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Museums as "Dangerous" Sites

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Jane Addams is probably a member of more organizations international, socialistic or communistic in character than any other one individual in the United States.... It is Jane Addams who is directly responsible for the growth of the radical movement among women in America. It is Jane Addams who is in the forefront of the battle in the attempt to disarm our nation. It is Hull House, the institution of Jane Addams, that has time and again been the scene of radical meetings where Communists, I.W.W.'s [International Workers of the World], anarchists, socialists and all subversive breeds have found shelter.

—Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) file of suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt

Jane Addams, who became America's first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, was considered at one point in history to be "Public Enemy #1" and also "The Most Dangerous Person in the United States." Addams' own FBI file, on display in the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum library, is remarkably boring. It is in her friend Carrie Chapman Catt's file, however, where we find the reasons why Addams was considered to be so threatening. (Let this be a note for all of us to check our friends' FBI files!) As the above quote demonstrates, Addams was considered "dangerous" because she was a suffragist who agitated for equal rights for women and an unwavering peace activist in a time of war. But the crucial reason why she was under FBI surveillance was for the simple reason that she opened the Hull-House Settlement doors, where she lived and worked, to people who did not always have popular or mainstream views. Addams created opportunities for people to assemble and discuss controversial ideas. She recognized that all the protest in the world would not be enough to bring about a more socially just world and that we also needed to have spaces to convene, argue, and grapple with hard issues. The Hull-House Settlement was this place for many immigrants, social reformers, writers, and others who found a home therein. Within the settlement walls, people were able to unleash their imaginations and envision a different world. This commitment to radically democratic and inclusive public space challenged power and authority.

The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum cultivates this art of being dangerous, and it is this obstinate and joyful embracement of this legacy that I will explore in this piece. We believe that a truly public sphere is one that exists to foster dissent and dialogue and this notion inspires our exhibits and public programming. This is what Iris Marion Young argued was the way that democratic pluralism is best served—when discourse is not reduced to the procedures of superficial consensus building, but rather structured around fostering dissent (Young, 2000). Many

people assume that being a public institution means presenting a so-called "fair and balanced" point of view. But the museum draws its inspiration from the history of the Hull-House Settlement. We use history as a lens through which to understand and approach contentious topics and to engage the public on critical social issues that are too often evaded or muffled in "polite society." We believe that our mission at the museum includes not only preserving and collecting artifacts, or telling the exciting stories of Hull-House reformers and the immigrants and community members that streamed through the settlement's doors each week, but also showing the continuing relevance of this history. We do not preserve history by calcifying it. The museum tells the story of Jane Addams so that it can have meaning to multiple generations to come in order to educate, excite, and inspire social change.

Three examples of recent projects at the museum will illustrate how we have interpreted and grappled with Hull-House history in the attempt to honor and remain true to our dangerous legacy.

Alternative Labeling and Alternative Lifestyles

We live in a culture where we have grown accustomed to being addressed as consumers in every instant of our lives. Whether it is shopping for deodorant, cars, social causes, or an education, the value of human life and our significance as sentient, sensuous, human beings has been eclipsed by our ability to shop and our perceived purchasing power. This is also the case in many museums, where the gift store has become a seamless extension of the exhibit. However, other forms of consumption also permeate the museum, most notably in the way history is "sold" through the labels on artifacts and text panels. Visitors are expected to "buy wholesale" what we tell them happened at our sites.

As informal sites of learning, public museums have the potential to encourage critical thinking and questioning, to cultivate the emergence of a

new political agent. This would require public museums to foster curiosity and inquisitiveness and to create exhibits and spaces for the visitor to not simply consume history as objectively presented, but to actively engage in history and participate in the making of its meaning. The former way of approaching history represents the past in a way that misleads us to believe we are somehow outside of history, looking in. The latter allows us to enter into a fresh relationship with the past so we can assume responsibility, feel connected, and claim it as our own. One example of how we have tried to do this is through an alternative labeling project that we launched around one of our most captivating historic objects, a painting from 1898 of Mary Rozet Smith, by the accomplished artist and teacher Alice Kellogg Taylor (see Figure 32.1). There is no consensus among scholars or family members about how to describe Rozet Smith and Addams' relationship. Rozet Smith is sometimes described in historical records as a prominent Hull-House patron, and at other times as Addams' companion, her lesbian lover, or life-long partner. The history of sexuality is



