

Institutionalizing the Practice

Bringing community expertise into the heart and process of the institution was something museums routinely once did when they asked people to explain where things came from. But how might museums actually make such expertise and oral history a normal operation, integral to *cataloguing*? Using oral histories to “flesh out” collections is the ultimate goal if you want to reap the benefits of closer community ties. When stories are preserved and catalogued with other information about objects, you acknowledge their importance for future generations; they are no longer add-ons. You also acknowledge your museum’s role in, and commitment to, lifelong learning.

The magnitude of doing such work “ex post-facto” may well seem a costly and insupportable attempt to retrieve what is already lost. But it is possible to build slowly toward the goal of collection-driven oral histories, the conferees said, working with material or objects “that just beg for community input” and incorporating their stories into the museum’s collection – I. e., moving from episodic to regular collecting, gradually changing the culture and institutionalizing the practice. Eventually every new acquisition could come with a stipulation that its oral history is honored. The Skirball Museum has begun moving in this direction, taking objects from its collection and “recontextualizing” them with oral histories. The first: a Hanukah lamp from India, which is being “fleshed out” through interviews with a dentist who is both Indian and Jewish.

Drawing in Colleagues

Because collecting oral histories necessitates some reorientation, you will need to motivate colleagues to join in and support the practice. Some suggestions:

- ❖ If you have an idea for a project that could involve oral history, share it with members of the curatorial staff individually to tease out their ideas, concerns, and questions. Co-develop agendas for meetings where issues can be discussed in a group, and then jointly define the project.
- ❖ Engage and valorize the registrar – the “gatekeeper” – from the beginning. Their traditional practice of recording information can be extended with just a little work, and their knowledge about items not usually seen can spur projects. The Afro-American Museum of Boston did an exhibit called “What’s in Your Attic,” for example, that got registrars talking with people about how to catalog and care for their own objects. It helped sensitize the registrars, as well; too often they see themselves as guardians of procedure.
- ❖ Start with the education and interpretation departments; they can provide institutional entrée for ideas and now have more power than several years ago.
- ❖ Take people on field trips where they can see the context out of which objects are coming, and their attachments to a “larger life.” This can be powerful – as when they can see a clear need for protection, or conversely, that objects are receiving tender care.

- ❖ Cultivate donors as sources of stories, involving them in the process of discovery. Get that “honorable position” correct and ongoing, asking for advice and ideas on where the museum should go with its collection, checking with them for accuracy. Often they have files no one has looked at. Registrars favor this kind of effort because they want to clean up records.
- ❖ Collaborate with institutions that are already positioned within communities the museum might wish to reach, or with university oral history departments, or with media. Two radio shows – “Story Core” and “Hidden Histories” – are doing related work.

Developing Fundamental Elements of Institutional Practice

Once there is institutional interest and a new “culture” has begun to take shape, the practice of gathering oral history should be codified in procedures:

- ❖ Draft a statement of purpose and philosophy – a rationale for “community-focused cataloguing” – that makes clear that stories are not interpretations of objects but crucial information equal to other elements of provenance; that collecting this information is a normal procedure; and that the intent is to establish a trusted two-way flow with communities.
- ❖ Work to get buy-in throughout the institution, from the board of trustees on down, acknowledging the complexity of the communities the museum serves. Early commitment at the top is necessary so that leaders will say “we’re doing this so if there’s a problem, find a way to solve it.”
- ❖ Train everyone to understand the rationale, goals, and methods for collecting oral histories, and to comprehend what community input really adds. Museum people are “object” people, not community organizers, so there is need for training in how to elicit stories, as well as to understand their value.

Sensitivity training is also necessary; the voice used by a docent, even in casual remarks, can make or break a connection people are getting with an object and its history if those remarks are too narrowly self-reflective. To get beyond self-referencing, those who train New Jersey state patrols point out that U. S. Highway 95 is not just as a freeway but a *free way* – a route signifying freedom in leading north.

- ❖ Write a plan to commit the institution to move from episodic exhibitions that incorporate oral history to full integration in regular cataloguing. This is important lest the effort be seen as just a development or education department idea, rather than an element of a registrar’s normal activity.
- ❖ Begin with new acquisitions so there can be a quick reinforcement of positive outcomes, and celebrate what is accomplished every step of the way so people are eager to continue.