Whose Museum is it, Anyway?
A Case Study of the Effects of Large Scale Funding on National Museums

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Abstract

While the need for national museums to secure large-scale funding is unavoidable, so are the controversies tied to this funding. This paper is a case study of the effects private donations and government funding can have towards major decision-making processes in national museums. Focusing on the The Price of Freedom and the Enola Gay exhibits at the Smithsonian Institute, and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights as a whole, this essay explores how factors such as location and time contribute to public opinion about these decisions. These national institutions find themselves in a balancing act to please private and government donors, as well as the public. While this essay does not ignore the fact that museums need money to operate and that they also have a duty to appease their donors, it argues that in this balancing act, one must consider the role and purpose of museums in society and that serving and challenging the public should remain, or become, a priority.

Keywords: national museums, funding, public and private donors, The Price of Freedom exhibition, Enola Gay, Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Large scale exhibitions and high operating budgets often require national museums to seek and secure government and private funding, which are typically not given without conditions attached, impacting the way an institution represents a particular history or event to the public. Funding sources for museums therefore become contentious, and pose a predicament for museums to please these sources, often the government, private donors, and the public. Through the cases examined in this paper, I argue that a possible solution to this predicament does not start with the museum, but rather with the donors’ understanding of the roles museums do – and should – play in society.
This understanding will create a more balanced and trusting relationship between the donor and the institutional recipient. The following is an examination of the influences of large scale funding on *The Price of Freedom* exhibition, displayed at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, and on the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. I will conclude with a discussion of the conundrums national institutions face and suggest possible paths forward.


The Smithsonian Institution is in a balancing act: both the federal government and private donations are a significant source of revenue. The majority of the Smithsonian funds derive from federal appropriations, and as of 2016 approximately 60 percent of the Smithsonian budget was federally funded (The Smithsonian Institution Fact Sheet). Nonetheless, between 2002 and 2007, during which time the *The Price of Freedom* opened, the Smithsonian Institute relied heavily on private funds (39 percent) to supplement their federal appropriations for facilities projects, in which major revitalizations for the National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center was included (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). Further, the United States Government Accountability Office reported in 2007 that funding designated for the Smithsonian Institution would not be sufficient to cover its estimated $2.3 billion in facilities projects through 2013 (U.S. Government of Accountability Office, 2007). The large-scale funds that the Smithsonian Institute receives from the federal government are therefore not always sufficient, leading to the necessity to solicit and secure private donations.

The need to please both private and government donors limits the independence and creativity that museums should embrace. *The Price of Freedom* is no exception. Behring’s donation stipulated that the NMAH must “maintain a close cooperative relationship” with him and that “Behring Center” must officially be included with the museum’s name and displayed prominently on the building’s entrance and promotional material. The official name is now: “National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center.” Behring also specified that his donation must be spent in a way that he believes is “beneficial to America”: a glorious portrayal of the American military and offering no other alternative to armed conflict remains consistent with this request (Boehm, 2006, p. 1148-1150). Yet, this controversial narrative remained largely out of public view. The exhibition was released in a time that Scott Boehm, an academic of Memory Studies, calls “the post-9/11 politics of display”: a period in which an exhibition such as *The Price of Freedom* can garner patriotic sympathies from visitors of a “wounded national body,” rather than scrutiny and criticism (Boehm, 2006, p.1150). Opening while
the U.S. military was still active in Iraq under the Bush administration, the exhibition reinforced rhetoric of the “national spirit,” American exceptionalism, and manifest destiny - values that reiterate the administration’s justification for its military campaigns (Boehm, p.1150). Behring’s donation and stipulations therefore remained consistent with the values of the Republican government at the time. In all, the timing of the exhibition’s opening and its ideological relevance to the federal government perhaps influenced the fact that the exhibition was not the topic of much criticism.

Significantly, the *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum was the object of incredible controversy, much more public than *The Price of Freedom* – further highlighting the influences that federal funding can have on a museum. The *Enola Gay* exhibit presented “suffering caused” by the B-29 bomber and the nuclear bombings in Japan, rather than solely commemorating and celebrating veterans of the Second World War (WWII) (Crane, 1997, p.59). The exhibit opened in 1993 and was intended to coincide with the then upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII. A non-celebratory approach to an anniversary that was depicted as celebratory transgressed publicly accepted memories, leading to public unrest, especially by veterans. The exhibit was therefore significantly altered in 1995, particularly excluding artifacts and images related to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing victims (“Controversy Over the Enola Gay Exhibition,” 2016). United States President at the time, Bill Clinton, supported veterans’ pleas to end or radically alter the exhibit. When asked about the Enola Gay exhibit in an interview, he stated that anyone who wants to express a “contrary opinion” is “perfectly free to do so” (such as by writing a book), but he does not “think that the policy of [his] administration or the United States should be to say that’s the way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II” (The President’s News Conference, 1995). The wording of President Bill Clinton’s answer is significant and relevant to *The Price of Freedom*, as it indicates that as a national museum in the nation’s capital receiving federal funding, the Smithsonian is expected to be representative of the current administration’s values and the narrative that they want to portray to the public.

Before examining the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), it is important to be aware of the differences of funding expectations between Canada and the United States. In general, private donations are much more prevalent in American museums than Canadian museums (perhaps due to the vast difference in population size), while government funding is much higher for Canadian museums than for American museums. Since the 2008 recession, government funding and revenue, on average, decreased for American museums, while private individual and corporate donations increased (American Association of Museums, 2012). For instance, in 2016, private donations covered approximately 40 percent of American museums’ revenue. In comparison, the Canadian Museums Association is working towards a goal to have 9 to 20 percent of Canadian museums’ total operating budgets funded by private donations (Canadian Museums Association, 2016). Certainly this does not suggest that private donations to Canadian museums are unnecessary or unpopular, especially for smaller, non-governmental institutions. America is not an exception in this regard. However, compared to the decrease in government funding for American museums from all three levels – federal, state
and local – in 2016, the Canadian federal government funded between 75 and 83 percent of Canadian national museums’ budgets (Butler, 2016). The type and location of the institution, the purpose of funding, and current politics can all influence the amount of private and government funding that museums receive in each country. While these factors deserve further elaboration beyond this paper, I must note that despite these differences, large-scale funding by either the government or private donors equally influences – albeit in different ways – national museums in both Canada and the United States.

