An Example of Reinterpretation in American Historic House Museums

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AN EXAMPLE OF REINTERPRETATION IN AMERICAN HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

By

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Summary

Despite their past importance, historic house museums have lost struggle to remain interesting to the general public because of the refusal to tell stories beyond those of wealthy, white men. In their 2018 restoration project on the Hampton-Preston Mansion, the Historic Columbia Foundation demonstrate how historic house museums can update their narratives to include the stories of marginalized people through the reinterpretation of their two Edward Troye paintings. This reinterpretation allowed Historic Columbia to tell a story that is not often told and represents the shift in new expectations for historic house museums in order to provide something meaningful to their community.
Introduction

In our increasingly digital world, the relevance of museums as places of education is being constantly reevaluated. While being forced to compete with the readily accessible information available online, museums must ask why they matter, who they are serving, and what they can give to their communities. In his book *Making Museums Matter*, Stephen E. Weil, a senior scholar of the Center for Museum Studies at the Smithsonian Institution, argues that, “Museums matter only to the extent that they are perceived to provide communities they serve with something of value beyond their mere existence.” Museums can no longer rely on their past importance and instead must evolve with the shifting societies they exist within. Museums, especially historic house museums, cannot survive and thrive if they are unwilling to move towards telling a new narrative.

This narrative shift towards something that gives more to the community was exemplified in Columbia, South Carolina at the Historic Columbia Foundation. With the 2018 reinterpretation of one of its house museums, the Hampton-Preston Mansion, Historic Columbia demonstrated the much-needed shift away from using historic house museums as memorials to the powerful or shrines to furnishings of decades past and towards a more holistic narrative of the community they serve. I argue that the reinterpretation of the two Edward Troye paintings, to highlight African-American involvement in equine sports rather than pieces of art that embody the wealth of powerful white families, exemplifies this shift and makes the museum more interesting to the diverse public it serves because of the more holistic narrative it provides.

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Historic House Museums

For much of the 20th century, historic house museums had one of two purposes. Either the home was a shrine to an idealized historic figure, or it functions as a building used to display aesthetically pleasing pieces of furniture in period rooms. The first type is usually the most popular. Places like Mount Vernon, the lifelong home of first American president George Washington, and Monticello, the home of third president Thomas Jefferson are frequently visited; Mount Vernon proudly boasts that one million visitors come to the home each year.² These historic house museums tell a highly romanticized story of the lives of these prominent men and are generally attractive to the public. However, there are significant issues with these types of museums. In trying to create a positive picture of the past, there is often only one side of a story told and a great deal of information is omitted to create a romantic picture of those considered to be American heroes.³

The second type of historic house museum is similar in its dedication to preserving the historic image of the upper class. These museums tend to focus on lesser-known names in history. Instead of the national heroes like Washington or Jefferson, these historic house museums use the locally wealthy to memorialize aesthetic tastes and styles from different historical periods. Entering into these museums, visitors see carefully decorated rooms that are curated to look as if they were transported from a specific time in history. These rooms serve to memorialize the aesthetics of the past with very little narrative about those who once inhabited the house and almost none about the people who were vital to the day-to-day function of the

home. In memorializing the wealth-driven aesthetics of the past, these homes are still functioning as monuments to the rich and fragments the narrative of a building’s history. People like enslaved workers and servants are usually marginalized in order to highlight the wealth and power of the homeowners. This continues the cycle of romanticizing the past which tends to only extend to those in power.

While historic house museums typically dedicated themselves to the wealthy and powerful people of the past, a recent shift in concern has occurred in the public. A large part of American society has begun to look at and focus on the stories of people who have not traditionally been a part of the narrative. This is exemplified through social and cultural movements such as Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement. Both of these seek to give voice to people who have, in the past, been silenced by those in power or who had more privilege in society. The Black Lives Matter movement sought to create awareness and change concerning the high rates of police brutality against African-Americans in modern America while the #MeToo movement vocalized the rampant sexual assault problem faced by women (and a few men) throughout the nation. They both work to move beyond the stories of rich, white men and instead are looking at the plights of those who have faced oppression and marginalization in their lives. Further, the new public attitude highlights the need to question and challenge the past and the stories that are often told. This shift shows some reasoning behind the push for museums, especially historic house museums, to reinterpret their exhibits and collections.

