Abstract:
As a University of Toronto publication, Musings, the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) student blog, shares graduate student insights on developing issues in the museum and heritage field. This paper examines the ways in which Musings is maintaining and increasing its relevance as a blog, as well as its methods in keeping abreast of modern issues to attract both new and returning readers. Through four main lenses – current events, difficult legacies, commemoration, and social media – this paper will discuss strategies for writing columns with timeliness in mind, demonstrating the ways in which Musings can make connections with the museum world at large.

Keywords:
digital, social media, relevance, blog, museums
As a University of Toronto publication, Musings, the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) student blog, shares graduate student insights on developing issues in the museum and heritage field. In a changing media landscape, written publications are migrating to the online sphere where they must compete with a proliferation of other content to obtain the attention of readers (McIntyre & Nicolle, 2008). Even in 2014, when the blog was founded at the Faculty of Information, digital engagement strategies and online audience behaviours differed from those of today, subsequently necessitating a lucid and conscientious marketing plan with each new term of governance.

Musings’ mission is “to provide a platform for opinions, critiques, and discussions of contemporary museum practices by emerging museum professionals” (Musings, 2014). In the museum world, institutions have come to rely on social media to promote their content. Consequently, in May 2017, Musings Editor-in-Chief Serena Ypelaar launched a new social media plan to broaden the blog’s audience within the museum sector. This plan included revitalizing Musings’ Instagram account, which had become dormant in previous years; changing the tone of institutional posts to make them more inquisitive and engaging; and promoting social media channels by cross-tagging the institutions Musings writes about.

Remaining current while retaining core institutional values can be a challenge. This paper examines the ways in which Musings is maintaining and increasing its relevance as a blog, as well as its methods in keeping abreast of modern issues to attract both new and returning readers. Through four main lenses – current events, difficult legacies, commemoration, and social media – this paper will discuss strategies for writing columns with timeliness in mind, demonstrating the ways in which Musings can make connections with the museum world at large.

Current Events

This past fall, the Musings team worked to unveil a new column on the blog titled “Beyond Tradition”. Looking at the topics Musings currently offered to its readers, Contributing Editor Emily Welsh hoped to create a dedicated space for the discussion of what some may consider non-traditional museums – such as science centres, zoos, parks, or other informal learning institutions. Welsh also hoped for a column where Contributing Editors can discuss what lessons institutions could learn by looking at other museum genres, similar to a museum peeking their head over the fence to see what is happening in their neighbour’s backyard.

After navigating potential overlap with the existing “Museum Mondays” column, “Beyond Tradition” launched in September 2017 after cultivation by Welsh and fellow contributors Hannah Monkman, Amy Intrator, and Serena Ypelaar. The column focuses on the practices of non-traditional museums situated outside of conventional models, exploring what lessons traditional museums might
take into their own practice, and perhaps vice versa. This focus addresses one of the underlying questions driving the column’s content: “What’s next for museums?”

Looking back at its creation, Welsh believes this is the column’s subconscious origin. In the Master of Museum Studies Program, we are constantly exposed to the pressures museums face regarding their continued relevance, addressing questions of how museums confront our current environmental, political, and social issues. Examples include the election of a controversial president, our ongoing problems with climate change, or actions to address our colonial heritage. External to our program, these same questions are being raised by museum celebrities, such as Nina Simon, or by forecasting groups, such as the Center for the Future of Museums.

The question remains: “Can we design columns that satisfy the current needs of our readers, yet allow for long-term sustainability?” As “Beyond Tradition” explores a potential answer to what is next for museums – a topic which may always be relevant – this column may continue to be picked up by future Contributing Editors and be relevant to Musings’ readers well into the future. When designing new columns, however, Welsh recommends starting with an environmental scan from the outset, a strategy she had neglected in this instance. We must ask ourselves: “What is it that your readers need to know and want to discuss in light of the current political, social, and environmental climates?” The answers may satisfy current needs but will not always lead to sustainable topics; once a solution is found, readers’ needs shift. As such, Contributing Editors should not be afraid to retire old columns as topics begin to require the space.

“She’s My Muse” is a column that currently examines museums – predominately art museums – through the lens of feminism. Setting out to find “museum muses”, Contributing Editor Kathleen Lew examines the successes of women in the museum field and features projects that critically engage with gender. Overall, museums are built on the belief of a universal truth, stability, permanence, and power hierarchies (Hein, 2010). “She’s My Muse” grapples with how women and feminist discourses interact with museums as inherently gendered spaces of institutional power, and how museums can be – and are currently being – transformed. The column strives to be intersectional, reject a coherent category of woman, and examine many roles within the museum – such as artists, professionals, and visitors.

