Using the Local to Tell a Global Story: How the Peabody Essex Museum Became a World Class Museum
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Peggy Levitt

Abstract

According to the World Bank, one out of every seven people in the world today is an internal or international, voluntary or involuntary migrant. Learning to live with diversity next door or across the globe is the challenge of the day. What role are contemporary museums playing in imparting cosmopolitan values and skills to their visitors? What helps explain how they present the nation in relation to the world? In this article, we use the case of the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts to explore these questions. In 1993, the Peabody Museum and the Essex Institute were poised to close. Despite their long histories and important collections, they were operating at the far frontier of the regional cultural map. In the ensuing years, the new PEM rewrote that cartography. By telling new global stories about very local objects, and by showcasing its global institutional roots, the museum dramatically transformed visitors’ experiences. It broadened and diversified the possible messages they might take away from their visits and sought to connect them to other times and places. Excavating pieces of Salem’s cultural armature enabled the PEM to display cosmopolitan ideas and to cultivate cosmopolitan skills while rescaling itself and its city in the process.

Key words: museums, cosmopolitanism, global, culture, scale

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More importantly, the Peabody Essex Museum shop has transformed into a shoe store for the duration of the exhibition! What could be better than a shoe store in a museum?! Well, how about giving back? The Museum is also running a shoe drive (which closes today) for
women's shoes to be donated to Dress for Success Boston. What someone chooses to collect tells a lot about the collector, but also deeply influences how the past will be seen by generations to come. The Met, through their fashion archives, tells a very particular story about a very small subset of fashion throughout history. The Henry Ford Museum is attempting to tell a different story, one that contains some of the same high fashion names but also brings to light long-forgotten designers and stores.