

Museum Professionals' Numinous Experiences:

Exploring their Nature and Influences

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ABSTRACT

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What kinds of experiences inspire museum professional to pursue work in this niche field? The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the nature of early numinous museum experiences and their long-term influences on museum professionals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 museum professionals, and transcribed and analyzed for common themes using an emergent coding framework. Results showed that museum professionals characterize their numinous museum experiences in highly personal and idiosyncratic ways. The data also indicated that museum professionals' memories of these experiences can influence both their personal and professional identities, as well as their practices, in several ways. These results have implications for museum practice, namely in underscoring the importance of mentoring future museum professionals, enhancing awareness of museums as a career option, and making space for reflection and dialogue among current museum professionals.

Keywords: Museum, numinous museum experiences, transformative museum experiences, early interest, museum memories, museum professionals, career development, phenomenology

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

How do museum professionals become interested in this niche field? In a June 2016 blog post, Elizabeth Merritt, founding director of the American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums asked, "What kinds of experiences, big or small, fire the ambition of a child to one day be a curator, registrar, exhibit designer, educator, or collections manager?" (Merritt, 2016). Referencing an animated video that tells the story of Bill Stanley, the late director of the Field Museum's Collections Center, she encouraged readers to reflect on their own "butterfly moments" – experiences that set them on their paths towards museum work. Merritt suggested that by creating similar "butterfly moments" for "kids from all kinds of families, neighborhoods, and backgrounds," museum professionals can inspire a new generation and diversify the workforce of the future.

Merritt's recent blog post, and the subsequent Twitter campaign where museum professionals shared their own #ButterflyMoments, demonstrate that this concept resonates with at least some people in the field. Despite the renewed interest and new name, this notion has been percolating for some time. In 1995, Spock and his team interviewed museum professionals about their pivotal learning experiences in museums, culminating in a number of publications on the subject (Leichter and Spock, 1999; Spock, 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c). Similarly, in 1984, Falk and Dierking began a series of museum recollection studies (Falk, 1988). Some exclusively concerned museum professionals (Falk and Dierking, 1991) while others utilized different participants (Falk and Dierking, 1994; 1997) but they consistently showed that museum memories are salient, persistent, and multifactorial (Falk and Dierking, 1995).

Related to Merritt's "butterfly moment," Spock's "pivotal moment" and Falk and Dierking's "meaningful museum learning" is the "numinous experience." This word was

introduced into a museum context by Cameron and Gatewood (2000) who “borrowed the term *numen* from Latin to describe what many people want from their excursions. In its etymology, *numen* translates literally as a nod or beckoning from the gods, metaphorically as a spiritual force or influence identified with a natural object, phenomenon, or place” (p. 109). Cameron and Gatewood used “numen” in a museum context “to describe a transcendental experience that people can have in contact with a historic site or objects in an exhibit” (p. 110). Building on their work, Latham (2007; 2009; 2013) investigated numinous experiences with museum objects more specifically.

All of these terms – “butterfly moment,” “pivotal moment,” “meaningful museum learning” and “numinous experience” – are speaking to the same phenomenon. By unpacking and understanding this phenomenon, “museum practitioners can make intentional choices about objects, design, and format that can serve to stimulate, connect, and inspire...museum audiences” (Latham, 2013, p. 3). On a more individual level, by reflecting on their own numinous experiences, museum professionals “can find clues about where their beliefs and values really lie, and, therefore, where their and the profession’s time and resources might be most productively spent” (Spock, 2000c, p. 19). Intersecting this understanding of museum professionals’ numinous experiences with studies of their life histories (Reid, 2012; 2013) could yield significant insights into the formation of their professional identities and practices. Moreover, it could provide guidance for inspiring the next generation of museum professionals.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the nature of early numinous museum experiences and their long-term influences on museum professionals. Three research questions drove this study:

1. How do museum professionals characterize their early numinous museum experiences?
2. How do these early numinous experiences impact museum professionals' identities?
3. How do these early numinous experiences impact museum professionals' practices?

Implications

This study contributes to the bodies of literature surrounding museum professionals' numinous museum experiences and early interest in the field. It also helps museum professionals better understand themselves, their motivations, and how their prior experiences impact their identities and practices. By knowing what these numinous experiences look like and how they impact museum professionals' career paths, the field can work better to inspire a new, more diverse cohort of museum professionals.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the nature of early numinous museum experiences and their long-term influences on museum professionals. Specifically, it investigated how museum professionals characterize their numinous experiences, and how these experiences impact both their identities and their practices. As such, this study is situated at the intersection of several interrelated bodies of literature concerning museum memories, numinous museum experiences, and museum professionals' life histories.

Philadelphia Stories

In 1995, Spock, Perry, Jensen, Leichter, and Paterson invited colleagues to talk about their pivotal learning experiences in museums as part of an exploratory research study. They set up a video camera and interviewed 75 museum professionals at the Association of Youth Museums and the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums) annual meetings, both of which were held in Philadelphia that year (for this reason, the study is often referred to as the "Philadelphia stories"). The team recorded 22 hours of video representing roughly 200 narratives (Spock, 2000a). Researchers classified between 30 and 35 of these accounts as truly life-changing museum experiences (Spock, 2000c).

Several subjects recalled how they initially became interested in museums and museum work, or at least had their minds opened to the possibility of it. Ten participants shared stories of childhood museum visits that proved pivotal to their later careers. Some narratives were marked by a "deterministic inevitably" (Spock, 2000c, p. 26), while others spoke to the possibility of museum work, even if it had not seemed likely at the time. While some accounts occurred in the storyteller's adult life, these narratives largely provided evidence of the impact of early museum

experiences on people who ultimately became museum professionals themselves. Regardless of whether these experiences were objectively pivotal in this way, the storytellers felt and wanted to share that these experiences led them to the profession.

Drawing on particularly vivid memories, these conversations frequently elicited strong emotions. The researchers were struck by the “centrality and intensity of what the informants brought to the interviews” (Spock, 2000c, p. 27). The participants were also intent on relating the importance of these experiences, as the storytellers believed that museums had made a difference in both their personal and professional lives. The vividness and emotional content of these memories suggests that museums have the capacity to change people’s lives in profound and persistent ways.

These stories provided powerful lessons not only for the narrators, but also for museum professionals more broadly. Spock encouraged museum people to examine their own memories and reflect on what stories they choose to tell. He maintained that these stories indicate people’s deepest – but necessarily acknowledged – personal convictions. By exploring what they truly believe, museum professionals could harness these values in a more conscious and intentional way in order to shape their practice and inform their work.

Making Museum Memories

The Philadelphia stories demonstrated the potential of memorable museum experiences to change people’s lives, but what makes a museum experience memorable? The main assumption of this research study is that museums, with their precious objects, propensity for storytelling, distinctive atmosphere, and capacity for both independent and social visitation, are often sites of memory-making, especially for children. This idea was the subject of multiple published studies

in the 1990s and early 2000s (Falk, 1988; Falk and Dierking, 1990; Jensen, 1994; Spock, 2000c) but interest has seemingly tapered off in subsequent years. This section will examine this body of literature and what it says about what makes a museum experience memorable.

Making Museum Memories: According to Spock

In his *Study Guide to the Philadelphia Stories*, Spock (2000a) presented 24 stories and five narrative fragments shared in response to the following prompt: “Tell us about your pivotal museum learning experiences” (p. 4). He organized these narratives into four thematic clusters: Powerful Objects, Memorable Exhibits and Programs, Engaging Relationships, and Museums Changing Lives.

Spock noted that the memories concerning encounters with objects were not surprising, as many museum professionals are fascinated with “stuff.” Experiences with objects were memorable because they incited deep thoughts and strong physical responses. These experiences were especially thrilling when participants were permitted to actually touch the objects.

Like objects, exhibits and programs engendered memorable museum experiences for many of Spock’s participants. He also identified social dynamics as a possible harbinger of a memorable museum experience. In particular, Spock pointed to interactions among visitors and between visitors and staff.

Spock talked about museums changing lives in two distinct ways. The first way is how museums shaped a person’s life trajectory; for example, a boy learning he did not want to become a doctor after viewing disturbing exhibits at a medical museum. The hallmarks of these types of experiences were intense emotions and “extraordinary impact.” The second way in which museums can change lives is what Spock referred to as “catching the museum bug.” Participants who “caught the museum bug” displayed similarly intense feelings as those who

described other life-altering experiences, but their memories centered specifically on their paths as museum professionals. For example, one participant recounted being enamored with paintings at the National Gallery of Art as a young girl, and how her obsessively studying them eventually led to her museum career.

Spock spoke about the nature of the museum experience, and how that contributes to memory-making. He hypothesized that, because going to a museum differs from other leisure activities, and because museums have a distinct “feel” that sets them apart, visitors come to the museum with a different set of expectations than they would the mall or movie theater. Similarly, learning from museum exhibits and programs differs vastly from learning in a classroom or from a book. Falk and Dierking (1992; 2000) offered up a framework for understanding learning in museums according to three interrelated elements: the personal context, the social context, and the physical context.

Making Museum Memories: According to Falk and Dierking

Beginning in 1984, Falk and Dierking conducted a series of museum memory studies concerning long-term learning in and from museums. Specifically, they aimed to understand museum memories more broadly by way of investigating their components, saliency, and persistence. Their first exploratory study intentionally included only a few participants (n=11) who were asked a series of open-ended, ethnographic-style interview questions (Falk, 1988). Over the course of this research, general patterns emerged from the data. Subjects placed their museum visits within social, geographic, and temporal contexts. Participants could recollect how long they spent in the museum, and could often remember their mental state as well. Most individuals could recall a few exhibits they had seen and some specific details about them. All the subjects referred to some aspect of the museum’s architecture or “feel.” Additionally, the

interviews suggested that museum memories were bound together in highly personal ways. Overall, people were best at remembering things with which they were already familiar. Subjects seemed to recall most vividly the objects and exhibits that built upon their prior knowledge rather than those that were totally novel.

In a subsequent study, Falk and Dierking (1990) asked 12 museum professionals to recall their earliest museum experience and relate it in as much detail as possible. The data were then analyzed according to three main categories: the number of memories per subject, whether the subject identified themselves as a frequent (more than three visits per year) or infrequent museumgoer in childhood, and the domains their recollections seemed to fall under. Falk and Dierking named nine domains, including: social memories, specific recollections of exhibits and objects viewed, physical characteristics of the museum, temporal memories, affective dimensions, souvenirs, concrete issues versus abstract recollections, what participants wore and ate, and if the experience was bound with other memories or hobbies/interests/concrete life experiences.