The struggles of balancing diversity and individualized experience makes “She’s My Muse” a difficult, yet fascinating, online project. Feminism and women’s experiences hold endless unique positions and intersections that are impossible to represent in a single blog entry. Lew writes with the understanding that her insight is limited by her own privilege. However, this acknowledgement raises the risk of the column being limited by the writer’s social and political position. A failure to engage outside the walls of a webpage and only provide informative self-contained posts can risk the column becoming a proverbial ‘echo chamber’ – creating a closed environment without active dialogue. The writer’s ideas are constantly reaffirmed by the echoes of itself, failing to consider or welcome outside discourse.
“She’s My Muse” strives to avoid ‘echo chambering’ through active dialogue. Lew interacts with museum practices and feminist discourse to further her knowledge of feminism’s role within contemporary museums, while encouraging readers to ask questions and participate with their own exploration of the subject. With multiple methods of dialogue in the “She’s My Muse” column, Lew responds to current events, social media practices, and exhibitions to facilitate conversation about what is currently occurring in the social climate and in museums. Dialogue is also present when Lew conducts interviews with museum professionals and collaborates with other Contributing Editors.

“She’s My Muse” values open-ended questioning and a critical engagement with social media, both within itself and external to blog posts. Lew has critically engaged with social media through grappling with online campaigns, such as #MeToo, and embedding social media into the blog as objects to be continually analyzed. Lew writes posts with an acknowledgement that they may be shared widely outside the Toronto museum sector. This strategy includes an awareness of both language and academic jargon, as well as incorporating fun titles that can draw readers into the post, while still presenting accessible critical questioning.

Two posts particularly demonstrate Lew’s engagement with current events and social media through the “She’s My Muse” platform: “Harvey Weinstein to the Museum: Art for Healing & Listening” and “Stop What You’re Doing and Look at These Blobs”. The former is Lew grappling with her own responses to #MeToo and the current sexual violence cases in the media. She found comfort and insight in two cultural spaces, including Amalia Pica’s In Praise of Listening at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, and the Walking With Our Sisters travelling art installation. The post asked: “When and how do online campaigns become action off our screens?” The latter explores a series of colourful sculptures by Texas-based artist Dan Lam, and how her Instagram fame raises important questions of constructions of touch and beauty, in and outside the gallery. The playful post sparks thoughts in regard to the question: “How do we interact with beautiful things online and express our desire to touch them?” While appearing to exist on different ends of the spectrum, both posts address social media, difficult boundaries, online sharing, online vs. museum contexts, asking questions, and celebrating women’s accomplishments. These are the values of “She’s My Muse”.

Through writing for the “Exhibition Reviews” column, Contributing Editor Sadie MacDonald has realized that engaging with new exhibitions in museums, and other cultural spaces, can create valuable learning moments when exposing visitors to new and current ideas. Various curators and institutions deliberately use exhibitions as platforms for learning. MacDonald has approached the “Exhibition Reviews” column similarly, seeking out exhibitions that engage with contemporary dialogues and critical issues. In this context, the column has become another tool for exposing audiences to new ideas.

MacDonald had a strategy for selecting focus exhibitions, approaching promising shows with regard to their scale and reach, as well as the story the exhibition was meant to communicate. The 2017
Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) exhibition *Out of the Depths: The Blue Whale Story*, which MacDonald reviewed in the post “How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful: The Blue Whale Story at the ROM,” was created in response to recent events involving blue whales in Canada. Narratively, the exhibition pushed a strong conservational focus and encouraged visitors to become involved in initiatives protecting endangered whale populations. As a blockbuster exhibit at a large provincial museum, this story had the potential to reach a large audience. MacDonald reviewed this exhibit because it was high profile, though she prefers to seek out exhibits that may benefit from increased attention to the ideas they communicate.

Smaller institutions can share new ideas with visitors in ways often more intimate than those experienced at landmark museums, such as the Royal Ontario Museum. MacDonald has twice reviewed exhibits at Toronto’s Artscape Youngplace, looking at the current offerings of the institution as a whole. Past shows at Artscape Youngplace that MacDonald has discussed include *Yonder* and *Soft: transformative queer love and care*. Both exhibits featured the work of emerging artists: Morgan Sears-Williams, the curator of *Soft*, and Madison Leeson, the exhibition’s interpretive writer. Both were sponsored by the Artscape Youngplace career launcher prize (OCAD University Centre for Emerging Artists and Designers, 2017). MacDonald also personally engaged with the work of emerging artists and curators when she visited the January 2018 exhibition *Hacking Black Futures* at BAND (Black Artists’ Networks Dialogue) Gallery and Cultural Centre in Toronto. This exhibition explored concepts such as Afro-Futurism and food sustainability through a Black-focused narrative lens. MacDonald spoke to the exhibition’s curator, Andre Baynes, as well as featured artist Toni Cater, to hear their perspectives and goals for the exhibition. When writing her review after this visit, MacDonald sought the advice of her fellow *Musings* Contributing Editor Kendra Campbell, who writes for the African Canadian History column. Campbell helped MacDonald situate Afro-Futurism within the scope of the article and contextualize BAND Gallery as a progressive institution that celebrates the work of Black artists and thinkers.

