

Creating Exhibits that Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations by John Summers

Megan Houston

Volume 111, Number 1, Spring 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059970ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059970ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Houston, M. (2019). Review of [*Creating Exhibits that Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations* by John Summers]. *Ontario History*, 111(1), 100–101. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059970ar>

Cree story-telling about elders, exploring the term *Aaniskotaapaan*, which expresses ideas about succession and great-grandchildren. The Wasitay prophetic movement of 1842-43 among the Omushkego Cree of Hudson Bay, as well as Ojibwe-Methodist encounters in the mid-late nineteenth century demonstrate that Christianity brought by the fur trade and subsequent missionaries had a significant, though not absolute, influence on Indigenous spirituality, which developed in its own distinct way in the midst of external pressures.

The final part of the book is devoted to the history of the Berens River in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario. One of the most interesting chapters examines the life of Fair Wind (*Naamiwan*), who was a well-known medicine man who lived along the Berens River at the outset of the twentieth century. Brown pieces together a biography of his life based on fragmentary written sources, including the notes and papers of anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell. She expertly weaves the fragments, carefully extracting the credible information from the conjecture. She examines both Ojibwe and

Cree terms and concepts and interweaves Indigenous oral history. Her scholarship can be seen as a model example of how the methodologies of ethnohistory are still relevant, and indeed, crucial, to understanding the complicated history of Indigenous peoples and the fur trade.

Brown grapples with nuances from both the European and Indigenous perspectives, analyzing how worldviews collided yet were turned into a system of reciprocal relationships and material exchanges. Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the openness to new ideas and evidence from all perspectives and sources, epitomizing the approach of ethnohistory and revealing its fruits. This is one of the best readers on the fur trade, with its strongest suits being in the realms of language and gender studies. This is a thoughtful, deep, and priceless contribution that will certainly fuel much further study from the next generation of scholars who will pick up where Brown leaves off.

Daniel R. Laxer, PhD
Ministry of Indigenous Affairs

Creating Exhibits that Engage *A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations*

By John Summers

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 216 pages. \$52.00 paperback.
ISBN 978-144227936-0 (rowman.com).

As museums struggle to compete for audiences in a rapidly changing and competitive world, creative exhibits allow visitors to think, participate, create, and interact with a space where they are challenged and inspired. John Summers recognizes and calls out immediately the important role that engaging and dynam-

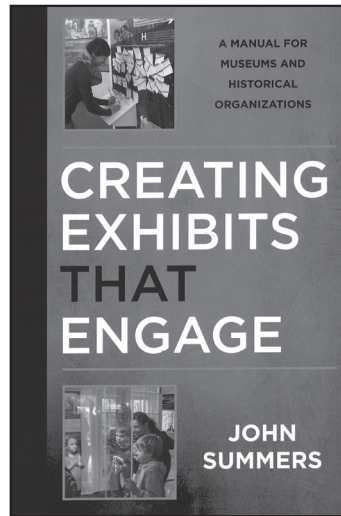
ic exhibits are in the museum 'business' model. *Creating Exhibits that Engage* is the outcome of a careers worth of practical experience and advice, mixed with current museological theory, that comes together in a single resource that museum and heritage professionals or volunteers would find helpful at any stage of their career. With his

encouragement that everyone should try designing an exhibit at least once, Summers emboldens designers to look beyond the idea that an exhibit space is prescriptive. It is a social space that can change depending on the people who are in it. While everyone has the same access to the labels, artifacts, and panels, it is their personal experiences that inform their understanding of what they are viewing.

This book is a 'how to' guide to creating an exhibit from the "Big Idea" through to follow-up after the exhibit closes. It provides an easy to follow road map that demystifies the exhibit design process by breaking down the process and expands upon each stage using real world examples.

Utilizing the concrete and relatable example of a 1918 Ford Model T donated to an imaginary museum by its founder as a case study, Summers begins planning an exhibit that extends beyond the obvious themes of transportation or a biographical overview of the founder's life. This starts by creating a dynamic "Big Idea" that allows for the exploration technological advances, societal changes, and environmental impact. It follows through other steps including audience identification, research and writing panels, selecting additional artifacts, and fabrication of exhibit furniture.

Each chapter covers a different step of this process and features illustrations, graphics, lists, and text written in a conversational tone making it extremely accessible. The end of each chapter also features a "Chapter Checklist" which is a summary of the information found in the rest of the



chapter, as well as a complete set of notes. Do not skip the notes, as they are full of bibliographical information, tips, tricks, and advice related to the section.

Overall, this is a very informative book that provides suggestions for any institution regardless of size or budget to implement immediately to make their exhibits more engaging and there are very few faults that I can find in the text. With many resources created for the heritage sector, I some-

times find they are created with a 'best case' instead of a realistic scenario in mind. For example, institutions that are smaller, operating independently, or overseen by a volunteer workforce may not have the physical plant to have a fabrication shop or the ability to design panels in house. Although, it does provide several suggestions for outsourcing some of these processes including graphics and purchasing ready-made cases and plinths.

Author John Summers has worked in a variety of cultural institutions for the last thirty years, is manager of Heritage Services and Curator for the Regional Municipality of Halton. He is also well-respected educator at a variety of museum studies programs across Canada, including the Ontario Museum Association and the University of Toronto.

Creating Exhibits that Engage was recently awarded the 2018 Ontario Museum Association Award of Excellence.

Megan Houston
Education and Outreach Manager
Sharon Temple National Historic Site and Museum