



Infusing popular culture into the museum experience via historic dress:  
Visitor perceptions of *Titanic*'s Rose as a living history interpreter/character

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The historical event of Titanic has been commodified in order to allow tourists and enthusiasts to relive the tragedy and its historical significance via many popular culture outlets (Biel, 1996), such as the 1997 *Titanic* film and Titanic Museum Attractions (TMAs) in Branson, Missouri and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. The hallmark of these venues is an interactive experience, including the integration of the fictional character Rose via displays of historic dress artifacts and interpreters wearing film costume to bring the narrative of the historical event to life. The use of a Rose living history interpreter (LHI) is an applied example of living history.

Dress and costume can be classified as a means of visitor engagement in the museum setting. Interdisciplinary literature (e.g., clothing and textiles, museum studies, and tourism) shows that many museums have been found to benefit from the popularity of notable celebrities and characters by displaying parts of their wardrobe and/or their film costumes (e.g., Taylor, 2004). Dress and costume, when used to this end, are a powerful reference to popular culture, film iconography and non-verbal communication (Lyden, 2003).

The “instructional value” of popular historical films is widely debated (e.g., Gutting, 2012), and so the inclusion of popular film characters in the museum institution invites examination. The purpose of this research was to conduct an introductory exploration of the role of film costume iconography in learning about a historical event. In the context of a larger study, the experiences of visitors at TMAs were examined using the following research question: Do TMA visitors use the film character Rose, and her costumed appearance, to learn about and relate to the historical event of Titanic? Twenty-nine participants were included. Qualitative data collection techniques (phenomenological interviews and participant observation) were employed. Data were analyzed using the descriptive phenomenological method.

The researcher found that the incorporation of a Rose LHI was primarily used by participants for historical learning and personal meaning-making. It was more common for participants to oppose the presence of a costumed Rose LHI than favor her presence. A sample of the arguments regarding how and why the presence of a Rose LHI would contribute to a negative and positive lived experience during a museum visit are presented below.

- Argument not in favor: A Rose LHI would be inherently different than the conception of Rose that is presented in the film, and these differences would be problematic for me.
- Argument in favor: If a Rose LHI were present in the TMA wearing a costume from the film, but speaking about historical information and telling fact-based stories, it would be okay. The information she provides bears greater importance than her appearance.

Another argument that represented opposition to a Rose LHI in TMAs was that her presence would detract from the museum experience because she was only a fictional character and not an actual passenger on the ship in 1912. Several participants actually learned from TMA staff during their visit that the character of Rose was created by James Cameron as a composite of a few different female Titanic passengers. An extension of the reasoning that Rose is a “composite passenger” is that she wears representational dress of the time period. Though a Rose LHI is not a literal portrayal of a Titanic passenger, for several participants it was her presentation of the essence of a real Titanic passenger that provided an interesting and engaging opportunity to learn about history. Therefore, as a film character Rose can present a recognizable and entertaining account of history, but it is the sharing of information related to the real passengers she represents that supports historical learning and critical thinking in the museum setting. Despite the presence of negative and conflicted opinions regarding the presence of a Rose LHI in TMAs, for some participants the acceptability of her presence was simply a matter of where she was placed in the physical museum environment. For example, some participants felt that Rose would only be acceptable in a room that is dedicated solely to the film as opposed to other locations throughout the TMA (e.g., an exact replica of the Grand Staircase).

The findings of this study revealed that, with careful planning, film characters translated as living history interpreters in film costume are one perspective from which to tell the story of Titanic and help TMA visitors learn about history with the use of popular culture. Participants also considered the relationship between a museum’s duty to strive for historical accuracy and Rose’s status as a fictional character. In so doing, they actively negotiated what a living history program and a film character LHI can and should achieve. In accordance with other scholars (e.g., Liggett, 2002), the fixed meanings related to Rose’s appearance that have enabled the 1997 film and Rose to become symbols of how we perceive and relate to Titanic in popular culture contribute to both the acceptance and skepticism regarding the Rose LHI. Scholars could undertake future research that examines (1) other modes of representation related to Rose in TMAs and (2) dress-related popular historical film representations in museums related to other historical events (e.g., the Holocaust and Pearl Harbor).

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