Emerging artists featured in exhibitions at smaller institutions can benefit from the attention of a platform such as *Musings*. MacDonald wanted to introduce readers to emerging artists and curators, and employed the tools of the blog format for this purpose. When reviewing exhibits such as *Soft* and *Hacking Black Futures*, MacDonald deliberately named each artist involved in the exhibitions within the blog text, providing hyperlinks to the artists’ online portfolios when available. As a writer for *Musings*, MacDonald has had opportunities to personally engage with new ideas and practices. When writing for a reading public, MacDonald seeks to evoke this experience for readers by highlighting the ideas she has encountered, providing new opportunities for site visitors to gain further knowledge.
Difficult Legacies

As a digital publication, *Musings* is uniquely positioned to respond to difficult issues as they unfold. The blog format allows Contributing Editors to respond to issues without the typical delay of traditional print publications, whilst having the ability to access the blog’s extensive digital archive. *Musings* remains a distinguished source of knowledge in the museum field through generating content that is both timely and informed by extensive research. The “Greatest Hits” column exemplifies the blog’s dedication to relevant content. The column requires the Contributing Editor to revitalize a *Musings* post, published at least eight months earlier, to examine its continued relevance. The column’s most recent Contributing Editor, Amy Intrator, examined older posts to understand how museums have developed strategies to address difficult legacies.

Intrator’s article “Rapid Response Collecting: Adapting Museum Practice in Moments of Crisis” revitalized an article written in 2014 in order to study the development of “rapid response collecting.” This form of collecting was based on the premise of collecting items manufactured and produced in our current era, in order to reflect on current issues and bring such issues into the museum (Jeffery, 2014). Intrator’s article studied how museums have taken up this practice in recent years, such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s recent collection of objects from rallies protesting police brutality. The museum collected these items to bring this current social justice issue within the walls of the museum (Bowley, 2017). The revitalization of a three-year old article allowed Intrator to respond to a museum trend currently unfolding, as well as consider the earlier roots of this development.

The “Exhibition Reviews” column also creates opportunities for dialogue around difficult legacies. As a writer for this column and an emerging museum professional in her own right, MacDonald has been exposed to best practices in terms of approaching and communicating challenging histories through exhibitions. What can audiences learn from observing institutional representations of such histories, and what can these representations teach museum professionals in particular?

One such exhibition that MacDonald reviewed for *Musings* was *Witness Blanket* during its tour stop at Museum London. This installation consists of a wall composed of artifacts collected from former residential schools in Canada, as well as poetry and artwork providing testimony from Indigenous survivors of residential schools. MacDonald was invited to the opening of *Witness Blanket* at Museum London, where she observed representatives from local Indigenous communities perform a smudging ceremony in the museum space. Later in the reception, Indigenous speakers from different generations, including a residential school survivor, spoke of the effects of the residential school system in Canada. *Witness Blanket* was an exhibition of healing and solidarity for Indigenous survivors, and their families, first and foremost. It was also a moment for individuals from settler communities, such as MacDonald
herself, to listen and learn. MacDonald attempted to echo this perspective in her review of the exhibition for *Musings*, “Whose Voice I Hear in the Winds: Witness Blanket at Museum London”; she provided a content warning at the start of the article and provided a link to residential school survivor counselling hotlines at the end. She also used the blog post to reflect on her responses to the exhibition as someone from the Canadian settler community. In this way, MacDonald sought not only to describe instances of best practice when representing difficult legacies, but also exemplify those practices in her own coverage of the exhibition.

Another exhibition MacDonald reviewed was *The Franklin Exploration* travelling pop-up installation at the Royal Ontario Museum. When presenting the history and recent developments of the ill-fated 1845 Franklin expedition, this exhibit discussed the role played by Inuit in recovering lost pieces of the Franklin story and acknowledges how Inuit voices were previously overlooked by Western investigators. MacDonald reflected on this approach in her review, analyzing the exhibit in terms of it serving as an example of how to discuss challenging histories. In *The Franklin Exploration’s* case, this approach was to acknowledge past oversights and take action to correct them.

