

The Value of Stories' Connections to Community

In revealing the connections objects have to human lives and feelings, stories lead back into communities. They can thus be of inestimable value to museums as they seek to enhance their public stewardship – not only helping them meet their responsibilities for education and scholarship, but also, for preservation and conservation.

- ❖ ***Stories can fill gaps in museum records.*** Often, for example, institutions have all kinds of tools lying around with no idea how they were used. Oral histories and anecdotes can help uncover layers of information that may help establish provenance.
- ❖ ***They can help correct mistakes and authenticate.*** If objects are mislabeled, it is community stories that can set the record straight. When curators debate whether something should be identified as a Native American headdress or a war bonnet, for instance, stories can assist by describing what certain colors and feathers represent.
- ❖ ***Stories inspire revelation and understanding, offering opportunities to relate on many levels.*** When a woman's young son dashed through the processing hall at Ellis Island, feeling its columns and tiles, much as her own immigrant father might have done at the same age when entering the country, she explained the similarity and a story came into being, linking their three generations. The "sense of place" people feel, and the reverence they exhibit in describing something as a "treasure," are expressed in stories.
- ❖ ***They can recapture missing history – sometimes even identity.*** When the Heard Museum created an exhibit on the boarding school experience Native American children endured – either by going through it, or by being denied it – stories not only provided the substance of the exhibit, but also captured a neglected chapter in the country's history. And that had a great impact on Indian people: the schools sought to remove humanity and succeeded, but the exhibit transformed the experience into a story of survival.
- ❖ ***Stories can help build an entirely new sense of "collection."*** When Seattle's Wing Luke Asian Museum, which embraces twenty-two ethnic groups under its Pan Asian Pacific umbrella, asked community volunteers to talk with their mothers and fathers, and aunts and uncles, about photos of their forebears and household items, it launched a period of growth and expansion now well into a second decade. The volunteers began collecting oral histories in the late 80's, inviting people to bring in items for exhibit, which brought offers of more objects and stories. Soon the museum had 100 accounts published in two books, as well as the offer of a 1910 building that had served as a center of Chinatown life. It is now being renovated as a new home for the museum.
- ❖ ***They can help engage new stakeholders.*** Relationships the Wing Luke Museum staff forged as they went out to gather stories – like those of war brides who came to work in Seattle's garment shops – enabled people to see themselves as true stakeholders. Where before they may have felt "outside," their giving of stories connected them to the institution.

- ❖ ***In providing opportunities for greater inclusiveness, stories can assist with the work of “democracy.”*** A few years ago Colonial Williamsburg figured out a way to retain the beauty of a plantation house, for example, while simultaneously connecting it with Carter’s Grove, making clear the direct relationship between privilege and slave labor. Offering stories creates context; it helps people connect the dots between humans’ varying experiences, and come to understand others’ emotions.

- ❖ ***They can help reposition a museum within a community, insuring its importance and sustainability.*** Foremost among the Wing Luke Museum’s capital campaign donors are those who helped gather stories. Because they’ve been involved in building the museum, they realize they own it; it has become a sanctuary, preserving and reflecting their efforts.