

# Focus Issue: Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety: Guest Editors' Foreword

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and Samantha Snell<sup>3</sup> 

Heritage organizations come in every shape and size, specializing in every niche one could imagine from bobble heads to bonobos and from multimedia artwork to multi-storied buildings. The museum professionals who work in these institutions bring a diverse body of knowledge to the table, whether they are employees, consultants, or volunteers. The strength in our diversity of skills, experiences, and knowledge cannot be underestimated.

There are, however, two things that tie all such organizations and people together: a mission to preserve tangible and intangible heritage and, simultaneously, to share it with others. A long history of discourse around the topics of preservation and access persists. Often, it is framed as finding a balance or compromise between the two, as the goals and methods of one generally contradict the other. Where access advocates want opportunities for all people to experience and learn from the heritage on display, preservation advocates focus on reducing risks and mitigating damage that is associated with display conditions.

Approaches to preservation and access tend to vary depending on the collection type, institutional goals, and available resources. Where a contemporary art gallery may strive to have minimal stations and vitrines between the art and the self-guided visitor, a historic house may lean heavily on physical barriers and guided tours. The first approach aims to support seamless connectivity between visitors and the works on display, and the latter aims to mitigate unwanted behavior and accidents in the exhibit spaces. These approaches may shift depending on current social movements, museological thinking, and the beliefs of the staff and leadership.

Today, there is a growing emphasis for equitable access to collections, which is likely tied to the codification of Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion (DEAI) principles. DEAI calls for support and recognition of groups of people who have been

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historically underserved and underrepresented. Museums across North America are rewriting their missions and adapting their programs and exhibits to better reflect the communities they serve. Access, engagement, and shared stewardship are just a few exciting maxims of our professional generation.

Several decades ago, the emphasis was on preservation. The common turn of phrase one might hear or see in a mission statement was, “to preserve collections in perpetuity.” These epistemological shifts are important for the continued growth of the field and as practitioners it is exciting to be working during this time of development. However, this means we are constantly exploring and testing new ideas and approaches. We have new goals and perhaps some guideposts, but the roadmap is still being drawn.

The Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety (PEAS) Working Group formed out of a shared interest in balancing access and preservation, and a desire to learn from one another. At the outset, the working group identified five objectives which would serve to accomplish this goal:

1. To provide a platform for challenging conversations and collaborative solutions on this topic.
2. To collect data about interactions with exhibit material, to better understand visitor behavior, and make that material available to museums and allied professionals.
3. To seek out and review new methodologies that protect collection items on exhibit, enhance public access, and cultivate behavior that promotes collections stewardship.
4. To provide interdisciplinary expertise, recommendations, and resources to organizations and individuals that seek to improve protection of collections on exhibit and visitor safety.
5. To promote and advocate for the implementation of proven strategies within the field.

We had an almost universal desire from our members to crosspollinate ideas with different specialties. Why reinvent the wheel, when our Collections, Education, Security, Facilities, Visitor Services, or Health and Safety colleagues already have tried-and-true methodologies that can be adopted and tweaked to suit our needs? After all, many of us are experts at MacGyver-ing tools and ideas intended for other industries to fit our needs.

After a year of discussion and gathering information from our professional networks, the PEAS Working Group asked, how can we best harness this multidisciplinary perspective and share the information gathered over the past year? In a stroke of good fortune, a couple of the PEAS members were working on a journal issue<sup>1</sup> which was to be

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1. That Journal Issue was centered around the theme of health and safety for cultural heritage collections and professionals. It is now available online as *Collections* Volume 19 Issue 2, <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/cjxa/19/2>.

published through *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*. After connecting with the editor and many conversations with our members, the PEAS Working Group decided to assemble a focus issue; one that looked at this subject from multiple perspectives and would provide practical guidance. We hoped that through these adjacencies, readers would see where there are parallels and opportunities for collaboration across specialties in their own organizations and regions.

The PEAS Working Group began soliciting article contributions from its membership and then broadly across the field through a call for papers. This not only accomplished the PEAS' first objective, "to provide a platform for challenging conversations and collaborative solutions," but it had the added benefit of creating opportunities for PEAS members to connect with other interested individuals who wanted to share their story. The resulting compilation of articles represents a cross section of stories, experiences, and lessons learned from cultural heritage specialist and allied professionals, largely based in North America. Their contents are summarized here to help readers navigate the journal issue, but we encourage you to take in the publication as a whole. Many of the articles play off each other and build upon ideas.

Starting from the beginning:

In the *Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety (PEAS): Reflections on Conference Surveys* article, the PEAS Working Group set out to analyze the responses to a questionnaire on access and safety issues that they disseminated to colleagues at four different conferences in 2021. While the initial intent was to establish some benchmarks, the group quickly realized that there was so much more to tease apart from the respondents' answers. The resulting article discusses the group's findings and poses some thought-provoking questions about where we are and where we want the field to go.

