History at Home:
Leighton House, Sambourne House, and the Heritage Debate

Erika Graham
Grinnell-in-London Internship
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In the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, many Victorian houses remain standing, for this part of London was favored by many artists of the day. Two of these buildings have since become museums: Leighton House, home to Frederic Lord Leighton, P.R.A., and Linley Sambourne House, residence of the premier cartoonist for *Punch* magazine and his family. Though managed by the same team of curators and staff, the houses have distinct characters, which stem from the finery of their interiors: Sambourne House sports almost entirely original furnishings and decor, while Leighton House has been painstakingly restored to its intended grandeur as a “palace of art.”

But although it might not be apparent to an average visitor overwhelmed by these displays, both museums are unavoidably involved in the fierce debate that surrounds all sites that present “the past.” This debate is multifaceted, but all strands return eventually to the issue of whether or not such presentations can educate the visitor—the key role of the museum. As museum-studies scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill observes, “Knowledge is now well understood as the commodity that museums offer.”1 The details of this knowledge vary by museum; we will here be focusing on the transmission of historical knowledge. The history museum, however, has an interesting place in the discourse on museum education, for not everyone accepts that these institutions fulfill their didactic role. The accusation runs that some history museums have abandoned their educational duties by moving beyond the glass case format to display history in context through reconstruction, preservation, and, most feared of all, living history.
displays. The goals of this paper are to examine the central themes of the heritage debate as theory, then to turn to the Leighton and Sambourne Houses as case studies of museums that present different styles of contextualized history to educate visitors, and possibly to allay the fears of those who criticize all history museums without discrimination.

Before continuing, it is important to scrutinize the impressive variety of heritage sites, which range from historic houses to newly built attractions. Not all of these can be properly styled museums; as art historian Emma Barker explains, there exists a "more populist and commercial side of the 'heritage industry' . . . it is important to distinguish between this type of presentation and the more restrained and scholarly approach" that characterizes the museum as it is traditionally recognized.2 "Disneyfication" is the noun most often tossed around in discussions of the commercial venues, and indeed, the term encapsulates much of those features of living-history presentations that are most worrying: the sanitization of history, a flippant disregard for historic accuracy, and, perhaps most of all, the striking popularity of such presentations.3 Indeed, some critics seem almost to condemn living history on the simple basis that people love it, perhaps due to that long-standing separation between education and entertainment in the British psyche.4 To varying degrees, these three charges are valid; the tourist portion of the heritage sector usually presents a simplified and inauthentic vision of historical events and life, which unfortunately can be absorbed by a passive population.5 But these tourist attractions
belong to the entertainment industry, and these sites are merely treating history as they would any other theme that might catch the public’s interest. The real debate begins with those institutions that are seriously trying to pass on knowledge—that is, museums—via some form of “heritage” display, whether or not that display even involves the most extreme form of living presentation.

The Heritage Debate

The chief points of contention are threefold, and each relates to the others: the issue of semantics between “the past” and “history”; difficulties in achieving authenticity; and the degree to which heritage can be educational. The first may seem a matter of synonyms, but several theorists have engaged with it productively. As Goodacre and Baldwin explain, “If the past is taken to mean all that has gone before, then history is the exploration and interpretation of that past.” Thus, for a heritage monument to evoke the past usually means to engage in the production of an experience, encouraging the visitor to become as involved as possible with a “then-made-now.” Conversely, to deal with history requires a step back; as Kevin Walsh maintains, “competent history . . . should be concerned with the contrasting of the past with the present” or, taking a broader view, with promoting historical skills, particularly the ability to consider critically the content of the past. Under this scheme, the past is represented by a living-history facility complete with historic smells and correct accents, immersing the visitor in a simulation of the past; history, by a museum with ancient artifacts explained by careful panels placing them in the chronology of organized history.
Of course, the latter is often preferred by critics, for the rise of a “leechlike addiction” to the past has many perceived failings. Scholar Nick Merriman asserts that to be interested in the past in a noncritical manner “has been seen as a symptom of the failure of modern society to face the future”—in other words, as nostalgia, a word denoting anything but scholarly enquiry. So, too, is the idea that we might empathize with the past, coming to a “kind of unquestioning empathy [that] can be dangerous.” But why is empathy so worrisome? Because it causes visitors to not analyze the past, to not look for trends and indicators of patterns and shifts, just as people do not typically analyze their everyday lives. Visitors who want the past, the whole past, and nothing but the past are inherently blinkered, for by attempting to merge into the foreign country that is the past, they cannot acknowledge a present or other greater frame within which to interpret experience.