These movements show the way that large portions of the American public are seeking new perspectives on stories that have been previously told by those in power. Counter-culture movements like the ones mentioned are not a new part of history. The evolution of society is being constantly pushed by progressive movements that force reexamination of the past. Like so
many of the movements of the past, such as the first wave of feminism, the Civil Rights Movements, and many others, these are just the ideas of today. They work towards creating a place in society for those who were previously excluded and to spread information that was previously disregarded. It is in taking in the messages of these movements and revisiting the narratives of exhibits that museums can work simultaneously towards a space that is relevant to the current social and political climates.

A lack of social progressiveness is not the only issue in the world of historic house museums. Several other issues are described in the book *Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums* written by Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan. Vagnone and Ryan lay out five major critiques of historic house museums as an attempt reconstruct readers’ idea of them. The first critic is similar to the argument in this paper, highlighting the memorialization of the wealthy. The other critiques by Vagnone and Ryan are: historic house museums do not contribute anything relevant, they are boring, they give visitors a heavily curated image of the past, and they are expensive to maintain. It is in theses issues that Vagnone and Ryan reveal the biggest problem with most current historic house museums: they idealize the elite of the past and are not meeting current desires for those spaces. It was this problem that the Historic Columbia Foundation challenged with their 2018 reinterpretation project. Looking at these five issues, the average historic house museum has much to change in order to meet the new standards and to remain relevant in the changing public attitude.

With a greater attention being paid to issues like these, some historic house museums are taking steps to change the way they represent the past. A great example of this process of change is at Monticello. Thomas Jefferson owned many enslaved people in his life, but this side of his story was not shown when visitors toured the home of the former president. Through much of the
20th century, there was little to mention of the legacy of slavery that was very prominent at Monticello. It was not until the 1980s that mention of the enslaved people who lived on the plantation was added to the historic house museum.⁴ This change included adding names and numbers concerning those who spent their lives enslaved at Monticello. A particular spotlight is put on Sally Hemmings, an enslaved woman who was the mother of six children by Jefferson.⁵ The changes to the interpretation at Monticello also included the acknowledgment of these children as Jefferson’s. All of these changes were made in order to tell a more holistic story of Monticello and the events that occurred there. By taking Jefferson off of a pedestal and looking at all sides of him, the complexities and challenges of the man become a story that causes visitors to engage with what they have been told in the past. In this same fashion, small steps have been taken throughout the nation towards creating and maintaining historic house museums that give more to their communities than shrines to the past.

**Historic Columbia Foundation and the Reinterpretation of the Hampton-Preston Mansion**

Located in the historic heart of Columbia, South Carolina, the Historic Columbia Foundation was founded in 1961 by a group of Columbia citizens who were attempting to save the then Ainsley Hall House (today, the Robert Mills House). Today, the Historic Columbia Foundation is one of the biggest advocates of history and preservation in South Carolina’s capital city. As stated in its mission, the Historic Columbia Foundation “supports and protects the historical and cultural heritage of Columbia and Richland County through advocacy, education,

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and preservation. To this end, the Historic Columbia Foundation operates five historic house museums: the Robert Mills House, the Hampton-Preston Mansion, the Woodrow Wilson Family Home, the Mann-Simons Site, and the Modjeska Monteith Simkins House. Each of these museums provides audiences with a unique look into different aspects of Columbia’s history. Conscious of the changing tides of public opinion, the Historic Columbia Foundation regularly reevaluates the state of their properties and the information displayed within them.

In 2018, with the 200th year anniversary of the home, Historic Columbia began a restoration and reinterpretation project on the Hampton-Preston Mansion and Gardens. The Hampton-Preston Mansion sits a few blocks from Main St. (both when it was constructed as well as today). The house is situated on an entire city block and is surrounded by gardens maintained by Historic Columbia. Like many historic house museums, the Hampton-Preston Mansion, before the reinterpretation project, was a shrine to the Hampton and Preston families that built and inhabited the house in the early 19th century. The first and second floors contained almost no signage or interpretation and relied on tour guides to present information to the visitors. Combining both types of historic house museums mentioned above, the mansion was filled with historic furniture and told also the story of the wealth and power of the families who lived there.