From this study, Falk and Dierking found that the subjects showed consistent patterns in their memories, which were placed within social, geographical, and temporal contexts. All participants recalled specifics of the exhibits, and many embellished their memories with details of the travel, architecture, food, and souvenirs. Nearly all of these museum recollections were bound to other, non-museum memories, like a family trip or the birth of a sibling. Like the participants in the earlier study, these subjects also recalled their state of mind on their museum visits. This supports the notion that affective dimensions may be extremely important outcomes of museum visits. These feelings may also be correlated with the subjects' later decisions to

pursue careers as museum professionals. Museum professionals necessarily feel strongly about museums, and their early experiences likely influenced these feelings.

Overall, Falk and Dierking (1995) were impressed by the similarity of patterns among the museum memories they studied. They saw their data as providing evidence that museum memories are salient and persistent, and that those memories are influenced by the amount of time spent in the museum, the mode of presentation, the social and physical contexts, and the prior knowledge and experiences of the visitor.

Making Museum Memories: According to Jensen

Jensen (1994) adopted contextual and constructivist perspectives in her attempt to situate museum-going within the everyday lives of children. She explored how 30 fourth-graders made sense of their museum experiences in relation to their experiences in other places. Jensen found that children often categorize places by their relationship to them. Most frequently, children sorted museums into categories defined by quality descriptors, social context, and when they visited. The children viewed museums as places to encounter special objects of particular interest to them. While most children considered museums, like schools and libraries, as places for learning, they were divided as to whether museums are fun, boring, or a bit of both.

Jensen's research is especially "helpful in beginning to understand not so much the deeper impacts of museum-going, but what a more general population of children found memorable and appealing" (Spock, 2000c, p. 29). According to her, "while most of the children expressed positive feelings for some museums, only a few included museums among their favorite places" (Jensen, 1994, p. 317). This provides an important distinction, then, between the normative childhood reaction to museum-going, and the emotional reactions of the future

museum professionals interviewed in Spock (2000a; 2000c) and Falk and Dierking's (1990) work.

Jensen's study proposed some qualities of memorable museum experiences, including: a match to personal interests and family and cultural backgrounds, control over content and pacing, independence from adults, and variety in activity and content.

Making Museum Memories: An Overview

The sampled literature generally agrees that museum memories are both salient and enduring. Childhood visits to museums can be highly memorable experiences, even into adulthood. These museum memories also tend to be linked with personal feelings and social experiences. Children view museums as places of learning and appreciate that they provide the opportunity to encounter unique objects. However, children who go on to become museum professionals seem to have more intense, emotional reactions to museums. While the topic of museum memories appears rich with opportunity for further research, little has been published on the subject since the early 2000s.

Nature of the Numinous

The concept of the numinous museum experience was introduced and explored by Cameron and Gatewood (2000; 2003; Gatewood and Cameron, 2004). They used this term, borrowed from the Latin *numen*, to describe the deeper, more meaningful connection people often seek when visiting museums (in this case, particularly historic sites). According to the authors:

In its etymology, *numen* translates literally as a nod or beckoning from the gods, and metaphorically as a spiritual force or influence identified with a natural object, phenomenon, or place. Rudolf Otto, who introduced the word into religious philosophy in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, describes numen as a

religious emotion or experience that can be awakened in the presence of something holy. In his rendering, a numinous experience is akin to religious rapture or a deeply spiritual effect. Since Otto's introduction of the *numen* concept, several of the humanities now discuss numinous effects" (Cameron and Gatewood, 2000, p.109).

Cameron and Gatewood (2000) used numinous "to describe a transcendental experience that people can have in contact with a historic site or objects in an exhibit" (p. 110).

In her work, Latham focused on numinous experiences with museum objects (2007; 2009; 2013). Building on Cameron and Gatewood's work, she defined a numinous museum experience as "a deeply connective, transcendental encounter one may have with a museum object, site, or exhibit" (Latham, 2007, p. 247). Latham added that numinous museum experiences are characterized by "deep engagement or transcendence, empathy, and awe or reverence" (2013, p. 16).

In her 2013 study, Latham interviewed five self-selected participants who responded to a call to share a story about a "transcendent or deeply meaningful experience with a museum object" (p. 6). Participants were prompted to tell the researcher about their experience with the object in as much detail as they could provide. From this data, four themes emerged as "essential elements of the numinous experience": unity of the moment, object link, being transported, and connections bigger than self (Latham, 2013, p. 8).

The overarching theme from which the other three themes spring is the unity of moment, which refers to "the total holistic and dynamic experience" (Latham, 2013, p. 8). Participants described their numinous experiences as somehow distinct or different from others. They tended to use words like "vivid" and "dynamic" to explain them, and recounted their experiences in great detail. As Latham observed, "each person was deeply

touched by the experience, describing connections that transcended memory, time, and self” (2013, p. 9).

From unity of the moment the other three themes flow: object link, being transported, and connections bigger than self. Object link encompasses the object’s physical presence as a trigger for the thoughts or feelings embedded in the encounter, as well as the object’s symbolic function as receptacle for deep and profound meaning. Being transported refers to the physical, bodily reactions to the encounter, such as feeling alone in a crowded space or perceiving time as having stopped. Connections bigger than self encapsulates the strong connections participants’ felt to people of the past and family members, as well as the “epiphanic” realizations about oneself (Latham, 2013, p. 10).

While he does not employ the term numinous per se, Spock’s work (2000b) touched on many of the same ideas and themes as Latham’s. In his exploratory study, he asked 75 museum professionals to share stories about their pivotal learning experiences in museums. He found that many of his subjects had vivid memories, which frequently elicited strong emotions. Unlike Latham, Spock defined five possible stimuli that could prompt these pivotal learning experiences: a collection, an object, an exhibit, a chain of experiences, and an extended program.

Similarly, Spock’s exploration of “alonetime” and what he called “owntime” in museums is related to Latham’s work on numinous museum experiences. He built on Buchholz’s (2000) idea of museums as restorative, calming, and peaceful places suited for alonetime. Spock proposed adding that museums are also well-suited as places for owntime, a term he coined to describe a subcategory of alonetime characterized as being more self-directed and open-ended. Again, using the 75 participants from his exploratory study, Spock found at least six of the 200

stories illustrated alonetime and an additional 10 stories demonstrated owntime. These findings suggest that museums are good places for becoming absorbed in one's personal interests.

Museums are also spaces conducive to transformational experiences. In her work, Soren (2009) explored the nature of transformational museum experiences and potential "triggers for transformation" (p. 233). From her review of the literature, Soren concluded that "transformational experiences seem to happen if we discard old ways of thinking and provide new opportunities for individuals to invent personal knowledge and explore new ideas and concepts" (2009, p. 234). To identify triggers for these occurrences, the author asked her students about their own transformational museum experiences. Together, they identified 10 triggers: attitudinal, authentic, behavioral, being witness, cultural, emotional, motivational, sublime/the idea of infinity, traumatic, and unexpected.

In summary, the concepts of numinous museum experiences, alonetime and owntime, and transformational museum experiences are intertwined and intriguing, but not much has been published on the topic. Latham wrote her dissertation (2009) and a few articles on the subject (2007; 2013). Spock wrote a number of articles in the late 1990s and early 2000s analyzing the results of his exploratory study. Both of their research studies relied on relatively small sample sizes (five for Latham, 75 for Spock) so further study would be prudent. Moreover, Spock's study lacked both a representative sample and a consistent interview protocol, so the field could benefit from a more rigorously designed follow-up. The relative frequency of these numinous museum experiences also remains unknown, though that is a question for another study.

Life Histories of Museum Professionals

In her work, Reid (2012; 2013; 2014) articulated the need for narrative-based research into the identities of museum professionals. She employed life history research as a methodological framework to explore the personal and professional identities of a group of art museum educators. Reid posited that these methodologies, employed in research and professional development programs, could aid museum educators in finding their voices, verbalizing their goals, and developing a strong, new identity in this rapidly changing museum climate.

In her dissertation research, Reid (2012) recruited four museum educators from her social-professional network and included herself as a fifth participant. Participants completed a biographical data form to help the researcher understand their backgrounds. Participants also received guiding questions before the first life history interview, “offering them an opportunity to become familiar with the topics that would be covered and encouraging a relationship built on trust and transparency” (Reid, 2012, p. 82). All of the museum educators participated in two interviews, lasting between one and one-and-a-half hours, which took place at least one month apart. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an “interpretive framework” (Reid, 2012, p. 89).

Despite her small sample size, Reid drew some interesting conclusions. In her cross-case analysis, she found that participants’ “early and recent museum and art-related experiences left lasting impressions on them” (Reid, 2012, p. 216). These early, positive museum visits were marked by aesthetic experiences and autonomy. Reid called these “profound early visits” (2012, p. 234). The recent, positive museum experiences were characterized by a pleasant element of surprise, including novel information and experiences and surpassing expectations. Each of the

participants also referred to the museum's architecture as an element of their recent, positive museum experience.

Reid (2013) posited that participating in her study became a form of professional development for her participants, as it allowed them the time and space to reflect on their paths, priorities, values, and goals. This aligns with Spock's (2000c) exhortations of museum professionals to tell their stories and listen to those of their colleagues, as he believes these stories reveal what is truly important in the field.

Aside from Reid, few researchers have used narrative-based studies to explore the professional identities of museum professionals. Dillenburg (2005) contacted fellow exhibit designers in his social-professional network and asked them to share stories of experiences that helped define their careers. For many participants, these "defining moments" were the impetus for them entering the museum field. Importantly, these defining moments did not necessarily take place in the museum; many occurred at school or on the job (museum-related or otherwise). Other defining moments sprouted from seeing the impacts of one's work on visitors, mounting exhibits dealing with controversial issues, and interacting with objects. Finally, some defining moments occurred when the participant realized it was time to make a career change.