Other critics feel, however, that such engaging experiences not only can instill in the visitor a deep and abiding appreciation for the past but also can be educational in both traditional and novel ways. In this light, living history is simply one of many interpretive techniques that can and should be used by any historic preservation or “any museum that wishes to educate its audience.” Every object requires some explanation before it can be educationally useful; given that “many visitors to museums with quite adequate labels prefer guided tours,” why should living-history presentations be so spurned? And even if an institution does not wish to offer such presentations, more knowledge can be uncovered if the objects are given a context that can be thought provoking and that leads to the
comparative thought that is so idealized by critics. When encouraged to feel at ease in a realistic environment, visitors will naturally draw comparisons between what they see and what they know. Even one of the more hard-line critics of heritage presentations concedes that “in many cases the spectacle is used by the museum to attract customers who will hopefully move on to the more didactic experiences once the spectacle has been consumed.” A lively display can have educative value and may even draw more visitors than a traditional one, thereby increasing the overall numbers who receive the information.

Attempting to re-create a historic interior, however, inevitably brings up the difficulty of authenticity (the second of our three points), which intensifies when considering visitors’ experiences in this environment. Of course, to have only original objects would be ideal; as Kevin Moore asserts, “the real is generally far more effective than its comparable reconstruction,” and we “admire it for its antiquity and aura.” Unfortunately, original buildings and objects are often no longer available. Museums must turn, then, to reconstructions, which can have great worth when founded on strict research, and can be used to fill gaps in context or otherwise provide access to rare information. After all, it is the business of the past to fade away, and if we still wish to learn from it, this fading away must somehow be counteracted.

But the realm of re-creation and restoration is dangerously close to that of forgery and illusion, and this proximity raises some disturbing questions; as Peter Fowler asks, “as long as we ‘feel’ a restoration to be ‘right,’ why worry?” And in an age
where scholarly foundation is “not necessarily of unquestioned priority . . . need [we] be particularly bothered by questions of integrity or details of accuracy”? The problem with this line of thinking is that it inevitably leads to the production of a sham in an area that of necessity “depends on motivation and honesty”—and so we have to care. Restoration is by definition ahistorical, for what was made in the past is never made now, even if alike in every detail. And yet, most would agree that some degree of restoration is necessary, out of simple expedience. The only way to reconcile this dichotomy between authenticity and the need to produce replacements is to look at the motivations for re-creation and, most specifically, to look for signs of deceit in the interpretation itself. Is the museum careful to let its visitors know what has been altered, or does it let them follow the natural but duplicitous instinct to, as scholar David Philips says, “understand the whole interior as ‘authentic’”? This is the line between a museum and an attraction.

To delve deeper, though, even a museum in an existing monument will have to wrestle with the meaning of the word “authentic” itself. A historic house, by virtue of that which makes it valuable, has inevitably seen its share of history—time passes, and the building may serve many functions. While often interesting in its own right, this continued past presents an issue that has been around since the fiery debates on the subject in the nineteenth century: to conserve or to restore? It is rare that a house will survive even decades in its original form; as such, curators must make a decision: Fowler asks, “Do we restore [the house] to its
original appearance . . . to that of any one of its successive phases . . . to a mixture of them so that it becomes as it never was before, or to a particular period associated with a particular inhabitant so that it becomes trapped in a time-warp?  

At its roots, the decision is one of authenticity, for the museum must select the authentic nature of the house. What, historically speaking, is the most real? Of course, to alter a building for any end can result in the difficulties of restoration explained above, but to leave it as it is may be to obscure a more important stage in the building’s past in favor of later changes that are irrelevant on a grander scale. In short, authenticity of one kind may give way to authenticity of another, and so, as Phillips says, “conservation cannot be just a matter of technical good practice, but requires interpretive decisions,” decisions regarding what authenticity means.

And finally, we must contemplate not only the authenticity of the objects in the display but also the authenticity of the visitor’s mental experience. Many historical houses have chosen to employ some sort of living history, even if it is more restrained than those of full-blown heritage attractions. Kevin Walsh says of such displays, “To a public accustomed to traditional glass-cased museums . . . [it is] a magical experience . . . [that] give[s] the impression that visitors really had ‘stepped back in time.’” It can be quite a powerful experience and certainly attracts many visitors. Unfortunately, this interpretation demands inauthenticity. On a fundamental level, the past cannot be relived. Physical remains can be re-created, but even so, as Walsh holds, “the absence of original visual context is as nothing in comparison with
List makes important information accessible.