While the upper floors were devoted to the wealthy Hampton and Preston families, the basement took on a different topic before the reinterpretation. In the basement of the home, there was a section devoted to the slaves that worked for the Hampton family. The basement, a world away from the polished and elegant main floors, was composed of brick and had no windows. Visitors would enter into this dark and dreary space to learn about the cruelty of human

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7 See Figures 1 and 2
enslavement that occurred on the land they were visiting. On one hand, the metaphor of the dark blight on history that slavery was, and still is, makes sense. In contrast, the narrative of those who were enslaved was placed in the basement, away from the main story of the house. This created both a mental and physical separation between the wealthy white families of the main parts of the house and the enslaved people whose stories were not included in the central narrative. Slavery was a deep-rooted part of everyday life in the antebellum period of South Carolina and placing all the information about it and those who suffered most from it in the basement makes their story a side piece. It, whether intentionally or not, removed the narrative of slavery at the Hampton-Preston Mansion from the larger story and isolated it. In reality, the narrative of slavery was deeply connected with all other aspects of the house and the people who built and inhabited it.

The 2018 project had two dimensions. The first part focused on restoring the home to its mid-19th-century grandeur while the second part was an attempt at moving away from its original interpretation to one that is more inclusive and holistic. Some of the projects that were undertaken were repainting both the exterior and some interior rooms, restoration of some of the interior features such as floors and doors, and the implementation of some features that may have been present in the house during the early 19th century like replacing the main hall’s flooring with floorcloth. As well as the changes to the building, the garden surrounding the home was restored to a similar style as would be found in the 1850s south.

Along with an extensive restoration process, the 200th Anniversary Capital Project sought to reinterpret the home, its original owners, and those who lived there throughout the years. On their website, the Historic Columbia Foundation describes its new reinterpretation of the site:
The new interpretation – presented through guided tours, new exhibits at the site, period vignettes, hands-on activities and digital elements – critically explores historical perspectives beyond the mansion’s antebellum owners and their planter-class peers. These enhancements have dramatically built upon the foundational exhibit *Home to Many People*, which debuted 15 years ago and provided the first significant coverage of the roles enslaved people played at the site and in Columbia in general. This exhibit has been further developed and integrated into both of the site’s main floors to ensure a more balanced representation of African and African-American voices.  

To this end, the reinterpretation project worked to bring the narrative of slavery at the Hampton-Preston Mansion out of the basement and onto the main floors of the house. The project involved reinterpretation in every room of the house. The different rooms throughout the house now show different eras of time and what was taking place in the house at that time. For example, from 1915–1930, the house functioned as a women’s college and so the Historic Columbia Foundation has modeled one of the upstairs rooms as a dorm room. The main floor of the home is still dedicated to the narrative of the Hampton-Prestons but stories of African-American people tied to the Hampton-Preston Mansion are now present in several rooms throughout the house as well. The main floor now has signs discussing topics such as *The Human Cost of Luxury* and *Slaves and Silver* as well as the exhibit on the Troye paintings. It is in the main parlor that The Historic Columbia Foundation decided to place the reinterpreted Troye paintings.

**Edward Troye**

Although not American born, Edward Troye was one of the most prominent painters of the Southern equine circuit in the early 19th century. Born as Edouard de Troy in Switzerland in 1808, Troye entered into an already artistic family. His father was a successful painter and had work displayed in the Louvre in Paris, France. His siblings also showed artistic skill and success.

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As a young boy, Troye showed interest in both art and horses, foreshadowing his thriving career to come. He studied art as a child before setting out to the New World in 1828 at 20-years-old. In Jamaica, Troye hoped to find wealth while working for a sugar plantation but soon relocated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania due to a desire for more stability in his life. It was here that he chose to rename himself Edward Troye.9

