

Museum Theory...theoretically
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What's so different about the Sam Houston Memorial Museum (SHMM) being a historic house museum? More specifically, why is the nature of a historic site so different from the standards of stewardship for "regular" museums? To answer that question, we need to learn more of how museums work.

In museums all across the world, there is a widely accepted though unwritten "Rembrandt Rule" which stresses that all museums treat all objects the same, whether they are Rembrandts or everyday artifacts. Preservationists have a tendency to analyze the physical attributes of the site, its aesthetics and its collections – the "sense of place" – through the lens of rigid historical conservation and collections management care, carried out at the expense of the site's educational and inspirational potential. Some Museum Studies students have even proposed that the word *museum* is the primary dilemma for historic house museums.

Having worked at Sam Houston's house, though, there are some points to consider. Historic houses are not environments that are easily controlled like most museums. Security is difficult, environmental controls like humidity and A/C are nearly impossible. Historic houses were not intended to serve as galleries or museums. They were designed to be lived in, and when a museum-like function is imposed upon these homes, it is not always an easy fit. Historic houses are inflexible and predetermined by the folks that built them, and the folks that later restore them. Historic house museums like the Sam Houston Memorial Museum, however, offer opportunities not available in other museum formats.

Historic houses, more than any other type of museum, offer visitors the opportunity to connect immediately with the past and its people. Take Colonial Williamsburg or Mount Vernon. These sites utilize several historic structures and a broad variety of artifacts in their collection to educate their visitors about life leading up to and after America's founding. Yet we stymie fully experiencing the uniqueness of the house museum setting by placing physical and standard-based barriers on its collection of artifacts. Due to this Rembrandt mentality, we fail as workers of these sites if the public isn't as passionate about their survival as we are. We at the SHMM have a wealth of knowledge, experience, and excitement for where and what we work with. We have lectures, conferences, and educational programs like (if not better than) that of those nationally known historic sites. We do this entirely for our visitors.

All museums, then, are similar in what makes their own uniqueness. Unlike this rigid "rule," what does exist is a combination of artifact policies, procedures, and legal and ethical standards that if applied properly will guide any type of museum to the proper use of its collection. In essence, there is no one size fits all approach to museums. Ideals are malleable depending on the nature of the museum and its collection. I work with some fantastic curators, conservators, and registrars, especially at the Sam Houston Memorial Museum, and they all interpret their responsibilities and approach to the objects in our collection in slightly different ways. Even within historic house museums, no two places do things

exactly the same. Some places use velvet ropes, some use half walls, while others use nothing but the training of their docents and guides to protect their collection. In fact, most museums of all kinds – art museums, history museums, natural science museums – treat objects differently. Some objects are protected more carefully, receive a higher level of security, are ranked higher on conservation priority lists, and are stored in better environmental conditions than others. There is, then, no one “rule.”

Upon gaining employment with the SHMM, I toured the historic houses on the grounds. I remember the archivist pointing out the Houston’s mirror against the parlor wall. I held it up, was in total awe, almost nervous about being around it, let alone gazing into the reciprocated image, thinking that Gen. Sam would have done the very same during the 1850s. The archivist, with infinite patience, explained that I shouldn’t be nervous about handling this one artifact versus another. Just treat everything the same, they said, as long as its part of the collection, no matter if it’s an antique or a painting or a child’s handwritten poem.

That should be the real “rule.” Use the highest standard of care, that is, the philosophy that museum personnel have been taught to carry with us, whether we apply it the same way or not. We preserve objects for future generations, a sort of museum-esque Hippocratic Oath: *Primum non nocere* – First, do no harm.

And now, for my next trick (article), I’ll try to use the Mona Lisa for a paint by numbers next week.