Lemelin (2002) conducted a participatory action research inquiry at a contemporary art museum in Canada. The study consisted of 11 participants: nine educators, a coordinator, and Lemelin, who was both the principal investigator and an intern at the museum. Lemelin's study explored the nature of education practice, curriculum development, and professional development through multiple qualitative research methods, including semi-structured conversational interviews. Her results suggested that the diversity in art museum educators'

backgrounds and experiences significantly contributes to their professional development, and also impacts curriculum development.

Narrative-based research into the life histories of museum professionals is a relatively unexplored domain. This type of research represents an exceptional opportunity to examine the influences that shape museum professionals' beliefs, practices, and identities. Reid's work was informed by Spock's, and confirmed his and Falk and Dierking's findings regarding the power of early museum memories. However, her work, and Lemelin's, attempts to go a step further in exploring the connections between museum professionals' personal, lived experiences and their professional identities and practices.

Summary

This study, exploring the nature of numinous museum experiences and their impacts on museum professionals' identities and practices, is situated at the intersection of several interrelated bodies of literature: museum memories, numinous museum experiences, and museum professionals' life histories. Inspired and informed by earlier research on museum professionals' memories of pivotal museum experiences, this research built on those narratives in an effort to fill the gaps left by that study.

In particular, this research aimed to understand the link between numinous museum experiences and their impact on museum professionals' identities and practices. The sampled museum memory research demonstrates that these memories are both salient and enduring, and that they tend to be linked with personal feelings and social experiences. The numinous museum experience literature shows that museums, with their precious objects, distinctive atmosphere, and space for solitary exploration, can be sites for epiphanic moments. The museum

professional life history research indicates that museum people can recall profound early experiences in museums, as well as defining moments throughout their lifetimes that have impacted their career trajectories. However, none of these bodies of literature address how these deeply meaningful museum experiences actually impact the identities and practices of museum professionals.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of early numinous museum experiences and their long-term influences on museum professionals. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do museum professionals characterize their early numinous museum experiences?
2. How do these early numinous experiences impact museum professionals' identities?
3. How do these early numinous experiences impact museum professionals' practices?

This study used a phenomenology design (Creswell, 2013) and data were collected using semi-structured interviews with museum professionals. This chapter describes the sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures, as well as the methodological limitations of the study.

Sampling

For the purposes of this study, potential participants were required to currently be working or to have worked in an object-based museum. Potential participants also had to have memories of a numinous museum experience that they felt had somehow impacted where they are today. The researcher posted an open call to participate on her LinkedIn profile and in multiple museum professional Facebook groups. The researcher also disseminated the call to both cohorts of the University of Washington's Museology Graduate Program. Furthermore, both the researcher and her thesis committee chair shared the call with eligible people within their own social-professional networks, and encouraged them to forward the information to their qualifying colleagues. Finally, the researcher posted the call on the American Alliance of

Museums' Museum Junction Open Forum online discussion board. Appendix A includes a copy of the call for participants.

A total of 32 individuals responded to the call for participants, 29 of whom were eligible for participation. Ultimately, 25 respondents elected to participate in the study. The sample comprised 19 females and six males, who work or have worked in object-based museums. Participants reported being in the museum field for as little as two years and as many as 46 years. They worked in a variety of museum types, including art museums, natural history museums, and history museums/historic sites. Two participants worked as independent consultants for multiple different cultural institutions, while two other participants worked for museum-focused non-profit organizations. Within the museum, participants were currently employed in a number of capacities, including administration, education, interpretation, collections, curatorial, exhibit design, and development. The participants hailed from across the country, with one reporting from Canada.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Nineteen of the interviews were conducted over the phone. Six of the interviews were conducted in-person, due either to participant preference or convenience. The researcher also received two written responses to the interview questions. These written responses were not included in the analysis with the rest of the data, as their collection procedure was anomalous. Interviews took place between March 15 and April 5, 2017. The researcher shared the interview questions with participants in advance, telling them they were welcome to read them but in no way obligated to. Before starting the interview, the researcher read a consent statement to the participants and asked them to verbally

confirm their willingness to participate. The interviews were audio-recorded using an iPad and ranged in duration from 12 to 66 minutes.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to align with the study's three research questions. The interview began by asking about participants' professional experience in the field, before inviting them to reflect on both the roles of museum in their earlier lives as well as their numinous museum experiences. The rest of the interview prompted participants to explore what impacts those experiences may or may not have had on them personally and professionally. See Appendix B for a copy of the interview guide.

Data Analysis

The audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and those transcripts were analyzed through emergent, content analysis procedures (Patton, 2014). Specifically, responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using an emergent, inductive coding system that identified themes among participant responses. All interviews were coded and analyzed using this rubric (Appendix C). A critical friend reviewed the coding matrix, and asked questions to enhance the reliability of the analysis.

Limitations

The major limitation of this research is that participants were self-selected, which inherently created a bias. The results of the study apply only for people who wanted to participate in this research. These people were necessarily highly involved in the museum field for them to hear about the study (active in social media and online professional groups, in graduate school, or connected with colleagues at other institutions). They were passionate about

their work, maybe even more than the average museum professional. Participants also took time out of their days to help a graduate student doing research, which could indicate that they were more concerned with developing the field than their colleagues. On a personal level, participants were people who felt comfortable talking about memories and personal experiences with a total stranger, usually over the phone. Finally, participants were museum professionals who had the ability to make time for at least a 30-minute interview, so this study possibly precludes supremely overworked or frazzled individuals.

Another limitation of this study is that the methodology required extensive reflection. People who elected to participate were probably naturally introspective. People who are not innately reflective may have opted out of participating, so the results may not fully represent all museum professionals who had numinous museum experiences. This might mean that participants had contemplated how their past experiences impact their work already on their own to some degree. They may also have been more likely to draw a connection between their past experiences and their paths to where they are now.

A third limitation is that the sample is disproportionately female. This could conceivably be because the museum profession skews female. It could also maybe be because women are more comfortable talking about their subjective, lived experiences and the feelings tied to them.

CHAPTER 4: Results

This phenomenological study presents the lived experiences of museum professionals who self-identified as having had numinous museum experiences earlier in their lives. An array of examples is provided to assist the reader in understanding the research participants. The substantial use of quotations allows the reader to hear from the participants in their own words, as well as provides a multitude of perspectives.

How do museum professionals characterize their early numinous museum experiences?

In response to the first research question, this study found that participants characterize their numinous museum experiences in highly personal and idiosyncratic ways, discussed here as context, impetus, binding, and moment versus gestalt. This research also demonstrated that study participants think about the impact of their numinous museum experiences on their career paths in very different ways.

Memories of Numinous Museum Experiences

Context

Participants were asked to share memories of their numinous museum experiences in as much detail as possible, including personal, social, and physical contexts of the visit. All participants described at least one numinous museum experience, with some sharing two or three separate memories. In all, 35 discrete numinous museum experience memories were recorded.

The contexts of the museum visits varied widely. For example, the ages of the participants varied at the time of their numinous museum experience. The youngest reported age was four years old; the oldest was 21 years old. These numinous experiences occurred at a variety of different types of museums, including art museums, natural history museums, history

museums/historic sites, living history museums, historic houses, botanic gardens, wax museums, and more. Most participants were with friends, family, or classmates at the time of their numinous experience, although one participant reported being alone.

Impetus

Participants shared memories of numinous museum experiences that were prompted in very different ways. These memories were coded into three emergent categories based on what served as the impetus for the numinous experience: an **object**, an **exhibit/program**, or the **physical space/atmosphere**.

For many participants, an **object** itself precipitated the numinous experience. A typical example of this sort of scenario sounded like:

“There was a case that had a giant king crab, which was just so freaky looking to a child. It was like an awe experience because [of] the setting of something behind glass, and I can remember a free-standing case, [which] really set it off as something special and so, I think that feeling was awe, in a way.”

These participants recalled reflecting specifically on the aesthetic or novel qualities of the object:

“I think it was the art museum there, had a touring show from the Vatican that was just like *the* most gorgeous robes and paintings and [vestments]. It was probably my first exposure to that old-school, European, luscious, really flamboyant, religious art... Mainly I was just interested in how beautiful things were. I just remember how *gold* everything was. You know? Like magical. That’s how it seemed at the time.”

“You walk[ed] in [to the American Museum of Natural History], and the first thing they had was a chunk of meteor... and then you walk in the door and you see the giant dinosaur, which is the big, long-necked dinosaur. And when I was a kid I was blown away. And I remember going through the exhibit... It definitely wasn’t the content, because I was young enough that I wasn’t getting that. But it was the scale and the aesthetics of it, just to walk in and see the colossal things just standing there.”

One participant even reflected on the impact of being allowed to physically touch objects in a museum:

“I remember the guide actually let us touch one of the gilded features in the reception room, I think it was a fire place... I remember how exciting it was, actually being able to touch something, to have physical contact with that place and think about the people that lived there, and what it might have been like to live there, that kind of thing. I remember really wanting to pick up one of the tea cups, and sit on one of the sofas, but they let us touch the wall and I thought that was really, really awesome. It was in this moment that I was like “I really like to touch the stuff!”

Multiple participants talked about the experience of encountering an object in real life that they had previously only seen in books or on television:

“I remember going into the Air and Space Museum and seeing the rockets, actual rockets that you’ve seen on television... and seeing the *Spirit of St. Louis*, the actual *Spirit of St. Louis*... and to actually see these rockets and these planes that made history, to go see the real things, that to me really, really was something pretty incredible.”

“I was just so wowed at being able to see these things I had looked at in slides, being able to see it in person, it was just really astonishing to be able to experience that.”

Others felt that these numinous experiences with objects led to a broadened worldview and deepened understanding of what a museum is or can be:

“I still have a pretty clear vision of it even now that I’m 52, going to the British Museum and seeing the Rosetta Stone and standing in front of it, seeing the three languages and remembering that this was found and that this was a decoding piece. And so, at nine years old, I remember standing in front of that and thinking how amazing it was that an object like this could change the way we understand language and the way we understand how people understand each other and learn from each other.”

“[My father] understood that I didn’t realize that it was a painting and he said, ‘This is a painting, an artist made it like you paint with your paints at home’ and [then] I got it, that an artist could capture a person’s spirit in a painting. That was revelation number one. And then I said ‘Well, where are they?’ and he said, ‘They lived a long, long time ago, they’re dead now’ and so revelation number two was [that] you can capture a person and they can live forever. So then, we were looking around this big old gallery with tons of paintings in it, and all of sudden I’m looking at these things with new eyes. All of a sudden, there are all of these windows to all of these different worlds and different times and different places... All of that just really came together, in one big flood, and it opened new worlds.”