Figure 32.1 Mary Rozet Smith, Alice Kellogg Taylor, 1898. Used with permission of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.

often a site of contestation. Given the cultural and historical specificity of language, there are problems with appropriating current understandings of words such as "lesbian" or "life-partner" to a Victorian era relationship between women. Jane Addams' own complex relationship to intimacy, sexuality, and desire should also be considered. There were also additional questions that we wanted to consider: Why should we care? What is at stake in how we describe their relationship? Who gets to decide? We wanted the painting to inspire visitors to think more critically and broadly about the history that is interpreted by and within the museum. In addition, we hope visitors make connections between and to reflect on their relationship to that history and issues in their daily lives.

We turned to the research of respected historians including Victoria Brown, Lucy Knight, Allen Davis, and Rima Schultz. We also consulted historians of sexuality and gender such as John D'Emilio and Lauren Berlant. From their studies, we crafted three different museum labels, and we asked museum visitors to post their feedback on a comment board on display where people could post their comments in the Museum. The labels as they appear read as follows:

(A). Mary Rozet Smith, Alice Kellogg Tyler, 1898. Mary Rozet Smith was Jane Addams's companion for decades and one of the top financial supporters of Hull-House. Alice Kellogg Tyler's relationship with the Hull-House began in 1890. She taught, lectured and exhibited here until her early death in 1900. A teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago, Kellogg Tyler received many honors for her work.

(B). Mary Rozet Smith was Jane Addams's life partner and one of the top financial supporters of Hull-House. Given the emotional intimacy that is expressed in their letters to one another, it is hypothesized that they were lesbians. It is, however, difficult to determine this for sure, particularly considering the differences in sexual attitudes of the Victorian era in which she lived and Jane Addams's own complex reflections on the ideals of platonic love.

(C). Mary Rozet Smith was Jane Addams's partner and one of the top financial supporters of Hull-House. They shared a deep emotional attachment and affection for one another. Only about one half of the first generation of college women ever married men. Many formed emotional, romantic and practical attachments to other women. In letters, Addams refers to herself and Rozet Smith as "married" to each other. Hull-House women redefined domesticity in a variety of ways. Addams writes in another letter to Rozet Smith, "Dearest you have been so heavenly good to me all these weeks. I feel as if we had come into a healing domesticity which we never had before, as if it were the first affection had offered us." Jane Addams burned many of her letters from Mary Rozet Smith.

There have been many thousands of responses, and after placing the project on the museum's website, people from around the globe have shared their comments.¹ We have been surprised by the great diversity of our visitors as exhibited through their comments and we have learned about their hunger for historical information that moves beyond simple dates and facts. And perhaps the most important thing that this exhibit has taught us is that democracy is messy and strangely unfamiliar. Inviting visitors to step out of their prescribed role as consumers means we must also relinquish our identities as the purveyors of knowledge. Surrendering control over the dominant narrative is both terrifying and liberating because it allows us to enter into a new relationship with the museum visitor. This project allows us to begin to appreciate a truly public sphere for discourse and dissent such as the one we talk about in our tours.

Preserving the Public Sphere, Preserving Tomatoes

Hull-House history is a reminder that the public sphere is something that is and has always been historically constructed, creatively imagined, and defined as the result of struggle. In 1889, before women had won the right to vote, when white gloves and corsets were still the norm and young women of privilege were expected to get married immediately after college, Jane Addams paved a new path. Addams stormed the public sphere and co-founded the Hull-House Settlement with her best friend Ellen Gates Starr in Chicago's 19th Ward—one of the most impoverished areas of the city and home to the majority of the city's immigrant population.

As part of the first generation of American women to attend college, Jane Addams broke through boundaries and crossed numerous borders. She was a White person working in communities of color; a wealthy, privileged person addressing issues of poverty; and a woman who entered into the male-dominated and male-defined public sphere. The Hull-House Settlement also facilitated this kind of border-crossing for the communities of people who came through its doors. Nine thousand immigrants a week came to Hull-House to participate in programs that included music, poetry, art, citizenship, sex education, and literature classes. There were nightly lectures about race, suffrage, and economics and integrated sports clubs and teams. The settlement fed their intellectual curiosity and their hunger for community and it also fed their bellies. The Hull-House Coffee House and the public kitchen operated from 1891 and was a space where people dined, communed, nourished, and sustained themselves and each other.