Like the Smithsonian, the CMHR is a national museum. In this case, the CMHR will be the focus of effects caused by large-scale government funding. In 2006, the Conservative government promised the CMHR $100 million in capital costs and $21.7 million in annual operating costs, with an additional $40 million and $20 million by the Province of Manitoba and City of Winnipeg respectively (The Asper Foundation, n.d.). In 2007, the capital costs increased to $265 million and then $350 million in 2011. The provincial and federal governments made up the difference in guaranteed loans. The museum was thus able to open on September 20, 2014 (McNabb, 2014).

Due to its federal funding and being under quasi-federal government control and a Crown Corporation, the museum must follow the government’s definitions of terms such as genocide (Lehrer, 2015, p. 1202). As a result, the only genocides that the museum recognizes are ones that occurred outside of North America (Lehrer, 2015, p.1202), ultimately excluding the Indigenous experience in Canada. This absence is accentuated when considering the close proximity of the museum to a monument dedicated to Manitoba’s missing and murdered Aboriginal women (Özsu, 2014). Canada is instead celebrated as a “human rights champion,” in which the “Indigenous Perspectives” gallery highlights compensatory gestures by the Canadian government and limits the coverage of Indigenous suffering (Lehrer, 2015, p. 1200 and 1205). The CMHR therefore remains consistent with the then-acting Conservative Harper government (Lehrer, 2015, p. 1211). As Erica Lehrer, the Canada Research Chair in Museum and Heritage Studies argues, national museums serve to celebrate the nation (2015, p.1211). National museums dealing with delicate and timely matters like the CMHR face a predicament. On the one hand, the funds used to build the CMHR were likely seen as a necessary investment to physically create an institution that was considered ‘aesthetically worthy’ of representing human rights in Canada in a respectful, appropriate, and prominent manner. However, the museum is built only a few kilometres away from Winnipeg’s North End – known as one of the most destitute Canadian cities. According to Umut Özsu, a professor of Law at the University of Manitoba, the museum – an over $300 million endeavor – is seen as an “elite representation” of human rights rather than a realistic, much-needed contribution to Canada’s human rights (Özsu, 2014). Therefore, on the other hand, opening a national museum outside of the capital in an area that is experiencing social and human rights troubles can significantly influence the way donors and visitors perceive the necessity of a pricy institution and alter the institutional message, making government reliance a burden more than a boon.

The CMHR and The Price of Freedom are examples of the federally accepted narratives of the time, but received differing public feedback. Protests took place outside of the CMHR on opening day and
a First Nations music group, A Tribe Called Red, cancelled their appearance at the museum’s public gala. The Manitoba Metis Federation and many Eastern European cultural groups also boycotted the museum, as they opposed the central role of the Holocaust and dismissal of other genocides and human atrocities (Brean, 2014). As of late 2016, the museum has been in $7 million deficit and is hoping that a major portion of the Liberal government’s pledge of $105.9 million to national museums will assist in lowering this deficit (Donnelly, 2016). Additionally, the museum experienced a 14 to 19 percent decrease of visitation throughout all quarters of 2016 compared to the previous year (Annual and Quarterly Financial Reports, 2016-2017). However, as the CMHR has only been open for three years, it is too early to determine whether the financial problems, location, or decrease in visitors will detrimentally affect the museum.

While museums have a fiduciary duty to the public, they also have a philosophical and intellectual duty to challenge the ‘norm,’ and offer different and new viewpoints to visitors relative to what is being depicted in mainstream venues. While visitors should be challenged, they don’t always embrace challenges. There are a number of factors contributing to the differences between the cases examined in this essay. Time and location contribute to public opinion and funding sources and amounts. The Price of Freedom prompted nationalistic spirit that was not only consistent with mainstream media and the elected government, but also provided a sense of justification to the public for their government’s actions, in which they may be emotionally affected. The location of the Smithsonian Institute on the National Mall in the capital of Washington, D.C. automatically, perhaps sub-consciously, becomes associated with the idea of ‘nationalism.’ Conversely, the CMHR – the first national museum located outside of Ottawa – emerged at major historical and cultural crossroads, during discussions around residential schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, making its representation – or lack thereof – of Indigenous Peoples all the more controversial and obvious. These influences of time and location deserve further analysis, but exceed the limits of this paper; their impact on how visitors and donors perceive the institution though cannot be ignored.

Museums ultimately serve the public and have an intellectual and social duty to challenge, but also please visitors. Museums are thus in a conundrum: without sufficient funding, they will face extreme difficulty in upholding these duties. At the same time, funding often comes with stipulations that may influence the way institutions deliver their duties and thus impact visitor experiences. I argue that the public is the utmost concern. Firstly, pleasing the public will increase visitation, repeat visitors, and membership, which all represent convincing quantitative data to measure the success of an exhibition or a museum that would reflect positively when requesting private and/or government funding. Secondly, in an impasse between an institution successfully delivering to the public, and a private or government donor’s ideology being challenged, the former must be the primary concern. The first step to achieving this balanced and trusting partnership, though, must begin with both private and government donors, who should realize the benefits of granting institutions full creative and intellectual independence. It is, after all, publics who visit museums and not governments.
References