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Let us consider each in turn, particularly in light of our previous discussions. The “critical understanding” could apply to both curator and visitor. In the case of the former, the issues are mostly those of authenticity; the curator must understand the implications of each of the interpretive issues we have discussed. It is the job of the visitor, meanwhile, to try to engage with the past as history—that is, to process it intellectually and draw distinctions between the elements of imagination (unavoidable in most presentations) and the scholarly content, with the help of the museum. The second factor is simply common sense, especially in the quest for authenticity; however, greater advantage comes if the evidence on which the presentation is based is shared with the visitors, for this teaches them how historical conclusions are reached, as well as increases their ability to engage with the presentation. Regarding the third factor, it is important to have a clear purpose for the presentation. Visitors should understand the context in history in which the presentation is being placed and the particular narrative being told.

With these criteria in place, the stage is perfectly set for a worthwhile learning experience. But as critics rightly note, most of these criteria are rarely satisfied in heritage sites; the visitors simply make what they will of the site, so education devolves into entertainment alone. Unfortunately, critics generally place museums in the same category as these heritage attractions, with the result that, as Merriman says, “museums have been tarred with the same brush, and many of their positive connotations have been forgotten.” It is necessary to turn to
actual examples of museums to see how well these charges actually apply to them.

Case Studies:
Leighton House and Sambourne House
Leighton House Museum and Linley Sambourne House provide two interesting practical studies in light of the above theories. In observing them, I have found in their displays both many commonalities and many differences that contribute to their effectiveness as historical presentations. Let us first consider the similarities. Both museums are devoted not only to representing the period from which the buildings date but more specifically to showcasing an individual, an obvious choice for both museums. In the case of Leighton House, Lord Leighton was the man for whom the building was specifically designed and constructed, and he was its only occupant. At Sambourne, the house was almost new when the family moved in, and thereafter was owned only by them and their descendants before becoming public property. Thus both buildings had strong ties to specific personalities, which eased the choice of redecoration to a certain degree. Both, furthermore, were artists’ homes, and so were originally decorated according to the wider fashions with which the occupants identified, providing good foundations within which the houses could be redone or interpreted. Finally, both museums are fortunate enough to possess significant archives, the most notable features of which are period photos and a guidebook description of Leighton House as well as Sambourne family diaries and an early inventory. These provide a wealth of knowledge applicable to restoration and
interpretation. While these features may be shared by select other monuments, they still form a special set of circumstances that strongly influence the functions of these two museums.

Of the two, Leighton House is both less concerned with re-creating a lived-in historical interior and more interested in presenting a particular point in time. Like many historical buildings, Leighton House lost its original collections of furnishings after Leighton’s death. As a result, it is obvious that authenticity has been the foremost issue of historical presentation facing the museum curators. However, we must look at the curators’ interesting choice to restore the interiors to something approaching their original condition at all. This approach required a lot of work, as the interiors had been whitewashed, and almost everything had to be entirely redone. And not only once, but twice; a recent closure for electrical rewiring has led the curators to review the restoration of the 1980s, and on the basis of new information, they are making several subtle alterations for a truer effect. All this occurred in a museum that visitors often frequent for the artwork on display rather than for the historical interiors.

But as Reena Suleman, curator of Collections and Research, explains, Leighton House actively seeks to “[give] an insight to Victorian life . . . from [an] upper middle class [perspective],” as well as “to tell the story of its occupants.”28 In other words, this museum which began as a memorial to Leighton and his art, is slowly becoming a display of a more general past.29 It is “the past” as opposed to history—it is a picture of life in another period, not an analysis of the period or an attempt to place it in a wider
historical context. One reason for this reading stems from the museum’s emphasis on art—the focus has been on maintaining the beauty of the main parts of Leighton’s palace of art, at the expense of, say, a more inclusive reconstruction showing the servants’ quarters (now office space), which might add a comparative element to the presentation.\(^3^0\) The museum has chosen a largely passive experience of the past, treating its subject as a single image to be contemplated rather than a pair of views to provoke a discussion or comparative look at history. Finally, this is the personal story of an artist and his work, and as such is disassociated from the broad study of history that critics advocate—and even from history itself. While Leighton’s domicile can display the narrative of a wealthy past, the most applicable field for serious study of it would in fact be art history. The past is there, but it is alongside a powerful aesthetic element.