Some individuals spoke about how the objects made them feel connected to other people and to the past:

“We went to the Louvre... and standing in front of the *Winged Victory* that’s in the atrium was really remarkable, because I don’t like being in crowds, but for whatever reason being in that atrium surrounded by all these people looking at all this stuff was just really incredible... just sort of being connected through history, as people. When I stood in that atrium, and around all these people, even though I don’t really like being around people, it still sort of felt like this amazing line that you can feel back and back and back.”

“I remember my mom bringing me to the Museum of History and Industry to see Bobo, and my grandma remembering, and they would tell me stories about seeing Bobo when he was alive... My mom and my grandma both grew up in Seattle, so MOHAI is a place where they would talk about, ‘I remember this’ and ‘I remember going there’... Walking around MOHAI with my grandma and my mom, talking about Seattle, it [was] almost like being transported back in history.”

For another set of participants, a specific **exhibit or program** was responsible for their numinous museum experiences. Two examples from this category follow:

“My parents took me to this botanical garden in Sacramento. And you know, the weather’s always nice, and they had plants and gardens you could go through. What was cool [though] was they were doing a special exhibition on dinosaurs where they brought in life-size, robotic dinosaurs and stuck them in the plants. That was probably one of the coolest things that they took me to, and that actually impacted an exhibit that I did later on.”

“I think my real start of museums was at Victoria’s Royal BC Museum. They had an exhibition, a traveling exhibition that had come... on the history of circuses... and they had a part where they had all these costumes of different circus performers, so you would get to put on a costume and they had a museum worker who would be the ring leader, and would call out to all the different children in costumes and we would each perform... I specifically remember, I was the strong woman and my sister was the two-headed woman.”

For a few participants, their numinous experiences were prompted by the **physical space or atmosphere** of the museum itself:

“I particularly remember the space, because I had never seen anything like that. And looking back, that museum was designed by Phillip Johnson, so it’s really... a modern icon for south Texas, and has this lofty space with beautiful light pouring in, it’s all white...I remember being struck by that space and just looking up. I had never been to a cathedral or a basilica or any kind of open, lofty space like that, and [was] impressed by that. And I still am, when I go back to visit that museum, I still think it’s a beautiful space. And that made me think. And we kind of looked at the art, but it was the space that I remember the most.”

“So, at the Met, for instance, there was a gallery of [works by El Greco] and we used to, some of my friends and I used to go in there, because there was nobody in that gallery, we’d spread our books out on the floor and we’d sort of make sure we were out of the way of patrons who wanted to see the art but that was just where we did our homework...So, they were places that we felt comfortable using and being in. There weren’t rules and we didn’t have to sign up and we didn’t have to take a class, we could just sort of be. And it was great...they were great places to not be at home, not feel like we needed to be watched by a parent, they weren’t as quiet as libraries and there was a little bit more freedom. That’s my biggest memory of growing up with museums.”

One participant even reflected on the impact of going “behind-the-scenes” in a museum:

“We walked through the exhibits, which I had seen before, and then they opened a door to the back. And that was like going into Santa’s workshop or something. It was a sea full of paintings, stuff was getting made back here, there were artifacts out on tables and file cabinets ... that was really transformative, to go back behind that door.”

Binding

For all participants, their memories of the numinous museum experiences were bound with memories of other details, which were necessarily idiosyncratic. Many participants shared – without being prompted – other specifics of the day the numinous experience occurred. These included remarks about the weather and time of year:

“It was a horrifically rainy day, and it ... was dark out, so it was either in the winter or a night event.”

“This was a great Sunday afternoon excursion... and you know how hot it is in New Orleans in the summertime...”

Others talked about traveling to and from the museum:

“I also remember the field trip, like the bus ride back, being particularly traumatic. I got called out for having a crush on a boy, it’s one of those things where the whole bus decides to make a song about it. It was a complicated day.”

Multiple participants recalled purchasing a souvenir (“I bought a t-shirt with a picture of the rocks, I was so into the show and the rocks”). Within this group, most people reported still having the souvenir:

“It still sticks with me today how enjoyable that experience was, and I still have this bookmark from that exhibition that I still use.”

“My parents bought me a silver ring at Colonial Williamsburg, I still have the ring today.”

For a few participants, the interactives were particularly memorable:

“I also remember that they had interactives, they had computer things that had trackballs. And I really remember the trackballs, because I think that was the first time that I ever saw that... and I remember playing on it with the trackball a lot.”

For the majority of participants, their memories of the numinous museum experiences were also bound with personal details about what was happening in their lives at the time. For some, the numinous museum visit occurred during a trip to another city or country. For others, the memorable museum visit took place on their birthday. One participant placed her museum visit within the context of a particularly adorable milestone:

“I was probably in first or second grade, whatever age where you lose all your front teeth at once, because we have pictures of me in museums with like, no teeth, and just smiling and lispng so hard.”

Some participants remembered their visits as part of a memorable class or school year. Others contextualized it within current events:

“It was 1969, so it was a very pivotal point in our country, historically.”

“It was whatever year Michael Phelps [first placed] in the Olympics.”

Overall, participants' memories of their numinous museum experiences were often bound with other memories, both of the visit itself and of what was going on in their lives and the world at the time. In sharing these details, multiple participants expressed surprise at the specificity and saliency of their memories. One participant summed it up succinctly:

“Yeah, that was a big visit. It was a big day. It was a day that lives on. You know, you can't say that for a lot of your youth, right? It's not like you remember whole days like that.”

Moment versus Gestalt

For the purposes of this study, the term “numinous” was not defined for participants. They self-selected for participation in this research if the word “numinous” resonated with them and if they felt it adequately characterized their experiences. Throughout the interviews, words participants frequently used to describe their experiences included: “remarkable,” “incredible,” “transformative,” “powerful,” “magical,” “spectacular,” “awesome,” “amazing,” and “astonishing.” Others talked about how it was a “revelation,” “wow moment,” or “awe experience.” Participants characterized their reactions to these numinous experiences as “flabbergasted,” “fascinated,” “inspired,” and “blown/swept away.”

While participants used a shared vocabulary to describe their numinous museum experiences and their reactions to them, they were divided on their characterizations of the experiences themselves. Specifically, some people embraced the idea of one seminal “museum moment” that led them to the field, while others insisted on the concept of the gestalt (“it was a lifetime of experiences” “it's been this string of museums”).

Impacts of Numinous Museum Experiences on Career Paths

After discussing their numinous museum experiences, participants were asked to reflect on if and how those experiences had impacted their life choices. In their responses to this question, participants largely focused on the impacts they perceived the numinous museum experiences had on their career paths. Their answers form a sort of continuum; some participants asserted that the experiences made them want to pursue museum work, while those on the opposite end of the spectrum insisted that the experiences had no impact on their life choices. The following section examines participants' responses to this line of inquiry in further detail.

Desire to Work in a Museum

Some participants responded that the numinous experience made them want to work in a museum and led them to take steps in order to do so. In particular, people pointed to choosing classes in secondary school, as well as courses of study at the university level, that would prepare them for a career in museums:

“I think that initial love of being in a museum, actively choosing to be there, directed what schooling I took and also what career I wanted to be in. It's the initial love.”

“Those experiences are kind of the main reason why I'm here today... I wanted to make that a part of my academic career, and now my professional career too, of course.”

“The conversation [after the experience] 100% as far as, because that's the reason I went to undergraduate to study art history and chemistry, together.”

Multiple participants recalled researching museum career options, typically with the help of a family member. One participant detailed the process below:

“As I was getting ready to apply for college I was very stressed out – what should I do with the rest of my life? I mean, I was really, intensely worried about it. And so, my mom and I talked about it and we had this conversation about what is it that you love, what are your natural gifts, and she, to be honest, did a lot of

research, because she knew what I loved and she knew what my natural gifts were, maybe even a little better than I did. But we really had a pretty meaningful conversation about that when I was probably 16 or 17 and talked about, I love teaching, I'm a natural teacher, I'm a good teacher, and we know that because of different experiences that I had. But we also knew that I loved objects, every time we went to a museum I always gravitated toward the Ancient Greek and the Medieval and the Roman, the things that were beautiful but also functional. And so, I said to her, 'Well, I guess I should be a teacher then, Mom, I should be a teacher because I like teaching things and I'm good at it. I'm good at explaining things' and she said 'You know, yes I think teaching is a gift of yours and that's something that you should pursue, but I don't think you should do it in a classroom. You really love museums and I found out that there's this job, out there in the world that exists and it's called a museum educator and I think you need to combine your love of objects and people who make them, with your interest and your skill in teaching'... We knew a museum was something that I wanted to be a part of and I wanted to be somebody who taught in a museum and so we knew this museum educator job existed..."

For a different participant, this conversation was part of the numinous museum experience itself:

"I specifically saw the painting... and I don't remember what it was about seeing it this time because we'd been there before, but I was just very enraptured by it, visually, and me and my mom talked about it for quite some time. I just casually was like 'Wow, art museums are cool. It'd be amazing to work in a place like this!' and my mom and I actually had quite an extensive conversation about well, that is a thing, museums are places that people work... I remember that one painting in particular but I mostly remember that follow-up conversation between me and my mom about, like, if this is a thing you really enjoy you can learn about it more because this doesn't just happen by itself. And she didn't know too much about the internal logistics and stuff, but she knew enough to get me curious to think about it on my own and look into it further... I remember, I was particularly interested in science at the time, so my mom and I basically discovered the role of the art conservationist and I thought that was really cool and I pursued that line of study through the entirety of high school, and three-quarters of my undergraduate career... [later] I switched to focusing just on art history specifically and kind of re-figured things out from there, and it was all from that one visit that I pursued that one interest for seven straight years."

Another important aspect of the above quotation is how it demonstrates that participants' paths were not always linear. Although these people were often "frighteningly focused" – as one participant put it – on working in museums, their career trajectories were not

necessarily straight. For example, when asked how her numinous museum experience had impacted her life choices, one participant replied,

“Very much so, I think, coupled with my parents taking me to other kinds of cultural sites. Obviously, that first volunteer experience set me on a course to [work in] museums. I took a slight detour to teach but I came back to museums because it was teaching in a different kind of environment. But they definitely set me on that personal, professional course.”

