhibitions, Exhibition #1 did not list any sponsors or donors on their credit panel. Instead, the panel only lists the names and organizations involved in various phases of preparing the exhibition. The bottom of the panel further states, "Special thanks to all of the [Museum's] staff for making this exhibition possible." The most unique aspect of this credit panel is that in addition to names, tribal affiliations are also given, if applicable. Exhibition #3, on the other hand, is divided into two columns. The column on the left is titled "Exhibition Sponsors" and the column on the right is titled "Exhibition Team."

So, who gets credit?

In our analysis of these credit panels, one of our guiding questions has been, “Who is actually being credited and what for?” As we have described, three out of four credit panels specifically credit sponsors and donors. In this next section we look closer at which jobs or positions associated with all aspects of the exhibition are (or are not) credited.

In table below (Fig. 1), we have documented in the listed order who is credited in the design and implementation of exhibitions #1, #2, and #3. We have not included Exhibition #4 since there is only one sentence crediting staff and docents and no listing of specific roles. None of the credit panels used the exact same language, so there is some variation in job titles or roles. We note if any position is credited to more than one person or to an outside contractor.

Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Exhibition #3
Curator	Project Director	Curator
Curatorial Team (4 people)	Project Coordinator	Registrar
Project Manager	Research	Assistant Registrar
Exhibition Fabrication Manager	Design (4 contractors, 1 staff)	Chief Preparator
Concept and Design Managers (3 people)	Graphics (5 people)	Master Carpenter
Editors (3 people)	Fabrication (contractor)	Installation Team (8 people)
Graphics (2 people)	Scenic Treatment (contractor)	Vice President for Exhibitions and Collections
Media (5 people)	Audio-Visual Production (contractor)	Director of Exhibitions and Collections
Conservation	Audio-Visual Installation (contractor)	Curatorial Assistant
Collections Management (2 people)	Based on a different exhibition note	Exhibition Designers (contractor)
Registration	Artifact and Photograph Sources (12 individuals and institutions)	Graphics Fabricators (contractor)
Education	Advisors (15 individuals and applicable institutional affiliations)	Special thanks from the curator (11 people and “others for their advice and support”)
Community Services		
Website Design (2 people)		
Exhibit Production (7 people)		
Photography		
Office of External Affairs and Development (2 people)		
Mount Making (2 people)		
Exhibit Support (an office)		
Exhibit Design (contractor)		
Media Production (4 contractors)		
Fabrication (contractors)		
Special thanks to all museum staff		

Figure 1. Table representing credit panel content from Exhibitions #1, #2, and #3.

One of the most obvious observations from this data is that upper-level management positions are credited first. As such, we wonder how many lower-level employees or volunteers may be missing. As we pointed out earlier, Exhibition #2 comes from the largest and most visited of each of these museums, yet there are very few museum employees actually listed on the credit panel. Design, fabrication, scenic treatment, audio-visual production, and audio-visual installation are credited to contractors (except one name under Design). Those credited in Artifact and Photograph Sources and Advisors are mostly associated with other institutions. That being said, we recognize the efforts of this exhibition by listing Advisors to also credit the community members who were involved in advising this exhibition.

We also noticed that there are no volunteers specifically credited in any of these exhibitions. While their names could be listed under other categories, such as “Installation Team,” “Graphics,” or “Editors,” we expect that this is not the case. As noted earlier, Exhibition #4 is the only one to credit docents.

Finally, we noticed a considerable lack of community credit given in each of these exhibition panels. Since all of these exhibitions are dealing with people, either historical or ethnographic, we can assume that most (if not all) required some amount of working with a specific community. Exhibition #2 somewhat recognizes the contributions of community members by noting advisors (who may be community members though it is unclear) and many sponsors (who likely are also members of the community who were most affected by the tragedy). However, they are primarily recognized for financially contributing to the exhibition. Exhibition #1 does recognize the members of the museum staff and exhibition team who are part of these communities by noting relevant indigenous or tribal affiliation on the credit panel. However, recognition is not given to the individuals who are featured throughout the exhibition, though some names occasionally appear on other text panels in the exhibition. Additionally, none of the exhibitions gave any explicit recognition to the members of the local community who may have contributed to the exhibition, perhaps during preliminary research and testing of exhibition elements.

Placement and Power

During our analysis we also observed that the placement of credit is important. On most of the credit panels, financial contributions of sponsors or donors was listed first, either in left to right or top to bottom organization. The only exception is the credit panel for Exhibition #1 which did not list any financial sponsors or donors. Placing financial support before those who worked on the exhibition seems to suggest that money is more important than labor.

When it comes to listing those who contributed labor to the exhibition, positions are listed in a somewhat standardized order. The panels list labor in a hierarchical order, with those in more senior positions listed first. This is not necessarily a negative practice, but it does mirror and reinforce power structures and hierarchy.

Discussion: Why are Credit Panels Important?