This is not to say Leighton House is a nostalgic heritage attraction or a presentation that assumes an uneducated audience seeking to experience a Madame-Tussaud-like journey into the past. As G. Ellis Burcaw maintains in *Introduction to Museum Work*, “The museum does not exist to provide light entertainment for an uneducated clientele.”\(^3^1\) Most visitors are expected, or at least perceived, to have some prior knowledge of the Victorian era, and particularly of its artists. As one friend of the museum commented during a meeting for the planned restoration work, repainting the library in its original shade of sage green would “immediately tell people it’s Victorian”—presuming a knowledge in the period by those who walk through the doors of Leighton House. But the
museum is meant to give an accurate presentation of this house as a specific historical building, and so contains many layers of presentation that require of visitors the time and attention to look closely at what they are seeing. Similar to costumed actors in other heritage experiences, the period portraits that hang on the walls give an idea of the society that used this house, but leave it up to the visitors to form their own thoughts. This presentation requires the level of mental engagement that is typical of traditional museums.

Leighton House is currently under restoration, and partly due to the importance of visuals in this beautiful building, as well as historical accuracy, authenticity is the key word. To this end, efforts toward visual accuracy have involved paint sampling, spectroscopic readings of old photographs, and fabric analysis, all corroborated with documentary research. It is fortunately possible to reproduce many features of the internal period architecture, such as paint tone and color; in some cases such as wallpaper prints, the same design is still being produced by the original manufacturers. But none of these replacements will be the exact items that furnished the original home, and the museum is facing an insurmountable problem when it comes to restoring the interiors by the strictest definition of authenticity. The books in the library are on subjects Leighton was known to have enjoyed, but the tomes are not his; the chairs are not those upon which he himself sat. Only a few pieces are, so to speak, native to the house. Complementing this, the presence of the paintings by Leighton, all laboriously acquired by the museum, is an anachronism, for a
working artist would typically sell, not keep, most of his or her works.

But it is difficult to criticize the museum for these restoration efforts. As Leighton House is unlikely to reacquire Leighton’s lost furnishings (though it is making the attempt), this externally accurate reconstruction is not a sin. Since the public is well informed about the restored features, replacing them is not a deception. Furthermore, Leighton House is not trying to give visitors the sense of awe that comes from true antiques. People visit the space for visual clues about the period and its art, not for an immersive experience; for this purpose, reproductions will suffice. If done well and accurately, the remodeling intrusion is forgivable and far better than the alternative.

Based on this examination of the museum’s program, we should now assess the results: what knowledge, from this mixture of old and new, art and history, do curators expect the visitor to gain? Of the three learning criteria discussed above, the first is the least important here; though visitors are expected to apply their own knowledge to understanding the house, art rather than history is currently the main subject. Still, the museum does provide enough information for the visitor to make basic inferences about Victorian upper-class lifestyle and to draw comparisons at least with the modern day. Meanwhile, the museum clearly shows the visitor the differences between the current and original interiors, as well as the process by which the latter evolved into the former. This information is conveyed largely through the period photographs that hang in each room for contrast, as well as
through dissemination of detailed information about the restoration process. The museum is also clear in its goal of interpreting the house as Leighton’s. The curators try to re-create the house as it once was during the artist’s lifetime, a choice that affects the visuals of the interior, and they interpret it as the remarkable Victorian house it then was—a palace of art. The presentation tells a personal narrative intertwined with art and with its period, a comprehensive view of the culture of the past. Finally, a strong learning-and-events program supplements the museum’s function of transmitting knowledge, and again, it follows the approach of the museum. The available courses as listed on the museum’s website range from drawing and painting to the social position and lives of nineteenth-century artists. Such supplementary activities demonstrate the house’s commitment to the well-rounded education of its audience.

The Linley Sambourne House represents the other side of the coin. Although it is also greatly influenced by the fact that it was owned by an artist, the museum is unquestionably focused on the past rather than on art. And the curators’ interpretation is far closer to those of many heritage attractions: an advertising poster is headed. “Step Back into Victorian Kensington.” The museum does run one conventional tour every day, with a modern, noncostumed guide, but the other three tours are conducted by costumed actresses portraying Linley’s wife, Marion, and Mrs. Reffell, the housekeeper. On the surface, a visit to Sambourne House seems like one of those falsely empathetic experiences so decried by critics. To a certain extent, the presentation does seek to
draw the visitor into the scenario of the past: visitors face such questions as, “Do you have a servant?” and are in most respects treated as members of the Victorian period. But contrary to critics’ fears, this involvement should not suggest that this is not an intellectually informed interpretation of the past. Though an actress reveals quite matter-of-factly that one of the servant girls “is” only twelve, visitors naturally recognize this as an opportunity for reflection and comparison. Some laugh uncomfortably, clearly realizing the discrepancy with modern views of child labor. Such incidents demonstrate that visitors look beyond the façade to solid historical matter.