Troye's path to becoming one of the premier painters of thoroughbred horses became more concrete when he began his employment with Sartain's Magazine where he would sketch animals as he traveled through southern states. This led to a world of private commissions that would spark his popularity among the elite. Troye’s commissions for William Ransom Johnson, a prominent southern horse breeder and trainer, brought him to the attention of the wealthy and helped catapult him into a successful career.10 Troye's business thrived during the 1830s, but he continued to work within different areas of the equine racing circuit until his death in 1874. In 1839, near the height of his career, Troye married Cornelia Ann Van de Graaf, a native Kentuckian and had several children but only one would live past infancy. Troye’s success during these years can be partly ascribed to the desire for accurate portrayals of these thoroughbred horses because photography was not popularized in the public until the 1870s. This left a hole open for realistic artists such as Troye to find great success in this line of work and it is said that Troye painted almost all of the prominent horses in American flat and harness racing during his career.11 Troye was hired by some of the most affluent and powerful families of the

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10William Ransom Johnson was frequently referred to as “Napoleon of the Turf” due to his incredible skills and connection in the world of horse breeding, training, and racing.
south both pre- and post-Civil War including the Hampton family who would build what is today known as the Hampton-Preston Mansion.

**Troye’s Paintings and Wade Hampton II**

The two Troye paintings in the possession of the Historic Columbia Foundation are of horses owned by Wade Hampton II, father of the well-known civil war colonel, Wade Hampton III. Wade Hampton II held large amounts of land in both South Carolina and Mississippi which was the epicenter of his and his family’s considerable wealth. While involved in politics tangentially, Hampton preferred to influence from the outside rather than running for office himself. That being said, he was incredibly influential and determined the outcome of several elections in South Carolina government.¹² Along with his participation in politics, Hampton was engaged in the social circles of South Carolina and with the horse racing circuit which would lead him to commissioning Troye for the two paintings now in the possession of the Historic Columbia Foundation.

The older of the two paintings is titled *Bay Maria and Foal, Cornelius* and it is titled after the animals portrayed in the work of art.¹³ This piece was painted in 1840. Bay Maria was a descendant of a horse that had been owned by Wade Hampton I. Troye completed this work at the Millwood Plantation owned by the Hamptons.¹⁴ The Millwood Plantation is located on the edge of Columbia, South Carolina. Wade Hampton II acquired the land from his father-in-law. It was here that most of the people enslaved by the Hamptons lived. Further, the Millwood Plantation was the center of Wade Hampton II’s racing interests and was home to many social

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¹² Ackerman, Robert Kilgo. Wade Hampton III. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007, 9
¹³ See Figure 3
¹⁴ Information on Paintings in Collection, 1972.104.1-1972.105.1, Edward Troye File, Historic Columbia Collection, Columbia, SC, USA
affairs of the day. The painting portrays two coppery brown horses with black manes and tails on either side of the middle of the painting. To the left is Bay Maria and to the right is her foul Cornelius. Cornelius is bent over caught in the middle of eating. To the casual viewer, the horses look healthy with a shine to their coat and full figures. Similarly to other Troye paintings, the horses have no competition for the focus of the painting with little else included besides some greenery and the landscape itself. The landscape is relatively uninteresting, simply dirt ground and a blue sky and there are no people included in the painting. The two horses in this painting are obviously the reason for the painting being completed at all.

The accompanying painting is titled Fanny and was commissioned and painted in 1843. Fanny was born to Maria West and sired by Eclipse. This work was also completed at the Hampton’s Millwood Plantation. Painted three years after Bay Maria and Foal, Cornelius, this painting focuses only on one horse, Fanny. This horse was a foul of Eclipse, a well-known and successful thoroughbred horse. Fanny stands to the left of the middle and like the other painting, it is clear that she is meant to be the only point of focus. Like the other painting, Fanny does not have any people included. The painting of Fanny also has less vibrancy than that of Bay Maria and Cornelius with more muted colors and less highlights and contrasts, but this may be due to aging or how it was stored over the years.

Impact on the Representation of Enslaved People’s Involvement in the Equine Circuit

Known as the “sport of kings,” horse racing, particularly in the antebellum period of American history, exemplified the divides in social class and the jobs given to enslaved African-Americans. Like today, horse ownership was expensive and this was expounded by the high bred

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15 Ackerman, Robert Kilgo. Wade Hampton III. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007, 9
16 See Figure 4
horses that many wealthy families were purchasing. The families that could afford these horses were often the same families who had made their money from agriculture and the use of enslaved labor, as exemplified by the Hampton family. Further, much of the work towards successful horse racing was done by enslaved African-Americans including the positions of jockey and horse trainer. Jockeys and trainers were usually chosen at a young age and were trained to follow in the footsteps of an older and experienced jockey/trainer.\textsuperscript{17}

