

Pathways to Collecting Stories

Relationships objects have with the natural world and their spiritual connections to places and human constructs like social status all branch widely; an object is like the hub of a wheel with spokes to many destinations. The opportunities are limitless for giving “voice” to mute objects, but how do you approach those many destinations in the community? Tribal museums already serve as cultural centers, it was said; for them, community and culture are inextricably linked. But for non-tribal museums such relationship-building must be intentional.

Opportunities museums could seize to jump-start the gathering of oral histories abound, it was said – they’re simply waiting to be found. Occasions that could prompt the asking of questions that give rise to stories:

- ❖ ***New acquisitions.*** The Saint Louis Art Museum was anxious to bring the African American community into its decorative arts gallery, but was having difficulty finding a “hook.” Acquiring a Peter Benson silver pot provided the museum with an opportunity to go into the community to explain how a collection comes to be, and to solicit anecdotes about similar objects.

Museums also flourish by asking communities to bring objects to *them*. The Skirball Museum in Los Angeles had the good fortune to begin anew in a new building in 1996 and invited people to donate trunks. That opened up many connections: people now come to the Skirball to tell their family stories, and the museum has just been given an archive of papers chronicling the move of a Jewish family west by way of Mexico.

- ❖ ***A theme, or event of local interest.*** Taking a thematic approach to soliciting stories works particularly well. The Yellowstone Western Heritage Center in Billings, MT did a project on the Flood of 1937, for example, because they had a good deal of material on it and the initiative brought in even more – not only stories, but photos. The Denver Art Museum found taking a thematic approach helped curators downplay the boundaries of time; they could place contemporary Latino artists’ visions of flora and fauna next to those of Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial artists.
- ❖ ***Collectors’ stories.*** Life stories, especially those of collectors, are an especially good place to start. How they got interested in something can be fascinating. Interviewing a connoisseur of hubcaps may run counter to prevailing ideas about what is worthy of collecting, but it is an entrée to community.
- ❖ ***Collaborations, especially with artists.*** Contemporary artists can prompt all manner of stories as they provide insight into what inspired them.
- ❖ ***Use of Media.*** “Wikipedias” – web-based encyclopedias – are proliferating on the internet and provide a way for small history and specialized museums – or any institution that cares about getting in touch with knowledgeable collectors but is understaffed – to gather stories. A museum could develop its own “wikipedia,” describing what is known about particular objects and inviting people to add to the description. Or it could simply post a photograph on its web site, asking who is pictured thereon. Over time such processes are self-correcting.

Actually getting down to the business of interviewing people is not so much a matter of what you need, as what you *think* you need: working with communities to gather oral histories is as much a matter of orientation as technique. Among strategies that can help with that reorientation:

- ❖ ***Forming an advisory committee to help establish a comfort level in working with a specific community.*** There are pros and cons to such committees, but they can help identify sources of stories and at the same time establish “a safe zone.” A couple of caveats, however: the committee should be an odd number of people representing the breadth of those you want to reach, and all should share the museum’s vision for collecting oral histories. It is also wise to check out a community’s local practices in identifying members since you make not only their friends but their enemies.

The Wing Luke Museum routinely employs advisory committees, asking “what should an exhibit be about? What form should it take, and what message should it have?” Currently it is working with the Sikh community, recording stories and identifying objects they will loan to the museum.

- ❖ ***Remembering sources are fully rounded people, not just representatives of a community.*** If you do not want to rely on an advisory committee, you can simply start calling possible sources – long-time residents, community historians, activists, and artists. But once they are identified, it is important to remember their full “personhood.” Failure to recognize the amplitude of peoples’ lives limits the potential to learn what they have to offer; the best practice is to listen carefully, letting a story lead where it will.
- ❖ ***Inviting story sources to see themselves as witnesses or narrators.*** Whether you bring someone into the museum or take an object out, allow contributors to determine the criteria for including an anecdote so the enterprise is jointly developed. Telling stories is a natural urge and the way people construct them – how they use the past to inform the present – is something you want to pay attention to.

To jumpstart the conversation you could describe how the museum does cataloguing, like organizing by theme or period, to draw out peoples’ own approaches. Oral historians have learned that the Depression doesn’t register as a “period” with some people because they’ve always been poor, for instance. You can also ask whether there are events of which the museum might be unaware but possibly has objects that are connected. People should be given a sense of why it is important to give a specific object context through stories, and the benefits to the community of having such context.

- ❖ ***Being transparent about what the museum is going to do.*** This is crucial. Sources should be reassured that you will check back with them to make certain transcriptions are accurate, and how everything is going to work. More formally, you should provide information on copyright law, the responsibilities of each party to the other, and models of releases that can be customized. (It should be remembered that such releases are to obtain the story, not to share it, which would take additional agreement.) It is wise to let people edit their transcripts. Oral historians have found that people get more articulate with successive re-tapings, in distilling history as they see it.