We can see that the presentation therefore doubly avoids issues of an authentic period mindset. Visitors may play the role of callers to the household, but their mentalities are not expected to be those of real Victorians; an appropriate level of distance is maintained. Furthermore, the actors’ dialogue is not a fabrication, as it is based on actual quotes from the diaries maintained by members of the Sambourne family. There is no need to guess at the minds of the characters, for their words are real, not devised. We can even see that visitors are quite unlikely to be taken in by an immersive experience. For instance, they may react negatively upon hearing about Marion accepting criticism for voicing her opinion, for to the modern mind the notion is implausible; yet the episode is straight from Marion’s diary. Critics of living history displays think visitors are far more credulous than they actually seem to be.

Physical authenticity is likewise not a challenge for the museum, since 85 percent of the collection remains in the same
place that Linley Sambourne placed it; the rest of the objects were added by later generations of the same family. A restoration in 2000–2003 hardly changed anything aside from a few bits of wallpaper; most objects were simply cleaned. This is a collection that most historical houses, including Leighton House, can only dream of. There was one interpretive decision that curators did need to make, however—the question of period. The house was formed by the first generation, Linley’s family. Their descendants mostly preserved the house and its contents, but Linley’s great-granddaughter, Anne, Countess of Rosse, did add several 1960s touches, including the complete overhaul of one bedroom. The museum, selecting a dynastic narrative (a diachronic view, preserving later history) that highlights the original generations, has preserved these changes. For a visitor on the conventional tour, this double-period poses no problems: viewing it as history, the room actually provides an interesting new dimension and point of contrast with the rest of the darker rooms of the house. However, the 1960s bedroom is also on the costumed tour, creating a glaring anachronism. Staying in their roles, the actresses ignore the differences in their scenery, and cannot comment on it as it actually is. This difference in time frame also makes it difficult for the visitors to ask questions about what they are seeing, though they are directed to the reception desk at the end of the tour should they have further enquiries.

The necessities of the tour also require some broader anachronistic gestures, such as letting the visitors inside in the first place, when they would in fact have simply left a calling card,
and taking them out again through the lower floor (the servants’ area) so that they might retrieve their coats. These actions are illogical from a historical perspective. Furthermore, these slips in accuracy are not pointed out to the visitor; they are simply accommodated. However, I think that in this case they are minor drawbacks to an otherwise useful display. For these tours provide a different angle on the house (the conventional visit focuses somewhat more on an interior design, while the costumed ones deal directly with the past), one particularly accessible to the nonspecialist, and the anachronisms provide useful fodder for critically contemplating historical perspectives.

Finally, let us consider again our three prerequisites for learning. Visitors are, as has been shown, confronted with material that requires them to take a long-term, historical view of the subject matter; they are not made into the passive receptors of absolute knowledge of the subject, but may make of it what they will. The scholarly foundation behind the presentation is also unimpeachable, for the museum’s considerable archives are well used. Furthermore, the visitors are made well aware of this fact (if not of all the details) by an informative pretour video that lays out the resources available to the museum and provides a better understanding of the nature of the presentation. Lastly, the choice between types of tours enables visitors to decide which perspective—and experience—to apply to the house, so they are likely to receive the interpretation that best suits their interests and abilities, providing for the best possible environment to further their intellectual growth.
There are no simple answers to the debate that revolves around representational interpretations of the past; each museum must be examined on a case-by-case basis. From these two examples, however, we might conclude that the living-history approach, properly used, has been unfairly maligned; it brings Sambourne House intelligently to life, and perhaps Leighton House might benefit from a similar interpretive tool. People enjoy learning from other people; living-history presentations “allow us to explore our relationship with the past through human contact,” which may be why it is possible that, as Goodacre and Baldwin assert, “any historic preservation or reconstruction benefits from some appropriate level of ‘living history’ interpretive techniques.” But it is also important not to underestimate the value of the reconstruction or preservation alone: strongly influenced by the information provided by our surroundings, we can make more of objects in context than in the glass cases of traditional museums. It is time to separate the museums from the attractions, and to look to the possibilities inherent in these intelligently presented, tangible displays of the past. And, perhaps most importantly, we must remember that it is impossible to please everyone.
Notes


5. Though a criticism here, not everyone believes this modification is a bad thing. For example, see Kevin Moore, Museums and Popular Culture, Contemporary Issues in Museum Culture (London: Cassell, 1997).


8. Walsh, Representation, 102.


10. Ibid., 3.


29. Suleman, discussion.

30. This presentation may change in future years as the house is renovated; plans have been laid to re-create and reveal these hidden areas.

32. Goodacre and Baldwin, Living, 59; Burcaw, Work, 4.
Bibliography


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