

Inspiring questions to critically interrogate objects and museum exhibitions

A. What do we know about the object? (≈ sourcing)

1. What is the object?
2. Who created the object?
3. Where was the object created?
4. When was the object created?
5. Why was the object created?
6. What stories are being told by the object?
7. Whose stories are being told through the object?
8. In which setting is the object currently located? What settings might it have been in before?
9. How did the exhibited object end up in the museum?

B. How is the object integrated into the museum exhibition? (≈ which evidence is constructed?)

10. What can I learn about the object from the labels and text in the exhibition?
11. Is information provided about who wrote the labels and text? If yes, what effect does this have? If not, why do you think it wasn't provided?
12. Is the research methodology used to generate the information on display explained? Are the sources used cited?
13. Which larger narratives is the object currently part of?
14. What effects does the specific mode of display have on the object being presented?
15. Is the specific object displayed in a way that considers its original setting? What precautions should be taken when displaying the object?

C. Which information about the object is missing? (≈ which evidence is not included?)

16. What information about the object in the exhibition was not included the labels and text? Whose voices and perspectives are excluded?
17. What (other) questions do you have after viewing the object in the exhibition?

D. What did/does the object mean to people in past and present? (≈ significance)

18. Was the object important to individuals or groups in the past? If yes, how do you know?
19. Is the object still important to individuals or groups of people in the present? If yes, how do you know?

What should happen to the object in the future? (~ future reconstruction)

20. What should happen to this object in the future?
21. Are there any current political debates about the exhibition? Are they incorporated into the exhibition itself, or are any references made to these debates? Does the exhibition include parts that would instigate reflection about these debates?
22. Are there people or groups who could provide additional perspectives on the exhibition theme? How could their voices be included?

Activity #1

Up to you: Deconstructing Old Town

Option 1: Narrow Focus

Select any object in Old Town. Critically interrogate the object and its relationship to the exhibit and Old Town Gallery using any of these 22 questions, in any order.

Some of the questions you will be unable to answer with the information provided. Discuss if that is ok, or should more information be provided to visitors?

Option 2: Wider Focus

Old Town will be reopening in late July but the other galleries on the 3rd floor will not be.

Consider either the entirety of Old Town or a section of it and look at it with a critical eye.

Questions like these might help:

- What story or stories are being conveyed through these exhibits?
- Do a “significance” audit. What in BC history appears important enough to be included in this story, and what is missing?
- Is there a diversity in perspectives?
- How will visitors interact with and move around the exhibit? Will this influence their perceptions?
- There are some new panels to read that introduce the exhibit while most of the exhibit is immersive, without written explanations. What do you think of the balance?

Activity #2

Thinking Like a Curator: Reconstructing Old Town and Beyond

The RBCM staff who are working to prepare Old Town for reopening are using this overarching question to help guide their decision-making:

How do we create a space that is more inclusive of diverse perspectives, and how do we make sure that the museum is a facilitator of this work, rather than the authority of this work?

There are other things we can consider in our design thinking. For example:

- Whether the organization of a museum gallery should be chronological / thematic / circular, etc
- Whether and when the provenance of objects is shared with visitors
- Explanatory panels and wording to tell a story vs. visitors making their own interpretations when immersed in it
- How design can support pedagogy for teachers & students working in museum

Option 1: Redesign an exhibit

- Pick a specific exhibit in Old Town. Make recommendations to museum staff for adjustments to the exhibit. These could be additions (objects and/or text), changes, reorganization, renaming, removal of objects – anything like that.
- Take a photo of the exhibit and load to Padlet with your recommendations and a justification for the change.

Option 2: Design an exhibit

- Find a space that has been emptied in Old Town
- Design a vision for what that space could hold and be. What would be in the space? How would visitors interact with it? Why?
- Post a photo of the space with your recommendations and explanation.

Option 3: Rethink the 3rd floor

- While Old Town will reopen with some changes in the short term, how would you redesign other exhibits on the 3rd floor?
- Draw and annotate a floor plan that shows exhibits and how visitors would move around and engage with it.

Padlet – open with your phone

