

Case Study: Portland Chinatown Museum



Opening a new museum is no easy task, especially one that features interactive displays. Portland Chinatown Museum turned to Delta AV to help make sure their new museum gave visitors a truly memorable experience.

Portland Chinatown Museum opened in December 2018 in the heart of Chinatown. Their mission is to tell the history of the city's Chinese communities, from 19th-century immigration and establishment of the original Chinatown through modern-day cultural centers and traditions.

The main museum exhibit, titled 'Beyond the Gate,' chronicles the history of Portland's Chinatowns with artifacts, interactive video displays, and audio recordings. It began as a temporary exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society in 2016. Within three months, the popular exhibit drew more than 23,000 visitors—enough to convince the founders to set their sights on finding a permanent location. While searching for a new venue,

executive director Jacqueline Peterson-Loomis and her team thought about ways in which the original exhibit could be improved and expanded upon, with emphasis on audio and visual technologies.

Delta AV became involved early in the project planning phase, which included meeting with the display designer and artists whose work would be featured in the new museum. This collaboration allowed us to truly understand the concepts behind the exhibit design and what they wanted visitors to come away with. Portland's Chinatown history is complicated and nuanced—it was important that this story be presented in a sensitive yet compelling way.



The PCM entrance area

Keeping the Focus on the Exhibit

Delta AV designed seven interactive displays and five audio zones, in addition to a projector and large screen in the museum's conference room and BrightSign digital signage in the lobby.

One of the first features that visitors encounter as they enter Beyond the Gates is a small "theatre," which comprises a looping digital animation with accompanying audio. In another display, one piece of animation spans across five monitors. Here, visitors may sit at vintage school desks and listen to audio from a language school dating back 50 years.

As they move through the museum, visitors hear sounds that reflect what is presented in nearby displays. For example, when viewing the display that features the interior of a historic Chinese restaurant, visitors hear audio of people eating, cooking, talking, and laughing.

The museum exhibit is contained within a fairly compact space, so it is important that sounds emitting from each audio zone do not interfere with those of other exhibit areas. This allows visitors to have a truly immersive experience beyond the typical museum encounter, as their movement through the exhibit truly becomes a journey through history.

Using Technology to Preserve History

With all new lighting, panels, and AV equipment, the exhibit narrative is brought to life. The museum has already received great feedback from visitors. Perhaps most importantly, elders from Portland's Chinese community are very excited about the impact this museum could have on the younger generation.

The museum plans to add interactive maps and more exhibits, further utilizing the state-of-the-art audio and digital technology to provide a truly memorable experience for everyone who visits.

Some exhibit images courtesy of The Oregon Historical Society

In order to keep visitors focused on the experience, all audio and visual equipment needed to integrate with the exhibit without distraction or obstruction. Delta AV provided a blueprint for how best to achieve this; the museum founders are very happy with the final result as it is a great improvement from the temporary exhibition-space. According to the museum's executive director, "Delta AV gave me confidence that they had the know-how and sensitivity to figure out the best way we could deliver these programs... They found a way to do this without making the equipment obtrusive and that worked perfectly with the rest of the museum. It's woven into the overall design of the show."

"They have been fabulous to work with, they understand what we're trying to do. I love the people, they bend over backwards to get it right."

— Jacqueline Peterson-Loomis
Executive Director, Portland Chinatown Museum

How can we bring your vision to life?

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