African-American boys being trained from a young age has been recorded in many sources, including diaries of the trainers/jockeys, racing rule books, and even a number of the paintings of Edward Troye. The Historic Columbia Foundation, in the wayside that accompanies the Troye paintings, notes both the South Carolina Jockeys Club’s Rules from 1857 and \textit{My Life in the South}, a biographical narrative written by Jacob Stroyer, a former slave of a South Carolina plantation as sources for young male slaves as being used in the horse racing circuit. Stroyer documented his life in his autobiographical work and notes how, as a young child, he was trained to be a jockey. The SC Jockeys Club’s Rules lays out the weight allowance for horses separated by age of the horse. Weights ranging from “a feather” to “126 lbs.” indicates the reason why children, who could fit into these low weight ranges, were so often used as jockeys.\textsuperscript{18}

While the majority of slaves were forced to work in agricultural development, by no means were all enslaved people found in fields. The positions granted to trainers, jockeys, and groomers highlight this. Much prestige could be acquired through successful horse breeding, training, and racing. In documenting the horses that brought about this status, Troye was able to also capture the influence that African-Americans had on horse racing. Like those who worked in the cultivation and processing of crops, African-Americans who worked alongside horses

\textsuperscript{17} Wayside, Hampton-Preston Mansion, \textit{Slavery and Sport}, Historic Columbia Foundation, Columbia, SC
\textsuperscript{18} Wayside, Hampton-Preston Mansion, \textit{Slavery and Sport}, Historic Columbia Foundation, Columbia, SC
were also able to bring funds into their household. In his work, “An Accidental Historian in Antebellum America: Edward Troye, Thoroughbred Horses, and Representations of African-American Manhood and Masculinity,” Pellom McDaniels III, curator and professor of African-American Studies, discusses the power and value those who were skilled in horse care could have. He states,

For enslaved African-American men and boys working as trainers, grooms, and jockeys, the ability to live outside their physical reality through their imaginations promoted a sense of purpose to be found in the saddle and in the stables, where their special talents could be used to claim a sense of autonomy not readily available to other enslaved African-Americans.

This statement highlights how those who were enslaved and forced into cruel and unforgiving environments could find an outlet in the equine circuit as jockeys, trainers, or grooms. It also hints at the prestige they could gain despite their circumstance. Some African-Americans became well known for their work with horses and horse racing which led to better lives for them.

The portrayal of African-American jockeys, trainers, and grooms in Troyes paintings, can be seen in the work The Undefeated Asteroid with Ansel and Brown Dick. In this work, Troye depicts the horse, Asteroid, with his trainer, Ansel, and his jockey, Brown Dick. A horse groomer is also shown but as in other works by Troye, his name is unknown. This painting was commissioned in 1858 by R.A. Alexander and was painted at Woodburn Farm. This painting is quite different from the paintings commissioned by Wade Hampton II. The Undefeated Asteroid with Ansel and Brown Dick still focuses on the horse, with Asteroid centered in the painting, but

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21 See Figure 5
the involvement of the trainer, jockey, and groom is clear. All three men lean in towards the horse clearly showing their involvement and importance in the horses' life. However, it is vital to note that the horse remains as the center of the portrait. Despite the work all three men contributed to the success of Asteroid, they are still supplementary figures to the horse, itself. Another point of contrast with the Hampton paintings is the landscape. Rather than a bare background with no point of focus other than the horse, this painting has a rosy sky with farm life in the background. The viewer sees men on horses, stables, and greenery behind Asteroid, Ansel, Brown Dick, and the groomer.

These aspects of the painting make this work much livelier than those of Hampton’s and it speaks to the image that Hampton was trying to create when he commissioned the two works from Troye. As opposed to the centered horse (or horses) on a mostly bare background, the work commissioned by Alexander has people and even softer, warmer colors, like the pink of the sky, that makes it more active and personable. In contrast, Hampton’s paintings only show the horses—objects bought by Wade Hampton II himself. The absence of trainers, jockeys, or groomers allows all of the prestige of these horses to fall on to Hampton as the sole influencer. The Hampton paintings perform as a symbol of Hampton's wealth and éclat.

