Vetting Complexities of Community-Focused Cataloguing

Oral histories are themselves artifacts subject to interpretation – just one complexity museums will likely confront in moving to incorporate stories in cataloguing practices. Moreover, while traditional cataloguing (noting donor, provenance, description, size, and condition) does not capture the life that stories exude, it nevertheless has adherents so there will be "issues," too. The term "community" usually entails diversity, and anything involving diversity is contested political, cultural, and terrain.

Matters of Power & Authority

The power of stories can be not only electric and illuminating but shocking and challenging, as well, especially to entrenched sensibilities and authority. The "ideology of the aesthetic" is grounded in the belief that something beautiful can only be understood by those who have the apparatus to appreciate it – even the maker can't fully comprehend its beauty – and this ideological struggle is codified in current cataloguing practice. When people say the object has "primacy" that is also code for a hierarchy of value – who decides what is put on view, and how it is presented. That, too, is very closely held. Labels like "Native art" and "New World Art" reflect the code.

"Community-focused cataloguing" seeks an expansion of that authority in heterogeneity, in recognizing the value of a multiplicity of viewpoints that should be placed side by side, but with care. Stories that are simply false abound. In collecting oral histories museums must thus be vigilant about inaccuracies, and in connecting with communities, provide opportunities to correct mistakes. In the Native American community a photo is considered a "permission to a community," and there is a resulting trust responsibility.

Occasionally there are stories people don't want to hear, and museums need to be prepared for that. When it offered an exhibit on oystering, for example, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, MD had to balance irrefutable science and the museum's view that the precipitous decline on oystering over the past several decades is the result of the resource's exploitation with local watermen's' belief that nature will bring oysters back.

Issues of Ownership

For any number of reasons people may be reluctant to provide oral histories or anecdotes about objects in your collection. Some stories are too raw or painful to be shared – like the horror of witnessing a lynching. Many are also considered privileged, especially in the Native American community where there is "no right to know." Then, too, sometimes people simply don't feel comfortable talking about museum items because they don't feel they're a part of the museum's community. Formal measures that are sensitive to these concerns can go a long way toward alleviating them.

Copyright matters, for example, should be fully vetted with sources of oral histories because sovereignty can vary. Some sources in the Native American community are considered cultural resources so legally their status is more complicated. Copyright documents must recognize such

complexity; release forms should be customized to fit the situation, with lawyers for both parties reviewing them carefully. And all museum staff should be trained to recognize their responsibilities in managing such relationships.

Language and Terminology

Because language encodes authority, it is a flashpoint. The term "community" itself is fraught with connotation – there are communities of place, interest, and ethnicity, for instance, and it is not unusual to hear people say "you should talk with this community or that."

Native American stories are frequently described as "myths," which devalues them. Irresponsible use of language has generated a lot of chaos in Native communities. Pueblo people declined to participate in a Smithsonian effort to collect stories until they could resolve the issue of how to protect their language, words, and stories. They finally decided to copyright them to protect them from being termed "myths," or published as children's material.

Sensitivity to language is also crucial when considering how to make information and meaning accessible. There are words an expert from a community might use that a curator would not, and vice versa. A curator might write "this homeless lady" on the label for a painting titled "Eviction," for example, which might in turn prompt the question, "how do you know she's homeless?" Interpretation departments already do some of this work, negotiating curatorial and education departments' views on how to label items.

Meeting the Challenges

While there are complexities in adding oral histories to normal cataloguing processes, avoid rethinking cataloguing itself. Instead, consider how current procedures can be modified. Some ideas on how to do so:

- ***Using relational databases.*** At the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, the vast number of oral histories and "witness accounts" the museum has collected are correlated to numerous objects. One man's story links to his boat, glasses, and photos, for example. You should think about the layering of a story, and how those layers can be categorized, as an approach.

- ***Diversifying labeling and filing.*** When an account like that describing the time five to six hundred people from her Lumbee community in North Carolina drove the Klu Klux Klan away is filed, the filing should acknowledge more than just the Klan's involvement. Too often one facet of a story prevails as the headline. Labeling and filing should reflect the multi-faceted nature of stories and the history they represent; new reference points might be needed so as not to lose facts.

- ***Striving for unmediated presentation.*** Avoiding the temptation to reconcile variances makes for the best presentation: that way the whole spectrum of an object's larger life can be brought to light through stories and anecdote, putting the maker, collector, and viewer on equal footing and flattening hierarchies of authority.

"Life Interrupted," an exhibit the Japanese American National Museum developed with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock to explore the incarceration of almost 17,000 Japanese Americans in the Arkansas Delta during World War II and the implications for post 9/11 contemporary America, achieved this by hanging translucent banners with first-person witness accounts as a counterpoint to the authority of the academic voice. The exhibit also featured interactive sections that dealt with the use of euphemisms to describe the camps.

- ***Preparing for dissonance.*** Objects freighted with symbolism can unleash stories that create problems but ultimately lead to greater understanding, if you're prepared. The Afro-American Museum did an exhibit that invited people to bring in dolls for appraisal, for instance. Several of its Beacon Hill neighbors arrived with extremely valuable Mammy dolls they had cherished since they were children. Black women came, too, so museum personnel found themselves standing between the two groups as a symbol of decorum and openness, to make real the regard white women felt for these dolls even as black woman wanted to rip them from their hands. You need to be ready when you unleash the power of objects and their stories.