One of the most brilliant ways of framing Hull-House efforts is described by Dolores Hayden as "The Grand Domestic Revolution." In her illuminating book of the same title, she argues that the reform work that Hull-House engaged in, such as advocating for public housing and public health, working to end child labor, shutting down sweat-shops, and creating the juvenile justice court, should be understood as forms of civic housekeeping. Hull-House reformers, like many other women of that period, extended the notion of home into the public sphere, demanding that the state take responsibility for the basic needs of its people. Hull-House reformers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Florence Kelley, and Julia Lathrop used the language and vision of domesticity as a framework for their social vision and for interpreting their unconventional lives and transgression from the norms.

Even the cooperative living spaces that were created by Hull-House architecture disrupted the domestic space that made women's work invisible and called into question the "women's sphere" and "women's work." The settlement house, both physically and metaphorically, challenged the division of household space from public space and the separation of the domestic economy from the political economy.

Throughout history, the excluded have flipped the script and creatively used what has been narrowly prescribed to them as a weapon for taking hold of cultural apparatuses. The Hull-House reformers placed old forms of domesticity into new frameworks and changed their significance.

We decided to re-open the kitchen at the Hull-House Museum and draw on the "domestic revolution" begun by the Hull-House, but re-interpreted for our own day. *Re-thinking Soup* uses our historic Residents' Dining Hall as a public forum, a museum exhibit, a learning center, and a laboratory. This room is a beautifully reconstructed Arts and Crafts style dining hall that hosted Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gertrude Stein, and other important social reformers. They met to share meals and ideals, debate one another, and conspire to change the world. Upton Sinclair came to eat supper every night at the Hull-House while he was writing *The Jungle*, the book that in 1904 initiated food purity legislation and transformed the way people think about the food on their plates. Our program includes a series of community conversations

on contemporary issues about food, a topic that is in the headlines every day and has emerged as one of the world's most important issues. Jane Addams herself advocated for access to food both locally and around the world, all the while linking food issues to women's rights, labor, poverty, and other social causes. We take her broad framework of food justice as our own as we looked both to the past and to the future. We make connections between problems of obesity in the United States and other parts of the world where millions of people are finding food prices slipping out of their reach and starving. We ask what exporting of our fast-food values has to do with the images of Haitians reduced to eating cakes made out of mud. We reflect on our agricultural policies and what they might have to do with tortilla protests and unrest in Mexico, and we discuss the effects of scientific innovations in seed engineering on farming communities throughout the globe.

Every Tuesday at noon, an average of 75–100 people gather over a free, hot meal of soup and bread made from local ingredients to hear from activists, farmers, doctors, economists, artists, and guest chefs about a range of issues. Topics including urban agriculture and gentrification, food in schools, the politics of food service vendors, immigration regulation and labor policies that affect those who pick and harvest our food, alternative farming practices, and environmental concerns. We wanted our own efforts to be "sustainable" in every sense of the word. To this end, we became co-producers and started an urban agricultural site on a nearby vacant property. (The idea of co-production further challenges the consumer identity.) This endeavor creates an opportunity for farm-to-school partnerships with local public schools, offers a community garden, and includes food-focused museum tours and activities. We now grow our own food and can, preserve and pickle what we can't use right away. This led us to another project called *Preserving Equality: Preserving Fruits and Vegetables*, where we playfully invoke the importance of "preservation" in both historic house museums and in the local food movement. Preserving fruits and vegetables is a critical part of sustainability. It allows us, for example, to partake of the delicious scent and flavor of a peach in the dead of winter by opening a jar of local preserves, instead of relying on peaches shipped from halfway across the globe. Since local fruits and vegetables are so abundant and delicious during certain times of the year, we decided to can the excess and sell them to the public to both generate income for the soup kitchen and to educate the public about seasonality. This project would also present the opportunity to honor the trailblazing women of "the grand domestic revolution," many of whom earned home economics degrees because Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees were denied to women.² On each label of canned tomatoes or peaches, is the brief biography of an important revolutionary (see Figure 32.2 and Figure 32.3).