The next article is a case study on the Molina Family Latino Gallery (MFLG), the inaugural exhibit for the National Museum of the American Latino. For new museums, there is a unique opportunity to build policies and practices from scratch, without a legacy of systems and processes dictating exhibit minutia. Jenarae Bautista and Sarah Elston are members of the team responsible for the creation, curation, and maintenance of the MFLG. In their article, *The Molina Family Latino Gallery (MFLG): A PEAS Case Study*, they examine the many perspectives that went into the implementation and day to day upkeep of the exhibit. They also discuss their experiences with the gallery and what they hope to carry forward into future practices for the new National Museum of the American Latino.

Interestingly, while combing through the field's literature to find content on this subject, there was little available from the security perspective. In talking with some security professionals, this made perfect sense. Printing your institutions methodologies creates additional risks, which is counter to the objectives of museum security. In the next article, *Challenges Requiring New Thinking in Museum Security*, Francis Demes, Jaime Juarez, and James Clark attempt to address this space in the literature without creating new risks. In this article they provide guidance from the security perspective on how to analyze

vulnerabilities, examine new concerns that have arisen from our modern world, and enhance policies and procedures that protect cultural property.

While there may be some tried and true compromises that address access and safety issues, Robert Waller and Jane Henderson turn this conversation on its head by asking us, the audience, to search for ways of optimizing these decisions rather than viewing things as a necessary compromise. In their article, *The Problem of Compromise in Conservation and Exhibit Decision Making*, Waller and Henderson push us to consider what are our risk appetites and risk tolerances as individuals, departments, and institutions, and how do we make decisions based on those values and goals.

Following this reexamination on compromising in conservation, National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) conservators, Jennifer Herrmann and Dong Eun Kim, present two strategies they utilize for making data-driven and scientifically informed decisions in gallery spaces. In this note from the field, *A Collaborative Conservation Perspective: Ensuring Preservation, Access and Safety in Exhibits*, they present these tools as examples of multidisciplinary approaches that can have a significant impact on the preservation of and access to collections.

In *Defensible Collections: Designing a Safe Exhibit Space*, Jeffrey Hirsch and Casey Gallagher, discuss the importance of design and architecture, and its impact on exhibit access and safety. This update to their 2013 publication in the *Collection Forum*,<sup>2</sup> looks at research happening in the social science and cultural heritage fields, and discusses how those ideas can be incorporated into the design process to mitigate and reduce problem areas in museum spaces.

Sometimes the collections themselves present a barrier to access and safety. In *A Collaborative Approach to Hazardous & Contaminated Collections Conundrums*, Holly Cusack-McVeigh, Mark Wilson, and Sarah Halter share insights into a unique, multidisciplinary research project. Students from the Occupational Health and Safety program at Purdue University and the Museum Studies program at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis collaborated to survey the Indiana Medical History collections for hazardous materials. This project highlights how cultural heritage professionals must also protect themselves and visitors from collections.

In the following article, Julianne Snider continues this conversation on health and safety issues, but with a special emphasis on adapting policies and procedures to better address modern vulnerabilities. In *The Wheel is Already Invented: Planning for the Next Crisis*, Snider examines the operations and policies implemented in her region during the SARS-COV-2 response and extrapolates from their lessons learned. She presents ideas and recommendations on what we can do now to ensure that our public and collections are better protected in the event of a future crisis.

While the Pandemic highlighted some new risks and considerations for access and safety, it also provided an interesting moment in time for reflection on current

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2. The original publication is now archived and publicly available here: [https://spnhc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/cofo\\_27.pdf](https://spnhc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/cofo_27.pdf).

practices. In the article, *Breaking Down Barriers: Adopting a Holistic Approach to Safety, Collections Management, and the Visitor Experience*, Carrie Heflin ruminates on her professional experiences in education and visitor engagement, and proposes some solutions for common access and safety issues from an operational perspective that encourages multidisciplinary communication.

Delving deeper into education and access, in the article, *Accessibility and Exhibit Safety: The Importance of Sensory Maps*, Emma Cieslik discusses her work on the “Morning at the Museum” program hosted by Access Smithsonian. This program aims to help visitors curate their own experiences in a safe and engaging manner that is unique to their needs. Cieslik also shares her personal thoughts and extensive research into accessibility programming at institutions across the United States.

Finally, to bookend the conversation and build upon the 2021 PEAS conference survey, the Working Group hosted Listening and Learning sessions in early 2023. These sessions brought together industry professionals from across North America to discuss their institution’s approaches to access and safety in small groups. The concluding article, *Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety (PEAS): Listening and Learning Sessions*, summarizes these conversations and attempts to answer the research question, “What are the current practices [that aim to promote access, preservation, and safety] being implemented and how effective are they?”