Other Paths to Museum Work

For a smaller faction of participants, their numinous museum experiences made them intensely interested in studying a specific discipline, which they later translated to museum work. An example of this:

“I always wanted to be a paleontologist, for as long as I can remember... and I definitely think those [numinous museum experiences] solidified that. I mean, I remember seeing *Jurassic Park* when I was really young, and I remember I had all the toys and I watched the movie and I had all the things you would associate and I just never really grew out of it. The transition to working in museums, that happened later, that happened during college.”

A different group discussed how their numinous experiences made them feel comfortable in museums, and how this feeling of comfort made them open to the idea of working in museums later in life. One participant shared,

“Some of it feels like accident, that I did end up in the museum field... I graduated art college, I had no idea, I thought that the only thing you could be in a museum was a curator, in terms of what I had studied to do, and I knew I wasn’t interested in that. And so, again, maybe it’s just that, I guess that I could safely say that museums felt like a place where I belonged, like they resonated with me in that way, it was a place that felt comfortable to me, it made sense to me, and on some level, since I didn’t have a really specific career goal other than like, “being an artist,” seeing a position like the one I saw in an education department was a real eye-opener for me and I applied right away, because I was like ‘well yeah, duh, I want to work in an art museum. That just makes sense.’ So, it’s a combination of things, it’s a passion that preexisted and then I think, I guess having positive experiences didn’t shut me off from [museums].”

Similarly, some participants talked about how their numinous museum experiences made them value museums, which also left them open to the idea of working in these types of institutions. When asked about the impact of her numinous museum experience on her life choices, one participant made the following distinction:

“Directly, no. Indirectly, yes. I think maybe the bigger context of my mom having a ‘Culture Day,’ and placing value on learning about something new, and going to museums, and being engaged in culture and arts and theater and things like that, that as a family value, that experience within the context of that value was really [significant].”

No Impact

A couple of participants reported that their numinous museum experiences did not impact their life choices. As one participant explained,

“I would say very little... I’ve talked to people who were very fortunate and their parents had them to a lot of museums and it really inspired them and they encouraged them to want to go into the field, [but] it wasn’t the case for me. I hadn’t been to many museums... When I did go to museums, I always found them really interesting, just to see, for me, it was seeing something that I’ve seen on television and I read about in a book, and seeing the real thing was an experience like no other. At the time, I wasn’t going to museums like ‘oh, I could do this for living’ and this and that, I just enjoyed the experience but it didn’t really shape me.”

Another participant was hesitant to assign any impact to her numinous museum experiences, but conceded that they may have had some net positive influence:

“Can I attribute that to some, very back, you know exploring all of these museums? I don’t know, because, you know – once a year? I would be hesitant to draw that kind of a correlation, but I think there may be some, there may be something there, that made things useful and good.”

How do these numinous experiences impact museum professionals’ identities?

In response to the second research question, interview data suggest that numinous experiences have the capacity to significantly shape both the personal and professional identities

of museum professionals. On the personal level, numinous museum experiences helped shape participants' identities as life-long learners and museumgoers. On the professional level, numinous museum experiences similarly shaped participants' professional identities. These impacts are further explored in the following section.

Personal Identities

Although the interview questions were intended to probe the impacts of numinous museum experiences on participants' professional identities, the majority of those interviewed also identified ways in which their personal identities were impacted. Specifically, participants pointed to their identities as life-long learners and museumgoers.

Life-long Learners

Many participants spoke about the impacts their numinous museum experiences had on their identities as life-long learners. As one participant put it, "I think it made me more interested in just learning about anything...it has made me want to learn more." Another participant echoed this sentiment:

"It impacted me that I wanted to learn more. I remember going to the [National] Air and Space Museum, and even seeing the *Enterprise*, I remember wanting to go back and watch the episodes again and see the details, knowing, that oh wow, the scale of the ship is actually this big, or seeing the *Spirit of St. Louis*, I wanted to go back and read about it again because yes, I'd read about it before and yes, I'd seen the photos, but then to see it in person, and then to go back and see the photos again... museums were something that, although I didn't go there very often, what I did see there put things in perspective."

A third participant said:

"I've always seen museums as a place of education, and I think because I was so engrained into museums, I'm kind of a forever student of learning. I think that has definitely affected a certain part of my personality, of wanting to always pursue knowledge and never being satisfied until I kind of find out all I can about a subject that I'm interested in."

A separate group of participants did not self-identify as life-long learners per se, but talked about the impacts their numinous museum experiences had on their thought patterns. For example, one woman hypothesized that her experiences have helped shape her into someone who “think[s] in the shape of a spiral.” Others described the joys of being an “interdisciplinary-oriented” “generalist.” One participant described how this has manifested in her work:

“I always liked going to all different kinds of museums, and that’s how I am as an educator. I worked at zoos and aquariums, natural history museums and art museums, and I like them all. And I value them all... But I think that because I love them all, I went to them all and value them all and so I can be excited about all of them.”

Museumgoers

As mentioned earlier, many participants reported feeling comfortable in museums and valuing them as institutions. They identified as museumgoers – people who know how to navigate the museum space and enjoy visiting museums. A participant provided the following explanation:

“Since I have been going [to museums] basically my whole life with my family, and I’ve always been very interested in the topic since I was pre-high school, and I pursued it all the way through college, I have zero problem walking into a museum. I have zero problem exploring on my own, I have no problem saying what I think is good and what I don’t like and going on a tour or not. I am 100% comfortable in any museum, anywhere. I bring my kids to stuff, I take them to art museums and everything and don’t worry about, they’re three and one and I don’t worry about it and that is not most people.”

Another participant talked about the role museums continue to play in her life:

“I still go to a lot of museums. I still make all my friends go to museums with me. When people come to visit, I’m like ‘Why don’t you want to go to the museums, what’s wrong with you?’ I think I share it with a lot of people because I grew up having my parents share it with me, so feeling like this is a gift as opposed to something that I’m making you do, or something you should feel like you have to do.”

Some participants even described seeking out numinous museum experiences, despite being well into adulthood and their professional careers:

“I’ve been a museumgoer ever since then [the numinous museum experience] and have always sought out spaces that give me that awe and amazement.”

“Just throughout my life, these kind of experiences, even to this year, I still keep having these kinds of experiences.”

Professional Identities

All participants reported that their numinous museum experiences earlier in life had shaped their professional identity in some way. Several participants had a difficult time separating their professional identities from their personal identities. The following response exemplifies this struggle:

“I think really my work is kind of my life. I’m a constant learner and I’m obsessed about museums as a form of job because that’s just my personality of just always wanting to learn.”

Another participant expressed fear for his identity upon his impending retirement:

“I am retiring and my biggest fear is my identity. Am I going to have a business card? What am I going to put on it? Who am I? I am, this is my life, I love it... I personally identify with what I do every day. I say I work because I have to, I do this because I want to.”

One person explained this hesitation to separate professional from personal identities in a cultural context:

“I’m a dinosaur guy, I know that... we use a lot of self-identifiers [for] what we do in our professional lives, just I think that’s an American, it’s a part of our culture. So, I know I am a collections person.”

For many participants, their numinous museum experiences infused an element of passion for the work into their professional identities. As one person explained,

“I think that experience... when I was like ‘this is what I want to do,’ that spark, I would say that shaped the reason why I’m in the museology field. Because it feels good to be in something that you want to be, rather than in something that you have to be.”

Another participant said, “I don’t see this as a job, I see it as a calling.” A third participant reiterated this idea, sharing “I really think I was born to do this... I take deep joy in this work.”

For a few people, their numinous museum experiences contributed to their professional identity as “outsiders.” However, they saw this difference as a strength to be leveraged:

“I recognize that in many ways I am not who you typically see in the field, in terms of my background, my experiences with the arts and museums growing up, and more frankly, being a male, Filipino-American. I don’t see myself represented and so I feel like my role in a lot of ways is to make sure that we’re making experiences available to many communities, being as inclusive externally as possible. It’s also about internally, what are the ways we can make the field more inclusive to encourage and enable more diverse voices to be here in the field... I see that as a key part of my identity here, inclusivity on an external standpoint but also inclusivity on an internal standpoint... I see myself as being part of the work, I’m still trying to figure out what my role is. Being relatively new to the field I’m still kind of figuring that out, but I feel like that’s a key part of how I see myself in this field, kind of pushing and advocating for that.”

“I feel like I’ve taken a less traditional route, it allows the museum to offer a different point of view... Coming from an engineering background, technology is something that I enjoy just messing around with, and so since a lot of teens, that’s how they are creative, it’s not challenging for me, I often have been able to kind of bring that component, whereas more traditional studio skills from a lot of our staff in education, I don’t necessarily have those but I’m able to bring another aspect... Having one person coming from maybe a non-expert stance, I’ve found... it’s just a different way to relate. I don’t know if it’s better or worse, but it’s just a different perspective.”

How do these numinous experiences impact museum professionals’ practices?

In response to the third research question, this study found that most museum professionals believed their own numinous experiences had impacted their practice in some way. For some, this meant providing for their visitors the experiences they personally had missed out on. For other participants, this manifested in trying to design similarly numinous experiences for

their visitors. For many participants, this influenced how they interacted with and contributed to the development of the field at large.

Providing What They Missed Out On

When asked about the impacts of their numinous museum experiences on their practice, many participants pointed to work they were doing to provide others with experiences they felt they personally had missed out on. One participant explained how this affects how she thinks about access to the museum:

“So, I’m doing things that I didn’t experience in museums, and I spend a lot of time in my professional life doing that, because I also had a pretty shoddy art education in school, I didn’t have a lot of access to it. I think I’m doing some compensating, like making up for what I didn’t get to do... thinking about how I wasn’t about to access a lot of museums. And being in the education arm, I think now I work hard to think about how to make museums more accessible and freely available to people who are like me, or people who don’t even know that the museum is a fun place, or can be...I’ve spent a lot of time learning about that, those social-emotional connections that can be made, and that weren’t made, you know those opportunities weren’t opened up for me during those visits, so, I think since I’ve learned about those theories, it’s been about sort of creating opportunities for what I didn’t see happen when I went.”

