Principles of History Interpretation

Introduction

As a center for preserving and sharing the rich history of our region, the Brick Store Museum recognizes the critical responsibility that public history professionals and researchers have to uphold the highest standards of historical interpretation. In today's world, where historical narratives shape our collective memory and understanding, it is vital that interpretations are grounded in accuracy, inclusivity, and nuance, free from the influence of personal biases.

In line with this commitment, our work follows guidelines outlined in **The Brick Store Museum's Principles of History Interpretation**. This ensures that all members of the community can engage with history in an honest, meaningful, and informed way.

The Museum invites visitors and researchers alike to engage with this work, providing opportunities for learning and dialogue that respect historical accuracy and promote critical thinking. As part of this ongoing process, the Museum remains dedicated to listening to diverse voices and perspectives while fostering an environment that invites all to examine history with care and curiosity.

We are proud to offer the Just History Database as a public resource for research and learning.

+++

The Brick Store Museum's Principles of History Interpretation

History professionals and researchers have a responsibility to uphold high standards of interpretation to minimize the influence of personal biases and produce more accurate, nuanced, and inclusive historical accounts. The Brick Store Museum takes this responsibility very seriously, as mis-interpreting history due to bias or error can seriously harm future learners, skew historical truth, and distort the community's understanding of broader history. The Museum continuously seeks to improve interpretation in exhibitions, research, writing and programming to ensure historical context is accurate and without bias.

To do so, the Museum follows these basic research principles:

Contextualize: Understand the historical, social, political, and cultural environment in which events occurred. Recognize that historical events and people are often multi-faceted and influenced by a variety of factors. Avoid simplistic explanations.

Compare & Connect: Analyze similarities and differences between historical events, eras, or societies to gain deeper understanding. Identify links between historical events, trends, and developments to understand how they relate to each other and contribute to broader historical narratives.

Identify Bias: Recognize that all people have bias. In primary sources, secondary sources, and in historic interpretation, be able to detect bias and evaluate it. Analyze evidence critically, and question assumptions and interpretations (even your own). Consider alternative explanations. Biases are inherent in human thinking and can influence research. Researchers should reflect on their own backgrounds, beliefs, values, and potential biases that might affect their interpretation of historical events and attempt to remove those biases.

Separate Fact from Opinion: A statement of fact is one that contains an assertion capable of being proven true or false by primary sources. Statements of opinion are those that cannot be proven true or false because they depend on a person's personal, subjective viewpoint. Generally, opinion should not be combined with historical interpretation unless stated clearly that it is opinion.

Focus on Evidence: Base historical claims on solid evidence from reliable sources. Avoid relying on personal opinions or anecdotal evidence that might be influenced by your own bias. Utilize multiple sources and methods to gather data and verify information. This can help reduce bias by providing a broader perspective and checks for consistency across different sources.

Practical Tips for Mitigating Bias in History Interpretation:

- *Begin your research with a question, not a predetermined answer*. Historical research should be driven by a genuine curiosity to understand the topic, rather than aiming to confirm an already-formed conclusion. Approaching research with a specific outcome in mind introduces bias, as you'll tend to seek out only the facts that support your narrow perspective—this can mislead future readers and limit and/or harm their understanding of history. Viewing research as a process of discovery helps researchers recognize that not every question has a clear answer, and that some questions may simply lead to more questions.
- *Use specific and neutral language.* Avoid using biased or loaded language that can perpetuate stereotypes and/or prejudice, or imply something that is not fact-based or proven otherwise. Avoid stated or implied "all or never" assertions. Use up-to-date terms when referring to people, places and things. Use parallel language when comparing groups or individuals.
- *Back up your statements*. Be able to answer the question, "according to who?" Back up your statements with specific research or sources. Most of the time, opinions do not belong in historical interpretations for public learning.
- *Self Awareness.* Be aware of how your own biases are expressed through words and writing. This includes assumptions about categories like professions, beliefs about specific populations, statements based solely on your own experience, and subjective descriptions (i.e. "a beautiful vase" – according to who?).
- *Missing sources or information.* In historical research, there may be gaps where certain sources or information are unavailable. It is important not to assume that the absence of information supports a particular conclusion. Avoid filling in these gaps with personal opinions unless you clearly indicate that you are doing so (and determine the value of that opinion). Always be transparent about what is known and what is missing.

For further information, please refer to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2015.