How the Historic Columbia Foundation Reinterpreted the Paintings of Edward Troye

Before the 2018 reinterpretation project, the two Edward Troye paintings in the collections of the Historic Columbia Foundation were presented as little more than aesthetic additions to the room designed to be a reproduced study from the antebellum period. The paintings adorned the walls without interpretation.\textsuperscript{22} To this end, the paintings were functioning

\textsuperscript{22} See Figure 6
as exactly what they were created for: they were highlighting the wealth of the Hampton family through their ability to own pedigreed horses and to commission works of art of them. Like the rest of the room, the paintings told the story of a wealthy, white family and their prestige. When the Hampton family had the work created, the purpose was to have a physical representation of their believed supremacy over poorer whites and people of color in the United States. It was the story that had been told time and time again by historic house museums and provided very little to the community that it was supposed to be providing for. There was no information on the family, the people who served them, or the area in which they lived. It simply worked as a memorial to the wealth and power of the families that inhabited the home in the antebellum period.

In the Hampton-Preston Mansion reinterpretation and restoration process, the paintings were moved from the room that was created to be a study and moved across the main hall into a room designed to look like a parlor or sitting room. With the movement, the paintings were placed on a wall that was much more accessible to visitors and could be viewed much more easily. Rather than being behind a rope, the paintings are situated on a wall that allows visitors to walk up and closely view the works. The paintings are hung on a wall directly across from the entrance to the room and while the paintings are not overly large or grand their placement makes them a focal point for visitors as they enter. Further, unlike before, the paintings were now displayed with interpretation: a wayside sign.²³

The new interpretation display, titled Slavery and Sport, looks at the African-American involvement in horse racing. The sign notes the involvement of hostlers, blacksmiths, and jockeys to bring about fame for the white, wealthy families that owned both horse and slave.

²³ See Figures 7 and 8
This wayside also notes the lack of representation of African-Americans in the Troye paintings commissioned by Hampton and compares them both to by presenting a picture of the painting on the sign. The wayside further notes the proclivity to train young African-Americans as jockeys due to their light weight by citing the South Carolina Jockeys Club Rules about weight limits. Finally, the newly added sign presents visitors with a question in hopes of creating an engaging exhibit: “Why were enslaved children and teenagers forced to compete in horse races?”

Overall, the new interpretation given to the Edward Troye paintings in the collections of the Historic Columbia Foundation provided background and information on the pieces of art that may not normally be accessible. The sign designed to accompany the works addresses the African-American involvement in antebellum horse racing. Noting both the accounts of Jacob Stroyer and the information on weight allowances from the South Carolina Jockeys Club’s Rules, this sign highlights the forced participation in the sport from a young age and even seeks visitor engagement by presenting a question on the topic. Additionally, noting the absences of trainers, jockeys, or groomers in the painting commissioned by Wade Hampton II by comparing them with another work by Troye, the Historic Columbia Foundation begins to touch on the mindset and goals of Hampton when he had these works done. Rather than providing information on the success of Hampton’s horses in the racing world or even really the paintings themselves, this interpretation is much more valuable to the community than the previous iteration had been because of its more holistic nature. This update now gives information on many things from Wade Hampton II to horse racing in the Antebellum period to African Americans who lived on the property. This sign provides a deeper look into the variety of the

24 Wayside, Hampton-Preston Mansion, *Slavery and Sport*, Historic Columbia Foundation, Columbia, SC
lives of enslaved peoples who lived in Columbia, South Carolina under the ownership of one of the wealthiest and most powerful men before the US Civil War.

This change in interpretation highlights the ways in which modern historical house museums have the ability to change into a space that is more relevant to their communities. Most objects have more than one story to tell. For most of museum history, curators and historians simply took the loudest story being told. People in power, people with money had the ability to preserve their stories through things like paintings, documents about goods, or even the very homes they lived in. The Historic Columbia Foundation took the opportunity to look outside themselves to pull a new story out of these paintings and it was a story that is not usually told. It is through steps like these that historic house museums can provide their communities with access to multiple narratives that are not often told. In doing this, these museums add something to the community. In Columbia, South Carolina, there are numerous buildings, streets, and monuments to the Hampton family. Because of their wealth, they were able to buy their place in historical memory but what about the marginalized people whose voices have been obscured? This is why it is so important that museums provide more to their community than the same story that has been told time and time again. Historians, especially public historians, must preserve and share the narrative of those who could not afford to seal their place in history because they were servants or slaves of people like Wade Hampton II.