A second participant mused on how she would have liked her numinous museum experience to be different, and how she sees her current role playing in to that:

“I think that it [the numinous museum experience] is a good example to me of how objects can pull people in but it doesn’t...in my ideal world, if I had been there as an educator, I would have had also an educational experience that I would have remembered about that, right? So, maybe it illustrates the power of objects to bring people into a state where they are more open to learning and more absorbed and present in the moment, but I didn’t get that extension, and that’s my job now, is to do those extension parts.”

A third example centered on the integration of interactives within the exhibition space:

“The part of been active in the museum...is the part I didn’t experience as a kid. At that time, there was not a lot of hands-on activities in museums. I got that at home and at school, a lot of hands-on activities, and that’s why I’ve been very active in working with our education team to develop hands-on activities for our museum. I realize that [it] is so important and I love working that way with kids.”

Facilitating Numinous Museum Experiences

When asked if they try to facilitate numinous museum experiences for visitors to their museums, participants were divided in their responses. The majority reported that they do try to facilitate similarly impactful experiences for visitors to their museums. One participant responded,

“Well, I think that’s my whole job, is to try to create such experiences. Do I consciously connect them to the ones I’ve had? I don’t think consciously. Maybe unconsciously. I mean, I’m aware of the experiences and how they made me. When I do my work, as a practicing museum educator, I absolutely want to create those moments for people.”

Participants’ techniques for trying to facilitate numinous museum experiences varied widely. One participant shared his philosophy that “the more senses you can incorporate, the more memorable the experience.” Another person emphasized the capacity of interactives to get “people engaged with what they are seeing.” A different participant relied on “behind-the-scenes tours, anything like that... to tell a story or provide access to an object that would really resonate with the people going through.”

A separate group of people reported that they do not try to facilitate numinous museum experiences, but instead focus on creating a safe, positive space so people can be open to those kinds of experiences. As one participant explained her approach:

“I focus a lot more on comfort and thinking and kind of leave the occurrence of the big, transcendent moments... if they’re going happen, I feel like that’s an individual thing, if that’s going to happen, it’s going to happen to a person, regardless if I’m there or not... So, if you take away all of the barriers, of not feeling comfortable and not feeling like I know what I’m doing, and not knowing what I’m looking at and what am I supposed to think about this, if you take all those away then that leaves the empty field for whatever they’re going to experience. And if they get there, they get there, and if they don’t, maybe they had a really good time and they’ll come back another time, that’s valid too. Number one most important thing, welcoming, positive, feeling good about what happened. Number two most important thing, would be achieving whatever we’re

trying to achieve, if it be a looking, a thinking routine, or using their imaginations, or having discussions as a group, those would be my number two priority, is trying to go down those roads. And I feel like, if those two things happen, then that leaves the possibility for something more to happen.”

Similarly, another person shared,

“I’m not sure if you can facilitate one of those experiences. Certainly, on a less intense scale I try to do that. I talk about the light bulb effect. I’m very fond of just kind of stalking visitors and watching their behavior and seeing what they’re doing and you can always tell when something hits them and they’re engaged, you know that light bulb goes off over their head. I think on a certain level, all of us in museums live to see that happen. I like the idea that people can stick their heads in...we encourage people to hang out with us... We experiment a lot. We use music a lot because it’s such a big cultural marker around here, we’ll have soundtracks playing in our exhibition spaces, we’ll encourage our student workers and certainly our staff to just talk to the people who are looking at our exhibits, to interact with them... Because I think the more comfortable people are the more their receptors will be open to get the messages that we’re trying to send.”

A third, smaller faction of participants reported that, although they do not work with visitors, they try to contribute to facilitating numinous experiences in other ways. Largely, this meant supporting colleagues who are doing this work. One participant related a heartwarming story of how she went beyond the scope of her everyday work to facilitate what was certainly a memorable experience:

“One of our board members has two little boys, they’re about eight and ten and they’re very, very bright and they’re interested in paleontology. I said, ‘Bring your boys and I’ll give them a special behind-the-scenes tour’ and I don’t do that for the general public but...I was just so taken with their interest. They had already told their mom that they were going to create a museum when they grew up, and they would hire her, and the main rule would be that there would be no glitter on the fossils. I was very impressed with that! So, I said bring them up here and I [showed] some special things to them, and then I put out a projectile point chart, and I had them sort some of the points and I said I was going to have them help me and it’s a little project for them. That was so fun for me, seeing them go ‘whoa!’ with behind-the-scenes excitement, especially because they had expressed an interest in working in museums, or creating a museum.”

Developing the Field

When asked if their numinous experiences had influenced them in developing the museum profession, most participants answered in the affirmative. A few participants said no or were unsure, but they were also largely new to the field.

The most common way participants felt they contributed to the field was in mentoring other museum professionals, especially at the emergent level. Many reported supervising interns and fellows. Some ran their respective museum's internship program, and a couple had even started internship programs at museums where they worked.

Another way in which participants helped develop the field was in enhancing awareness of museums as a career option. This category included being available for informational interviews and organizing or participating in career fairs. One person described a particularly innovative career fair:

“I worked on a group that did a Career Day seminar for middle and high school students that was about non-traditional museum careers. So, we brought in somebody from the General Counsel's office, we brought in somebody who does architecture for the Smithsonian, I brought in computer programmers, some accountants, somebody from the Health and Wellness office, so that students could come in and understand that a museum isn't only about art or science, but [that there] is a whole infrastructure behind it that keeps it running... These lightbulbs were going off all day long, it was amazing... It's surprising for people to think of, people think of museums and they think of art, well I don't like art, so that's closed to me, and you can say, well you don't have to be an art person, you can be a scientist or you can be a teacher, and work in a museum.”

In addition, participants identified a slew of “other” ways they have contributed to the development of the field. These included writing articles and a textbook, as well as teaching museum studies courses. One participant started a successful boot camp program for “middle-career museum professionals who want to further their career and round out what they do.” Another person talked about the work he was doing with his museum's equity initiatives:

“In terms of like shaping the field more broadly, I’m really proud of the equity work that I’m able to be a part of. I feel like, from what I’ve heard, from talking with colleagues, [our museum] is really kind of ahead of the game in a lot of ways and is doing a lot of great work. I feel really honored to be part of that work because I feel like what we’re doing, a lot of the initiatives are so incredible and I’m really hopeful for them. And I feel like they have a lot of possibility to really be more influential throughout the whole larger field.”

Summary

This chapter relates the results obtained from 25 semi-structured interviews. These findings contribute to the field’s understanding of museum professionals’ numinous experiences in three ways. One, museum professionals characterize their early numinous museum experiences in highly personal and idiosyncratic ways. Two, these early numinous experiences have the capacity to significantly shape both the personal and professional identities of museum professionals. Three, these early numinous experiences can impact both museum professionals’ daily practice and how they interact with the field at large. The key findings of this study were presented in this chapter according to the research questions and are discussed in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the nature of early numinous museum experiences and their long-term influences on museum professionals. Museum professionals' narratives of early experiences in museums was the topic of some exploratory research in the 1990s and early 2000s (Falk and Dierking, 1995; Spock, 2000a; 2000c). Recently, there has been a renewed interest in studying the life histories of museum professionals (Reid, 2013) in order to better understand their identities and shared values. Moreover, by examining the kinds of experiences that motivated current practitioners to pursue this line of work, museum professionals can inspire the next generation and aid in diversifying the field (Merritt, 2016). For this study, data were collected through interviewing 25 museum professionals and analyzed by coding the themes that emerged among participant responses.

Conclusions

How do museum professionals characterize their numinous museum experiences?

The results of this study suggested that museum professionals characterize their numinous museum experiences in highly personal and idiosyncratic ways. This makes sense, as these are highly personal and idiosyncratic experiences. The three main differences in how participants characterized their experiences were the impetus for the experience, how the memory was bound with other memories, and the perceived impact of the experience on the participant's career path.

This research found three possible stimuli for numinous museum experiences: an object, an exhibit/program, or the physical space/atmosphere. These findings confirm and extend those

of Spock (2000c) who identified objects, memorable exhibits and programs, and engaging relationships as themes within his participants' memory narratives.

Participants' whose numinous experiences were prompted by objects typified Latham's (2013) concept of object link, whereby the object "acts as evidence or witness to the past" and helps bring people or the past to life (p. 9). In describing their numinous experiences, all participants also embodied Latham's themes of unity of the moment, being transported, and connections bigger than self. In this way, this research both confirms Latham's findings about numinous experiences with museum objects and extends them to include numinous museum experiences prompted in other ways.

This study showed that participants' memories of their numinous museum experiences were bound with memories of other details, as well as personal recollections of what was going on in their lives and in the world. Details included remembrances of the weather, time of year, transportation to and from the museum, purchasing a souvenir, interactive elements, and the floor plan. Personal reminiscences comprised travel to another city or country, birthdays, memorable classes, and national news. These findings align with those of Falk and Dierking (1995) who identified eight domains of museum recollections: social memories, specific recollections of exhibits or objects viewed, physical characteristics of the museum, temporal memories of the visit, affective dimensions of the visit, whether the memories tended to be concrete or abstract, and whether the museum recollections were bound with other memories. Not every participant touched on every domain, but all eight were present in the body of data collected.

Participants' perceptions of how their numinous museum experiences impacted their career path formed a continuum. Some individuals attributed their coming to the museum field to their numinous experiences, while those on the opposite end of the spectrum said these

experiences had no impact on their life choices. Participants in the middle reported that their experiences either made them intensely interested in a discipline that they later linked to museum work, or that their experiences were positive and left them open to the idea of working in a museum. These findings confirm Spock's (2000c) observation that "there was a deterministic inevitability in some of the narratives... for others museum work was a possibility rather than an inevitability... or the experience appeared to have opened up the possibility of museum work even though it had not seemed likely at the time" (p. 26-27).

How do these numinous experiences impact museum professionals' identities?

The results of this research indicate that numinous museum experiences have the capacity to significantly shape both the personal and professional identities of museum professionals. On the personal level, these experiences helped mold participants' personal identities as life-long learners and museum goers. These findings support Reid's (2013) assertion that "if we define identity as a complex, holistic, and reflexive concept, *personal* pasts are essential defining components of *professional* identity formation" (p. 230).

How do these numinous experiences impact museum professionals' practices?