This project has not only allowed us to bring two important movements together but to expand the stories that are told at the museum. I strongly believe that an ethical imperative of any history museum is to ask ourselves every so often, "Which stories are being told and which are not?" And more importantly, we can begin to ask the even more dangerous question: "Who gains by leaving these stories out and what is at stake in

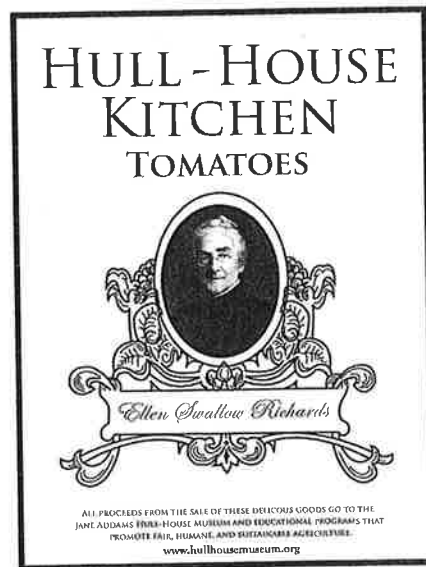


Figure 32.2 Hull-House Kitchen Tomatoes, featuring Ellen Swallow Richards. Created by Sarah Higgins. Used with permission of the artist and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.



Figure 32.3 Hull-House Kitchen Tomatoes, featuring Ellen Swallow Richards. Created by Sarah Higgins. Used with permission.

their re-telling?" This commitment to giving voice to the lives of the forgotten addresses the historical and selective amnesia that afflicts us all too often.

Let's Talk About Immigration

One of the most important issues our historical site and museum addresses is immigrant rights. It is a topic that is politically charged, divisive, and often generates much heat and little light. However, we believe immigration is one of the defining issues of our times and instead of sitting on the sidelines or keeping quiet, we wanted to explore how Hull-House history might illuminate contemporary immigration issues and create a space for dialogue and dissent about this contentious topic. Addams and others at the Hull-House, including innovative and fierce reformers like Grace Abbott, Sophonisba Breckenridge, and Adena

Miller Rich helped to found and advance the work of the Immigrants' Protective League (IPL). Founded in 1908, the IPL fought for immigrant rights with determination and conscience. It helped immigrants adjust to living in America and established waiting rooms at railroad stations where multi-lingual men and women helped recent arrivals find their relatives or friends. The IPL also carried out investigations into fraudulent organizations such as employment agencies and loan companies that claimed they were providing services for immigrants.

Working with the newly formed Immigration Sites of Conscience, a network of museums and historic sites committed to using their history as a springboard for dialogues about contemporary immigration, we created a post-tour dialogue that fosters civic discussion about immigration issues. These facilitated conversations, led by trained museum educators, are not intended to be debates that would re-inscribe dichotomous positions or encourage a simple "us vs. them" logic. Instead, we encourage participants to not only articulate what they believe, but also excavate why and how they came to their way of thinking. We ask participants to talk about the dense social, political, cultural and interpersonal influences that shape the way they think and listen to others tell their own stories. In other words, we promote "critical generosity." This term was first introduced to me by Coya Paz, the Artistic Director of Teatro Luna, Chicago's all-Latina theater company. Critical generosity informs their dramatic productions—plays that take a stand and create community, not by ignoring or flattening differences, but by bringing them to light in honest ways, gently placing them alongside each other as evidence of a whole. Central to their work is the belief that we are a nation deeply scarred by an ongoing history of racism, sexism, and xenophobia, and that we will only heal ourselves when we are honest about how these structures work. Teatro Luna's productions prove that performances can help, by exposing the seams in ways that make people laugh, make people think, make people care. But this requires an approach to political performance that is not just critical of the problem, but generous in its understanding that in order to make change we must reckon with the whole of human lives.

For example, in a drama about immigration in the United States where one of the characters is an undocumented laborer and the other a member of the independently organized border control militia, the Minutemen, the stance of critical generosity demands evaluation and criticism of each character's position, while simultaneously insisting on being receptive to the vision

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of the world that they both put forth. This willingness to be critical while at the same time trying to understand where and how someone comes to believe what they believe is the hallmark of critical generosity. These two stances are not often found together, particularly in a culture where interactions are so often characterized by either aggressive and confrontational debate or insincere and polite agreement.

Contrary to the oft-cited sentiment, we do not think "talk is cheap," or believe that what we need is "less talk and more action." Instead, we insist that talking to one another is the cornerstone of a democracy. And while we understand that talking is not the solution, it is the challenge.