When we look closely at exhibition credit panels, we are confronted with what is important to the museum. As shown above, the donors, sponsors, endowments, and anyone who has

financially supported an exhibition are most likely to be listed. In all of the exhibitions we have discussed, positions such as curator, director, and manager are listed before other contributors. Other museum positions such as graphics, fabrication, collections, education, and installation then tend to follow. However, the number of people actually listed is minimal and varies greatly. We cannot help but ask: Is the purpose of a credit panel really to “recognize the contributions and efforts of all the people who worked on the exhibition?”¹⁶ If this was the case, then should we not see more recognition of the volunteers, community members, and *all* those who assisted with every aspect of the exhibition?

Ultimately, we have found that credit panels tell us what is important to a museum, while also implicitly contributing to power structures. While they do provide a list of people involved in an exhibition, they do more than present an unbiased accounting of all contributors. By examining what is and is not included and how they are included, we have shown how credit panels can reinforce museum power dynamics. This is important for museums to consider because the effects of these dynamics are very real. Not only do they come out in forms of complaint, such as unionizing or anonymous Instagram pages, but are also reflected in museum salaries.

Salaries in a museum, like any business or organization, are based on a hierarchical system. Directors are at the top, curators, exhibition teams, educators, and registrars in the middle, and finally interns and volunteers at the bottom. In credit panels, this hierarchy is reflected in who is included, and in what order. In our research sample of credit panels, those individuals mentioned first were usually the director or curator, followed by project directors, managers or those at the head of the department who helped with the exhibit. If included, more specific parts of the museum staff would be mentioned, such as graphic designers, collection personnel, as well as those involved in the creation of the exhibit. This order corresponds with the salary information we obtained from Salary Survey 2020 from the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), National Museum Salary Survey of 2017 by the American Alliance of Museums, and the Art/Museum Salary Transparency Survey of 2019.¹⁷ We found that curators and directors have been listed as the highest paid positions (earning significantly more than others), followed by directors, conservation, collections, exhibit management, development specialists, and educators. Administrators and registrar positions came next, and followed by exhibit crews, designers, coordinators, media teams, marketing, and the like. Lower paid positions such as students or interns were not included in the list, nor was aid from community members.

We invite museums to ask, “Who is really involved in the creation of an exhibition?” and “How do our credit panels mirror value hierarchies?” In each of the credit panels we have discussed they have each taken different approaches to this question. Some have focused on the financial support and others on the work of museum staff and contractors. However, on the whole, these credit panels have excluded the work of museum staff, volunteers, and community members, often grouping these into a comment of “special thanks” to all involved.

Conclusion

This article was written to encourage museums to reconsider the role of the credit panel and realize the power that credit panels have—for good or bad. And with that, we return to the Wang’s experience watching *The Lord of the Rings* credits:

Eventually, the words “The Lord of the Rings Fan Club” rolled up followed by a long list of names in alphabetical order. Even though I do not normally enjoy sitting through an extra half an hour of credits, when my dad’s name finally rolled across the screen I squealed and jumped up, pointing repeatedly at the name of my own flesh and blood. Not only did the movie thank the stars and director, but also the make-up artists, drivers, and even the devoted fan club members.

Similarly, we argue that credit panels are just as impactful as the rolling credits in a blockbuster movie. While we recognize that there is no perfect way to write credit panels, and every museum will have their own response, we nonetheless think it is important for museums to consider the many rhetorical questions that we have posed. How do credit panels implicitly reinforce stereotypical museum hierarchies and perhaps even contradict the messages that museums are trying to put across in their exhibitions? If a museum claims to be dedicated to promoting political and social change in their community, then ignoring the contributions of community members who supported (financially or otherwise) the museum works against this effort. Additionally, how do museums make statements of value through credit panels, which are also mirrored in museum salaries? Finally, we recognize that there are many other elements of museums that may more actively contribute to potentially oppressive power structures, and we do not wish to imply that credit panels are the most important contributor. Rather, we argue that their influence should not be ignored.

If museums want to be involved with their communities, to truly be places created by the people, then they also need to consider how they credit the people. While we are not necessarily recommending that museums begin implementing full-wall sized credit panels, we invite museums to consider how credit panels reinforce power structures, and then how they can use credit panels to overcome negative power relationships. We also recommend further ethnographic research either by the museum field at large or by individual institutions to better understand how visitors, employees, and management interpret and use credit panels.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Table representing credit panel content from Exhibitions #1, #2, and #3.

Notes

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⁵ Jodi Byrd, *The transit of empire: Indigenous critiques of colonialism* (U of Minnesota Press, 2011), 117.

⁶ Stocking, 117.

⁷ Change the Museum (@changethemuseum). "It's infuriating to hear the leadership at my arts organization talk about dumping money into all kinds of new projects and initiatives for 2021...", Instagram, January 30, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKo5bStlvI2/>

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