Challenging histories can also be confronted in exhibitions through celebration. For example, the 2018 exhibition *Morning Star*, sponsored by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto and hosted at the Jackman Humanities Institute on the University of Toronto campus, seeks to uplift Indigenous artists and highlight their accomplishments without making concessions for the comfort of viewers from settler communities. This approach is one that MacDonald tried to be mindful of when selecting and reviewing exhibitions, attempting to reflect it when discussing *Morning Star* in the article “Through Darkness and Light: Current Exhibitions at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto”. Celebrating and uplifting the creativity and agency of oppressed communities while looking beyond a narrative of suffering can be an effective method for discussing difficult legacies.

Writing exhibition reviews for *Musings* has helped MacDonald engage productively with challenging histories and has exposed her to different contemporary museum practices and alternative community perspectives. By visiting exhibits and reflecting on their interpretive methods, MacDonald has observed strategies for how museum professionals can be more engaged and aware, in ways such as actively including and celebrating overlooked voices. MacDonald writes about exhibits that espouse values of mindful representation in the hope that these stories will provide *Musings* readers with opportunities to learn about these values in practice.
Commemoration

As commemoration and public memory shapes the basis of heritage preservation, Musings must take great care to represent these issues in an ethical manner. Ultimately, as the blog is a public platform linked to a graduate program at the University of Toronto, Musings has an extended digital lifespan. As Editor-in-Chief, Ypelaar ensures that historical narratives and past legacies are remembered in a respectful manner throughout the blog, placing emphasis on “remembering responsibly”. She now writes the “Museum Mysteries” and “Walk of Fame” columns, both of which have involved the re-examination of contested and untold histories. Under Ypelaar’s purview, “Museum Mysteries” deals with controversial case studies in an effort to move away from “safe” topics and challenge the boundaries of interpretation.

Beyond mere commemoration itself, asking provocative questions about why we, as a society, are interested in the things we are, and why we remember things that are mysterious, can open up new opportunities to appraise the nature of remembering and its ramifications for museum work. The inquisitive tone of the column draws people in, while still relying on evidence and not delving too far into speculation or conspiracy. For “Museum Mysteries”, and the blog as a whole, Contributing Editors must prioritize offering an informed perspective while welcoming the opinions of readers. However, taking a stance is important and valuable in online discussions since museums are not neutral spaces. Trying to remain noncommittal in the writing process could potentially be harmful, as it favours the “whatever” interpretation Cheryl Meszaros warns against (Meszaros, 2008, p. 163).

One of the crucial questions to consider when exploring commemoration is, “is commemoration an endorsement?” Commemoration is important in society, but erasure is dangerous as it promotes a sense of amnesia. In the current climate of political correctness, commemoration sits in a difficult position. Removing evidence of past commemoration may be tempting, but the tension between wiping away shameful histories and openly criticizing them remains. From a communications perspective, Meszaros promotes the “authoritative voice” (Meszaros, 2008, p. 164) of museums and their accountability to audiences, arguing that institutions risk misinterpretation when they lack transparency.

Taking these issues into consideration, the “Walk of Fame” column also focuses on commemoration, specifically regarding individuals in the museum and heritage world. This year’s edition has particularly focused on bringing untold stories to light. Why are certain stories frequently neglected? Where are the patterns and what does that tell us about museums and their treatment of certain historical and cultural narratives? It is crucial to confront these issues directly in order to question the “status quo” of museum practices. There is no universal best practice, as every museum is different, but taking a “hands-off” approach toward difficult topics is less than ideal. Since the lack of engagement can be construed as complicity, museums must be wary of the messages they put out (or neglect to put out), even if a trepidation to misrepresent these histories is the cause. Difficult or marginalized narratives should
be promoted, but with great care. In a February 2018 edition of “Walk of Fame”, Ypelaar wrote about Richard Pierpoint, a Black military leader in the War of 1812, and examined his lack of recognition in Canadian history. Why is Pierpoint only commemorated during Black History Month? Why did Ypelaar herself choose to address it in February? Why do we not talk more about Black History all year round? In an effort to address these questions and offer museums tools to increase representation, African Canadian History columnist Kendra Campbell concluded Black History Month by publishing a guide on how to evaluate museums’ responsibilities to confront anti-black racism in institutions.