Conclusion

On December 10, 2007, the anniversary of Addams winning the Nobel Peace Prize, the state of Illinois celebrated Jane Addams Day: the first honorary day named after a woman in our state. Addams also had a 79-mile segment of the northwest tollway I-90 named after her by a 2007 joint resolution of the Illinois General Assembly. (Although Addams would have undoubtedly preferred a freeway.) These were both causes for celebration. But like every other historical icon, Jane Addams runs the risk of being mainstreamed and stripped of the edginess and vibrancy that so defined her. Many of our visitors come to the museum to pay homage to America's first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. They are not familiar with the "dangerous" Jane Addams who spent her life fighting injustice and redefining what peace was. A famous quotation of hers provocatively asserts, "Peace is not merely an absence of war, but the nurture of human life... and the establishment of social, political, and economic justice for all without distinction of sex, race, class, or creeds" (Addams, 1907, p. 26). For Addams and the other Hull-House reformers, working for peace meant agitating for public housing and public health, fighting for immigrant rights, women's rights, juvenile justice, and labor reforms. A peaceful state included the right to exercise free speech and public spaces for dissent and civic dialogue.

In 2008, for Jane Addams Day, we decided to take our work to the streets and one of the most public of spaces, the Chicago Transit Authority. On the back of buses and inside Chicago's "El" trains, we placed announcements of the anniversary with the two signs (see Figure 32.4 and Figure 32.5).

We hoped people would consider the legacy of Jane Addams and that her quote would provoke reflection and perhaps discussions between strangers. This project was inspired in part by Danielle Allen's beautiful essay *Talking to Strangers*. In this work, she argues that for us to realize the promise of democracy, we must root out the seeds of distrust that have calcified between people and replace them with "a citizenship of political friendship." Talking to people we do not know and to those unlike ourselves becomes one of the most fundamental and practical tools of



Figure 32.4 Jane Addams Day 2008 Public Announcement. Created by Joerg Becker. Used with permission of the artist and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.

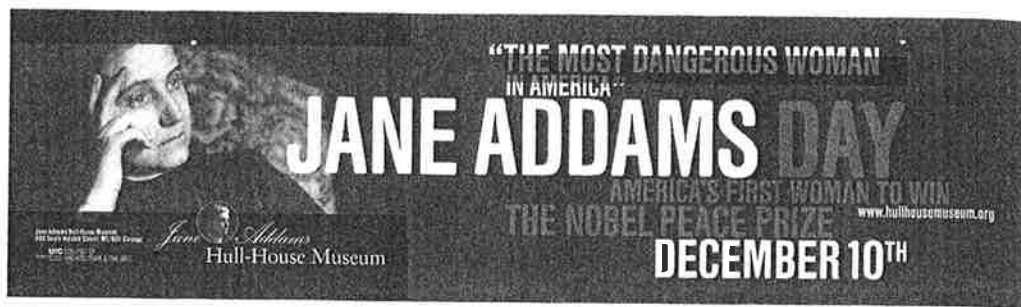


Figure 32.5 Jane Addams Day 2008 Public Announcement. Created by Joerg Becker. Used with permission of the artist and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.

citizenship and part of the important process of revitalizing a democracy. Now, as we all know, this is yet another thing that we have been taught is “dangerous.” Our museum embraces being “dangerous” in these ways and the projects described above attempt to remember the “dangerous” Jane Addams. It is a given that our work at the museum includes the preservation of the buildings and artifacts of the Hull-House Settlement, but it should also include a continuing and passionate engagement with the issues that mattered to the Hull-House reformers, which is the reason why our historic site is so meaningful. We believe that by animating the museum with Addams’ commitment to the creation of radically democratic space and engaging with important contemporary social issues, we preserve our historic site in the most honest way.

Notes

1. I should say that the following facts are irrefutable: Addams lived in a long-term committed primary relationship with Mary Rozet Smith. Their relationship to each other was recognized by their close associates and intimates as being unique, like no other relationship that the two had. They were each other’s emotional bedrock. They owned property together. When they traveled together, they traveled as husbands and wives did: sharing the same room and bed. When writing to Smith, Addams used phrases like “I am yours ‘til death,” a phrase that is unambiguously joined in U.S. culture to the vows of marriage. During one separation, in describing how much she missed Smith, she wrote “There is reason in the habit of married folks keeping together.”
2. Jane Addams was one of the first two women at Rockford Female Seminary to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in June 1882. She graduated as the Valedictorian of her class.

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