For those who are new to this topic, we hope this Focus Issue provides a welcome introduction to thinking about access, safety, and preservation for cultural heritage organizations in the twenty-first century. For museum veterans, we hope you find some new strategies and solutions that you can take back to your organization. Regardless of your background, specialty, or stage of career, the PEAS Working Group hopes this wonderful array of articles inspires new ideas and multidisciplinary conversations that build upon the work of our predecessors and colleagues of today.

When the PEAS Working Group set out to publish a Focus Issue with *Collection: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, the goal was to establish a foundation for our collective roadmap—one that we can continue to work on together. What we discovered in the process was that we don’t exactly know where we are going, and that is okay as long as we continue to move forward in a positive and hopeful direction.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge our editor, Juilee Decker, and the entire PEAS Working Group for their contributions to this Focus Issue. This would not be possible without you; from those who wrote articles to those who shared ideas to those who made interpersonal connections and to those who took meeting notes. Every step, email, gesture, and contribution played an important role in making this publication possible. We thank you for your support, time, expertise, and spirit throughout this endeavor.

We invite you to join the conversation around exhibit access and safety by reaching out to the guest editors or by visiting the PEAS website, <https://ncp.si.edu/PRICE-PEAS>. We look forward to hearing from you.

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Hirsch	Jeffrey
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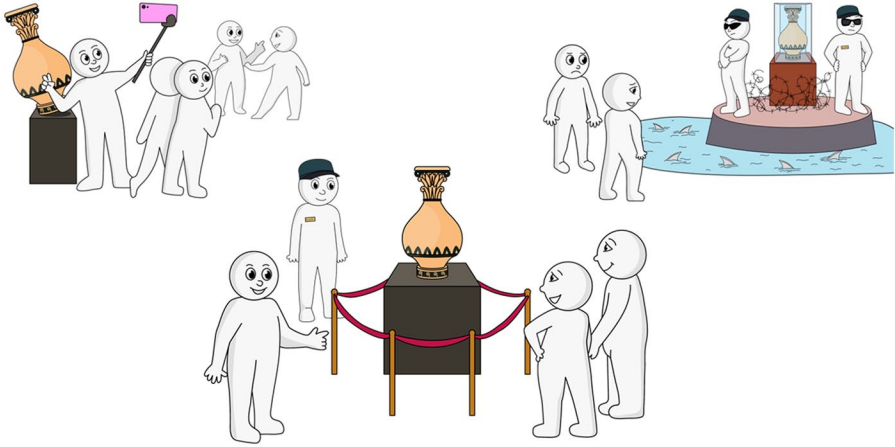
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Willman	Abbey
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**Figure 1.** Over emphasis on Access. Balance; Over emphasis on security. Cartoons by Sofia Merchuk © Protect Heritage Corp.

### Author's Note

Cali Martin is now affiliated to Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA.

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**Jeffrey Hirsch**, With over 30 years of experience as an architect, is the founding Principal of Hirsch Culture Works. He helps museums reimagine how space and building infrastructure support an institution and its many stakeholders. Jeff's expertise includes issues related to the museum environment, public engagement, and the preservation of cultural heritage. He brings



a keen interest in fostering a cooperative and creative project team and an understanding of sustainability as an environmental, financial, and intellectual strategy. Jeff received his Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Texas at Austin.

**Cali Martin** is a Collections Steward at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. In this role, she oversees all aspects of storage, safety, security, access, care, and emergency management for the NMAI collections and loans on exhibit. She collaborates across departments, facilitates exhibit work and collections access, and provides educational opportunities and training to NMAI and SI staff as well as across Indian Country. She is Kaw (Kansa) and an enrolled member of the Osage Nation. She graduated from the University of Oklahoma with an MA in Museum Studies in 2011 and the University of West Florida with a BA in Cultural Anthropology in 2008.

**Melissa Miller** is the Collections Emergency Program Specialist at the Smithsonian National Collections Program. She provides programmatic support to the Preparedness and Response in Collections Emergencies (PRICE) Team, the first pan-institutional collections emergency management team at Smithsonian. Her work focuses on the development of training opportunities, resources, and logistical mechanisms that support emergency management programs at the Smithsonian Museums, Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Gardens and National Zoo. Melissa has a Bachelor's degree in Art Conservation and Anthropology from the University of Delaware, and a M.A. in Museum Studies from Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis.

**Samantha Snell** is the Collections Management Specialist for the Smithsonian National Collections Program (NCP). In this position, she works to improve Smithsonian-wide collections emergency management and collections management professional development training in addition to supporting other priority pan-Institutional collections initiatives. Prior to joining NCP in 2016, Sam had a 15 year career at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum's collections department. She earned her BA from Moravian College, Bethlehem PA, and is C2CCare Outreach Working Group, the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a former AIC Emergency Committee co-chair, ARCS Emergency Programming Subcommittee chair, and PEAS co-chair.