This study showed that most museum professionals believed their numinous experiences had impacted their practice in some way. For some, this was in providing visitors to their museums with the experiences they personally felt they had missed out on. For other participants, this meant trying to facilitate numinous experiences for their visitors. For many people, their numinous experiences and subsequent mentoring relationships with museum professionals inspired them to help develop the field more broadly, by enhancing awareness of museums as a career option and by mentoring people themselves. These findings contribute both

to the literature and the field's understanding of this phenomenon, as there does not appear to be much research on the topic.

Implications

For Practice

This research could inform museum practice in three key ways: supporting early interest, enhancing awareness of museums as a career option, and making space for dialogue and reflection among museum professionals.

The results of this study could help museum professionals better understand their significant role in fostering individuals' early interest in museums. Many participants spontaneously brought up the contributions of a supporting figure in their lives who helped them take their reactions to the numinous experiences and translate them into concrete academic and professional goals. These supporting figures were often parents or museum professionals who took on a mentoring role. Participants spoke highly of these mentors and ascribed a lot of value to their influence. In practice, museum professionals could embrace the ability they have to support and mentor individuals who demonstrate an early interest in the field.

Another implication for practice raised by the results of this research is that museum professionals could work to enhance awareness of museums as a career option. Many participants explained that they initially did not understand that working in museums was a possibility, or that there were roles other than curator within the museum walls. Some participants reported taking steps in their own practice to rectify this, such as organizing or participating in career fairs. Field-wide, museum professionals could take steps to enhance

awareness of museums as a career option and broaden understanding of what roles are available within the museum field.

A third way in which this study could inform practice is in making space for dialogue and reflection among museum professionals. Participants' open and emotional responses to the interview process, which one individual referred to as "professional therapy," suggested that there are museum professionals for whom these sorts of conversations are valuable. According to Spock (2000c):

"If we examine our own museum memories and think about the stories we choose to tell, they offer important clues to our deepest, but possibly unexamined, professional convictions— what we really believe and how those beliefs can be brought to bear in a more conscious way to shape our work" (p. 30).

Making space for dialogue and reflection among museum professionals could be helpful for the individuals themselves, their colleagues, and the field as whole.

For Research

In response to Spock's study of museum professionals' narratives of early interest in museum work, Falk said "What this data does not provide... is a sense of the relative frequency of these kinds of impacts... What remains to be investigated is how these impacts are distributed, and why" (Spock, 2000c, p. 29). Falk's statement continues to ring true. This research study further explored how museum professionals characterize their numinous experiences and what impacts they believe those experiences have had on their identities and practice. This study did not, however, attempt to get a sense of how many museum professionals have had numinous experiences that led them to the field. One opportunity for further research could be a quantitative study aimed at understanding the frequency of these types of numinous experiences among museum professionals.

Another prospect for future research could be a comparative study between museum professionals who had numinous experiences and those who did not. The results of this study indicated that museum professionals' numinous experiences impact both their personal and professional identities, as well as their practice. A comparative study could investigate if and how the identities and practices of museum professionals who had numinous experiences differ from the identities and practices of those who did not.

A third possibility for additional research could be expanding this study to include other populations within the museum. This study solely concerned museum professionals, but there are many more groups of people who help museums run, including volunteers, docents, trustees, and board members. Another study could investigate if members of any of these populations had numinous experiences that motivated them to get involved in museum work, but not in a strictly "professional" capacity.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Call for Participants

Reflect on your pivotal museum experiences

Have you ever felt a unique or special moment while visiting a museum? Was this experience deeply moving or transcendent?

As a second-year Museology student at the University of Washington, I am working on my graduate thesis. My study focuses on **transcendent museum experiences in youth and how these experiences impact museum professionals**. If you have memories of such a transcendent experience and feel that it has somehow impacted where you are today, I would love to speak with you.

In order to participate in this study, you must be **working or have worked in an art or object-based museum**. The interviews will be conducted in March 2017.

If you choose to participate, you will be involved in a **brief, thirty-minute conversation with me**, either in person or over the phone. Participants will not be identified and their interviews will be confidential.

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact me, Kirsten Gausch, at **kgausch@uw.edu** or **610-563-1804**.

Thank you very much. I hope to hear from you soon!

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Kirsten Gausch Allen // Phone: 610-563-1804 // email: kgausch@uw.edu
 Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jessica Luke, Museology Graduate Program, University of Washington
 Phone: 206-685-3496 // email: jjluke@uw.edu

Consent Script

I am asking you to participate in a research study that is part of my master's thesis at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to explore the nature and influence of numinous museum experiences in childhood on museum professionals. Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. This interview will be audio-recorded. However, your responses will remain confidential. Your name will not be identified and while I may quote you, that quote will not be attributed to you. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may ask me or my advisor using the contact information I have shared with you. Do you have any questions? Do you agree to participate in this interview?

Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you been working in the museum field?
- 2) Growing up, how often did you visit museums?
 - 2a) What kinds of museums did you visit? (Art, natural history, etc.)
 - 2b) Where? (Hometown, on vacation, etc.)
 - 2c) Who did you go with? (Parents, school, etc.)
 - 2d) When did you go? (Weekends, school breaks, etc.)
- 3) Please share a memory of a numinous museum experience earlier in your life. What were the personal, social, and physical contexts of the visit?
 - 3a) How old were you?
 - 3b) Where were you?
 - 3c) Who were you with?
 - 3d) Why were you there?
 - 3e) What was striking/memorable?

PROBES

 - What was going on in your head?
 - What were you thinking about?
 - What response did you have physically and emotionally?
 - What did it mean to you?
 - Why was it important to you?
 - 3f) Do you have another numinous museum experience you would like to share?
 - 3g) How were these experiences similar and different for you?
- 4) When you look back, to what degree and in what ways do you think this experience influenced the choices you have made up to this point?

5) What impact, if any, do you think this experience has had on you? What is that impact? Personal? Professional?

6) Do you think your experience has had any impact on you as a museum professional? If so, how?

PROBES

- Has it had any impact on your choice to work in a museum?
- Has it had any impact on the ways you engage in your museum practice now?
- Has it had any impact on how you think about the value of what you do?

7) Do you believe your experience has impacted your practice? If so, how?

8) Does your experience impact how you conceive of what you do for a living/your profession? If so, how?

8b) Does your numinous museum experience shape your professional identity? How?

9) Do you try to facilitate numinous museum experiences for your visitors? If so, how?

10) Do you think your experience has influenced you at all in developing the museum profession?

PROBES

- In cultivating emerging museum professionals?
- In enhancing awareness of museums as a career option? How?

Appendix C: Coding Rubric

Gausch Analysis Rubric

How long have you been working in the museum field?	
0 to 4 years	
5 to 9 years	
10 to 14 years	
15 to 19 years	
20 or more years	
Growing up, how often did you visit museums?	
Less than once a year	
Annually (once per year)	
Quarterly (4 times per year)	
Monthly (12 times per year)	
Multiple times each month (>12 times per year)	
What kinds of museums did you visit? (Could have multiple responses)	
Art museums	
Natural history museums	
History museums/historic sites	
Science centers	
Zoos/aquariums	
Other cultural institutions not otherwise specified	
Where did you visit these museums? (Could have multiple responses)	
Hometown	
Closest big city	
On vacations	
Who did you go to these museums with?	
Nuclear family	
Extended family	
Friends	
School/extracurricular activity group	

No one	
When did you go to these museums?	
Weekends	
School breaks/vacations	
Free/discounted days	
When there was an event/exhibit that interested me.	
I don't remember/it didn't matter.	
Please share a memory of a numinous museum experience earlier in your life. What were the personal, social, and physical contexts of the visit?	
How old were you?	
0 to 5 years old	
6 to 10 years old	
11 to 14 years old	
15 to 18 years old	
18 to 22 years old	
Undefined	
Where were you?	
Art museum	
Natural history museum	
History museum/historic site	
Other	
Who were you with?	
Family	
Friends	
School/extracurricular activity group	
No one	
Not specified	
Why were you there?	
Leisure/something to do	
For a specific exhibit/program	
For the experience	
As part of a school/group trip	
Don't remember/no reason	
What was striking/memorable? (Could	

<i>have multiple responses)</i>	
Object	“Being able to see these things that we had looked at in class in person, I was just so wowed...It was just really astonishing to be able to experience that.”
Exhibit/Program	“So, we went through the whole exhibit, and at the end when we left I just sat down on the sidewalk and started crying because it was so overwhelming. So many emotions connected to that experience that it was a very strong response to the exhibit.”
Physical Space/Atmosphere	“She took me over there and we walked through the exhibits, which I had seen before, and then they opened a door to the back. And that was like going into Santa’s workshop or something. It’s a sea full of paintings, stuff gets made back here, there were artifacts out on tables and file cabinets, I mean I don’t think I had been in any kind of working environment yet. But that was really transformative, to go back behind that door.”
To what degree and in what ways do you think this experience influenced the choices you have made up to this point?	
It made me feel comfortable in museums.	“Oh, I think they were critical. I really do. I think the ability to come and go, almost, we sort of felt like we were, kind of getting away with something? You know, we found these places and they were quiet and they were sort of private. So, that level of permission to be in this place, that again, was warm and safe and interesting, it had cool stuff in it that we could look at and if we didn’t like one gallery we could move on to another gallery. Or, if we wanted to do some research or find out something there were labels that we could read and look at and pull from. So, knowing that a museum was a place to gather information, but that we could, or that I could be in charge of what I was looking at, was huge. This idea of self-selection and self-discovery.”
It made me value museums.	“I think that valuing cultural institutions is something that you get from being taken to

	those places and knowing that you enjoy those places.”
It made me want to work in a museum and led me to take steps to do so.	“My realizing what I wanted to do stemmed a lot from those initial high school experiences, those exposures, remembering what drew me to those places in the first place.”
It didn't.	“Can I attribute that to some, very, back, you know, exploring all of these museums? I don't know, because, you know – once a year? I would be hesitant to draw that kind of a correlation, but I think there may be some, there may be something there, that made things useful and good.”
What impact do you think this experience has had on you, personally or professionally?	
It increased my sense of connectivity to other people and/or the past.	“I think in a lot of ways it just sort of created a sense of connectivity. Right? The thread I see in both of those is just sort of being connected through history, as people. When I stood in that atrium, and around all these people, even though I don't really like being around people, it still sort of felt like this amazing line that you can feel back and back and back. And that's sort of in a more personal way, what walking around MOHAI with my grandma and my mom, talking about Seattle... it's almost like, sort of being transported back in history.”
It enriched my sense of what museums are/can/should be.	“I would say that particular one took me from thinking that museums were like a cool place to like spend free time, to a place where you actually can, I don't want to say can learn things but, where you actually can, just like uncover, like discover new things, have really interesting conversations about stuff, like really, kind of independently find out stuff that you didn't know before. It went from like a cool thing to an actually like important thing.”
It impacted how I think (lifelong learner, spiral, generalist).	“I think it made me more interested in just learning about anything. You know, interesting things that come across your desk or people talk about, it's made me want to learn more.”

