

Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects

Beginning the Dialogue

Introduction

In facilitating the sharing of collections, the Museum Loan Network has helped many museums come to a richer understanding of the objects they hold, and the relationships those objects have to their makers, users, and appreciators – the communities whose interests and values they reflect.

In 2001 the Network funded the travel of four Inupiaq elders and a youth from Alaska to Washington, DC, for example, where they examined, named, and demonstrated how to use some of the 400 objects that had been collected from their village and stored at the Smithsonian since the late 19th Century. Similarly, the Network underwrote the survey of a collection of photos taken by civil rights activist Jack T. Franklin during the 1960's that included development of a video oral history interview with Franklin to give added context and depth to about 250 of the images that are now available as part of the MLN directory. In related fashion the MLN also supported a survey by the Chinese Historical Society of America that engaged community volunteers in identifying and cataloguing materials documenting daily life in California's Chinatowns in the early 1900's.

All three projects (and numerous others) demonstrated how inadequately documented and catalogued many museum objects are – especially those that are rarely exhibited – and how urgent the need is to preserve their histories and stories before they are lost.

In June 2005 the MLN brought twenty-five individuals from across the country together to consider how museums might address this crucial need and opportunity. Meeting first in the historic Abiel Smith School on Boston's Beacon Hill – built in 1834 to offer public education to African-American children, and the first such edifice in the country – and later in Cambridge, the conclave extended a conversation begun in 2000 on the potential for museums and the objects they hold to catalyze collaboration.

This time the focus was on the power of places and objects to prompt people to describe their meaning, use, and significance in anecdote and story, generating insight, understanding, tolerance, and new concepts in the process. What hidden histories might there be in such rooms as that in which the MLN conferees met, for example, its walls covered with 19th century rules of behavior recreated in barely visible script? As those who gathered in the room's late afternoon light noted, objects and sites like the schoolroom exist in time and space, and within those realms have many relationships – to people, events, endeavors, customs, emotions, and ceremonies. As curators often say, an object is not only beautiful, but “telling.” But what can it “tell” about that larger life? The walls' spidery script could as easily have told how Frederick Douglas was sad to move west of the city, it was said, to leave the school and its neighboring brick buildings behind; they were the center of his thinking about freedom, liberty, and abolition.

That kind of spiritual connection – or as a conferee described it, the “umbilical cord” that links objects, places, and humans – is revealed when given voice in the various tongues of language, in stories of its meaning and significance. The relationship between certain objects and accounts of how things came to be, for example, is direct and sanctified for Native Americans. When such connections are honored, objects and the people to whom they mean so much are complete, in that objects motivate people to recover the stories that return them to their traditions – they’re no longer searching.

The Peabody Essex Museum discovered this when it moved an ancestral home from rural China, reconstructed it piece by piece in Salem, Massachusetts, and invited members of the Kwan family, descendants of its owners, to visit. The museum’s curators, educators, and interpreters had all been used to working from an historic perspective, but decided they would present the wood house without labels, or mediation, to offer visitors an authentic experience of Chinese culture. Because the Chinese characters for “home,” “village,” and “family” mean “architecture,” they knew there were hidden histories, and would be stories.

The mystery and possibility associated with discovering those stories proved magnetic. Amy Tan heard about the house and said, “Can I help in any way?” ultimately creating an audio tour. Yo Yo Ma brought musicians and story tellers for residencies as part of his Silk Road project. But it was not until members of the Kwan family itself made their way to the ancient altar of the home they had promised their forebears to preserve, asking “How did you preserve the smell?,” that the Peabody staff realized what they had accomplished.

For the first time they also realized the responsibility they had for presenting the house in a way that would bring it alive, with the literal breath of stories being told within its walls. It was an electric moment whose electricity continues: family attendance at the Peabody has grown 750% since the house was brought to Salem; there is new interest in programs on other cultures; and there are more of them. Children adopted from Asian countries are especially drawn to the secrets of the house, knowing there is a relationship to be discovered, imagining, as one child did, that “this is where my grandmother sat so she could see out the window.”

A conserved object or room by itself is nothing, the conclave’s participants pointed out. It is what humans see in the object, or what they view from a room – the story that describes something “brought to mind.” That “bringing to mind” is akin to the recognition between a mother and adopted child, who are not connected but see in coming together how they are alike, or the reunion of birth mother and her young. In other words, objects without stories are orphans.

Participants in the MLN gathering considered ways museums might preserve these spiritual connections in oral histories, and opportunities that could flow from incorporating them into cataloguing processes. Ideas they offered are presented here as a “portal” – an invitation for you to get involved, to trade experiences and thoughts on how oral histories and the community connections they represent might be brought into everyday museum processes, enriching collections and activities.