Within the vein of relevant media, “Walk of Fame” has also looked at ways museums and interpretation can make history more accessible to modern audiences. One article, “TURN: (Exposing) Washington’s Spies” used the example of the AMC TV series TURN: Washington’s Spies, which interprets the story of George Washington’s under-recognized spies during the American Revolution. As a historical drama, TURN fosters connections to people from the past by focusing on emotional storytelling, an excellent way to make connections to museum visitors and blog readers alike. Museum strategies discussed on the blog can be similarly applied to expand our own audience and increase their responsiveness.

Social Media

As a digital publication, Musings relies on online platforms to communicate with its readers. Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, are used to promote the blog’s content and establish a connection to a general audience, as well as museum professionals. Musings regularly utilizes social media functions, such as incorporating trending hashtags on Twitter, to reach new audiences. A general audience without a strong connection to museums is not likely to seek out a museum publication; however, they might click a link to an article if the content seems interesting and relevant beyond the scope of museums.

While social media provides a means of reaching a general audience, the blog also values its relationships with museum professionals, using social media to build such connections. The blog utilizes social media functions like tagging institutions directly in an attempt to create a dialogue with professionals in the field. Just as museums are beginning to use social media to connect with their audiences in a more personal manner, Musings depends on social media in order to “redefine relationships” with its readership (Kelly, 2013, p. 54). Social media allows the blog to connect with new audiences and build relationships within the museum field, but the challenge lies in finding a balance between the different forms of interaction while building the blog’s image as a reputable source.

When Ypelaar started as Musings Editor-in-Chief in April 2017, she wanted to revitalize Musings’ social media strategy and focus on new ways the blog could engage and broaden its following. The first
step was Instagram. Numerous museums now use Instagram to promote their institutions, but the blog’s account had been stagnant for over a year. The decision to restore Musings’ presence in May 2017 served as a gateway to broadening the blog’s audience, and it was the first step toward cultivating a wider circle.

Comprising the social media and administration team, Ypelaar and Intrator also changed the institutional voice across platforms in the hope of gathering more interactions. Having taken advantage of Instagram stories and “going live”, the blog’s administrative team prioritized its public face to further public awareness. The blog also follows current Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) students and alumni on Instagram, interacting directly with their museum-related content. Over a three-month period, the Instagram account saw a doubling in post impressions from November to January, directly following the decision to follow MMSt students – many of whom followed back. Collectively, these engagement practices resulted in an 85% increase in the number of Instagram followers.

On Facebook, an older platform that garners mixed feedback in the way of engagement, the first strategy was to individually invite Facebook friends to like the page using the “Invite” function. Coupled with the revamped institutional voice, the Facebook page has seen a 56% increase in page “likes”. Across all official Musings platforms, the administrative team of Ypelaar and Intrator frequently “mention” the institutions Musings writes about by tagging their accounts directly. This key strategy not only maximizes exposure, but also creates direct links, both literally and figuratively, between major institutions and the blog. This action also serves to make institutions aware of the dialogues on our platform, especially concerning their content.

Most recently, Musings launched its Outreach Hit List, a marketing tool suggested by Contributing Editor Lana Tran. This project involves crowdsourcing a list of institutions across the country, as well as those which Musings has written about. Contributing Editors provided various institutional contacts and identified potential inroads for forging connections with museums and institutions in the field. The Editor-in-Chief will use this information – both in the current term under Ypelaar and possibly in the future – to initiate and maintain networks on a national scale. Musings reaches out to these museums directly and through alumni, if applicable, to establish relationships and self-promote.

Contributing Editors can also use their personal social media platforms to promote their work, share the work of their fellow writers, and help introduce the blog to a wider audience. A proven strategy for those using personal accounts, as Emily Welsh has illustrated on Twitter, has been to directly mention social media users who are discussed in the writer’s post, such as institutions or individuals. Gaining “retweets” and “likes” in this fashion allows the blog to benefit from the promotion and reach a wider audience. Those using personal accounts may be more direct in their tags than the official promotional media can afford to be at times. However, social media use should not be focused solely on gaining views and interactions; perhaps our future considerations should look at how we can use our platforms to initiate discussion.
Conclusion

In revamping Musings’ digital engagement strategies and diversifying the questions the blog considers in its work, the editorial team can foster a greater spirit of engagement and dialogue in the museum world. On a local, and even national scale, the museum and heritage field is a small one, and Musings has earned a reputation for critical thinking and thoughtful reflection. Nevertheless, more can always be done to improve the blog and the ways in which it connects to readers. By using a conscientious digital strategy in the way of choosing timely topics and cultivating a strong and active social media following, Musings can achieve its full potential of inviting critical discourse and inspiring fellow young museum professionals to think outside the box.

References