**Importance of Reinterpretation in House Museums**

At their inception, historic house museums were created to preserve the history of prominent figures of society and culture- this usually meant a white man who had been part of the aristocracy. For centuries such museums functioned as places to memorialize people in
power while providing aesthetically pleasing furniture and artifacts. Even in more recent decades, as the historic house museums became more factually based, they still had a major problem: most of these museums only tell a portion of the community’s story. Facts about the wealthy families that originally inhabited these houses were the only information provided to guests visiting these houses. Little information about any other class of people would be present in the houses’ displays despite the vitality of both enslaved and employed peoples in maintaining the affluent lifestyles lauded by these early house museums. This was not a problem isolated to the realms of historic house museums but was, instead, simply a symptom of the issues deeply ingrained in the entire study of history. Until quite recently, the field of history was dominated by white men who sought only to preserve the history of the powerful, which for most of western history means the study of wealthy, white men. There has been some improvement in the study of history to be more inclusive and pay more attention to those whose stories were originally left out of the bigger narrative.

The biggest problem with these museums is that they present fragment pieces of history to the communities they are meant to serve. With the words of Stephen Weil in mind, most historic houses no longer matter. They provide nothing that can’t be found in every other book written about that powerful white man or family. Their mere existence is not enough anymore. Simply, they lack diversity in the narrative they are providing to their visitors. When the same story is being told time and time again without thought for those who have been marginalized in history, people cannot learn or benefit from it. To be both relevant and engaging, museums, especially historic house museums, must find new, more holistic stories to tell. In this light, they must tell stories of the devalued and disenfranchised throughout history. In doing this, they can
become relevant again because they are not repeating the same old story but instead are presenting the public with new, interesting, and valuable information.

Conclusion

As technology grows, museums will have more and more competition when it comes to engaging with the public. Today, we are continuously revisiting the idea of what a museum is and how much of it can be done digitally. To keep up with this, museums must be interesting and appealing to visitors. In order to do this, museums should be providing new perspectives on history that are less known to the general public. They must find a way to tell a new story to tell about their objects. The Historic Columbia Foundation was able to take an object that they had possession of for decades and determine a richer and less told story. In doing this, they provided their community with something greater than their mere existence or a repetition of the same narrative that has been told since the beginnings of written history. The story of the marginalized, the poor, and the forgotten is not only important but interesting and diverse and it is the key to the continued relevance in historic house museums in the United States.

The reinterpretation of the Troye paintings is a perfect example of the ways that historic house museums can update their messages and narratives. The paintings themselves tell many stories but the Historic Columbia Foundation chose one that was new, interesting, and meaningful to their community. The name Hampton permeates the city of Columbia but the story of the people who he built his wealth on is a rarity. Like the work done by the Historic Columbia Foundation, other historic house museums throughout the nation need to take the time to reevaluate their homes, collections, and stories available to them in order to ensure the future relevance of museums in local communities.
Figure 1: The basement of the Hampton-Present Mansion before the 2018 reinterpretation project was partially dedicated to the narrative of slavery in the house and by the Hamptons.

Figure 2: The Hampton-Present Mansion’s basement pre-reinterpretation project.
Figure 3: *Bay Maria and Foul, Cornelius*, 1840, painted by Edward Troye.

Figure 4: *Fanny*, 1843, painted by Edward Troye.
Figure 5: *The Undefeated Asteroid with Ansel and Brown Dick*, 1864, painted by Edward Troye.

Figure 6: The Troye paintings were previously hung in a room designed to look like a study. There was no interpretation accompanying them.
Figure 7: The paintings were moved into the parlor and are visible to visitors as soon as they enter the room.

Figure 8: With the reinterpretation project, the paintings are now accompanied by a wayside that discusses the African-American involvement in horse racing.
Works Consulted


https://www.historiccolumbia.org/about-he.


Troye, Edward. *The Undefeated Asteroid with Ansel and Brown Dick,* 1864. Oil on Canvas, 28 ¼" H x 38 ¼" W.