It brought me to the museum field (directly or indirectly).	<p>“They were the foundational influences for my career, which means my life.”</p> <p>“They have been a touchstone my entire life.”</p>
Do you think this experience has had any impact on you as a museum professional? If so, how?	
Yes, it is the reason I became a museum professional.	<p>“Oh, absolutely. I’m positive they did. I don’t think without those experiences and my mother’s research I would be where I am. I just fell in love with museum work and I honestly can’t imagine doing anything else.”</p>
Yes, it informs/impacts my practice.	<p>“... I still think about this experience and it just kind of...shows me and supports that there’s no one way to do an exhibit. There are different ways to present a story, even if it’s a similar story, and to not be afraid to confront people with emotion or with an experience like that, to not just keep it to the history or to something more controlled.”</p>
No	<p>“No, I don’t think so because, you know looking at it from the outside and the inside are two totally different things. So no, I don’t think so, not a lot.”</p>
Other	
Do you believe your experience has impacted your practice? If so, how?	
Yes, it makes me focus on how to create similarly impactful experiences for others.	<p>“I give tours of our site and I do try to find something that a kid could grab onto.”</p> <p>“I think it makes me focus on how to create those experiences for other people, that it isn’t just about “this object is cool,” it’s about “what story does this object tell?”</p> <p>“I do think that I am a little less registrarial in my practice, because I know it can really have the effect on someone. I’ve led tours through collections storage where I’ve actually let people touch something that maybe was a collection duplicate or something, not the main, one, unique thing but I think that we can really, help bring you</p>

	into a space.”
Yes, it makes me focus on making the museum accessible and inclusive.	<p>“Yes, they’ve impacted my practice in a way that I want to make sure that nobody is turned away from a museum experience.”</p> <p>“Yeah, definitely. As I’ve said, if I didn’t have the memory of being in the museum as a young person, then I don’t know what I would use as a touchstone to make decisions for what other people should do in the space... I think a lot about prior experience, in my role because I spend a lot of time trying to help others and myself be in the position of newcomers to a museum because that’s so much of the population, people that just aren’t interested in art or just haven’t lived around art museums or haven’t been able to get to them. I think I also feel really grounded in that role because that was, that was where I was coming from. So, keeping things low-barrier in terms of language and assuming knowledge and all of that, I think definitely comes from, not being brought up in them in a scholarly way.”</p>
Yes, it makes me think about the social value of what I do.	<p>“Museums have such a platform to comment on, not only represent history like that, but also to comment on society now and what’s happening in the future. I think that the past, present, and future all really connected within the museum. Exhibits like that really just support that museums are important, and that the work that we’re doing can have a real impact on society.”</p>
Not in my personal, everyday work, but in other ways.	<p>“Probably, in that it’s inspired me to keep my hands in the educational aspect even though that’s not my main job description... I love getting to go back and do things with the kids because I get to experience that excitement again of them coming to such a special place and so, I think in a way it’s impacted me more in the part that’s not my main job. My main job requires a lot more intellectual, thinking about what are the main themes of our area that we want to collect, a lot more managerial aspects of the</p>

	collection, but my childhood experiences draw me back to working with the kids.”
No	“No, I don’t think so. I think of them more as like inspiration and backdrop, and that most of my practice comes from practical experience working in museums, or in grad school learning the theory behind it, or just working with kids more generally since that’s my focus as a professional. But no, I think of it more as like a backdrop.”
Does your experience impact how you conceive of what you do for a living/your profession? If so, how?	
It helps me focus/distill what I do.	“It definitely helps me sort of boil down what I do to just telling stories that are accessible to people. And just like creating connections, that those stories create connection, and that’s what were here to do. And having that thing to go back to, when other stuff... It makes it easier to stay focused, I think.”
It has caused me to focus on the social value of my work.	“I really think that people in this, that we can make a big difference, and I think we really can make sure that people don’t take their lives and the past for granted. I think what we do is important so I’m glad I’m doing it.”
It sparked my passion for the field.	<p>“I think they more than impact it, I think they’re the reason that I am, who I am.”</p> <p>“I think it has value to me personally because it’s something that I really want. Being in the field is something that I have chosen deliberately and purposely because I want to be in it. Not because I have to be in it or I feel like I should be in it, but because I personally want to be... I think definitely that experience, when I was like “this is what I want to do,” that spark, I definitely would say that shaped the reason why I’m in the museology field. Because it feels good to be in something that you want to be, rather than in something that you have to be.”</p>
Not directly, but tangentially.	“Probably somewhere deep down, but not, but I don’t think of that instance regularly when I’m like doing things. I think it more

	of, was like a transition point of realizing what an actual museum was, of being like oh yeah, this is where I like to be, consciously, as opposed to going out and doing something else. So, kind of real far out, theoretically, yes, but not in every day.”
No	“Not so much, because like I said, while museums were great they weren’t very, no, I would say no. I think those are too far and few between. I would have loved to go to more, but simple fact of geography, I wasn’t close to any of them. So, the opportunity to go was not very often.”
Does your numinous museum experience shape your professional identity? How?	
My professional identity is the same as my personal identity.	“I am retiring and my biggest fear is my identity. Am I going to have a business card? What am I going to put on it? Who am I? I am, this is my life, I love it... But yeah, I am completely, I personally identify with what I do every day. I say I work because I have to, I do this because I want to.”
I love what I do.	“I’m glad I’m in this profession, I really like it. I can’t see myself doing anything else.” “It’s a little corny, but I really think I was born to do this. I really do, I take deep joy in this work, and between the work itself and like I said, watching the people... who are coming to see it, they become friends. It’s so great to know that we really are building community and that this is not just some feel-good thing, that it’s important work. And I believe it.”
It has marked me as an “outsider” or anomaly in the museum world.	“I think so, so even though sometimes I feel like I’ve taken a less traditional route, it allows the museum to offer a different point of view... And so coming from, having one person coming from maybe a non-expert stance, I’ve found that there are, it’s just a different way to relate. I don’t know if it’s better or worse, but it’s just a different perspective.”
Other	

Do you try to facilitate numinous museum experiences for your visitors? If so, how?	
Yes, I try to facilitate numinous museum experiences for my visitors.	<p>“Well, I think that’s my whole job, is to try to create such experiences. Do I consciously connect them to the ones I’ve had? I don’t think consciously. Maybe unconsciously. I mean, I’m aware of the experiences and how they made me. When I do my work, as a practicing museum educator, I absolutely want to create those moments for people.”</p> <p>“Yes, absolutely. It is my philosophy that the more senses you can incorporate, the more memorable the experience.”</p>
I don’t work with visitors, but I try to contribute to this in other ways.	<p>“I don’t tend to interact with visitors as much but I do think that my philosophy and my thoughts about <i>how</i> to do all of the things that we do... And it does shape sort of my like more theoretical feelings about how museums <i>should</i> be doing things.”</p>
No, but I try to create a positive, safe space so people can be open to those types of experiences.	<p>“I’m hoping to become more involved in community engagement in the future and I’m definitely interested in creating meaningful experiences in the museum and also having the museum sort of be a space where you can feel your feelings, like a community space that is also a safe space.”</p> <p>“Reflecting back to my own experience in high school, my teacher made the art accessible and relevant to me. I try to infuse that in a lot of ways, in the programming I’m involved in. How are we breaking it down for the visitor? How are we making it accessible for them? He was able to do that well and so I always try to do that here, too.”</p> <p>“I think the more comfortable people are the more their receptors will be open to get the messages that we’re trying to send.”</p>
Do you think your experience has influenced you at all in developing the museum profession? (Could have multiple responses)	
Yes, in enhancing awareness of museums as a career option.	<p>“I’ll do interviews, like last week I had an in-person interview with a local honors</p>

	<p>student who was thinking about what she could do with history as a profession and so I brought her back and gave her a behind-the-scenes tour of the area so maybe that is where I can have that impact, is with some of the students who are coming up and considering the field.”</p> <p>“Yeah, I mean, I’m always giving lectures, recently, because of my fellowship, at a local college, and I always make sure that people can just directly ask me questions about pursuing a career in museums.”</p> <p>“I worked on a group that did a Career Day seminar for middle and high school students that was about the non-traditional museum careers.”</p> <p>“Something I try to do, or that I really love doing, is going to career fairs actually... there’s lots of students who we talked to who had never been to [SAM], didn’t really see museums as a career option, like there were even jobs here, you know? And so, I also try to make it a point as part of my work to really shift that notion and be able to speak about that in these contexts. I like to go to a lot more that are for youth or like high school aged, because I feel like that’s such a key time and a formative time for the youth.”</p>
<p>Yes, in mentoring other museum professionals/interns.</p>	<p>“In my case, I think yes, definitely. I mean, in my career, I’ve always had interns. In this job, I’ve always had paid fellows. I run the museum’s internship and fellowship program. I engage with a lot of young people. I’ve turned out more interns and fellows than I possibly can name. They remember me but I don’t always remember them because there’s been that many. But it’s really important to me. And I think if I don’t pass on my passion and give people opportunities to learn from them and understand what I think it means to be a great museum educator than I’m not doing it</p>

	all. That's really important to me and I'm really invested in that."
Yes, in other ways.	<p>"I feel like what we're doing here at SAM with our equity initiatives really have potential to make an impact throughout the whole, larger field."</p> <p>"My teaching has really been my area where, I hope, I've been able to make a difference."</p> <p>"So my book, I'm hoping, will be a helpful textbook for the field."</p>
No	"Probably not, I don't think I'm important enough to have that kind of impact on the profession. No."