

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

An On-going Destination

What is exciting, suggested those who participated in the MLN gathering, is the prospect of putting such challenges and opportunities together – discovering what an object is really all about. Harvesting stories is something museums have done in the past, but community-focused cataloguing would go beyond that, serving as inspiration for a great deal more than simply recovering chapters neglected by official narratives.

Curators are reluctant to get beyond the factual side of an object – beyond artist or maker, universal meaning, and the like; to say something has individual and personal significance is very difficult, even though that is the very excitement that brings people into the museum field. Adding oral histories to cataloguing is thus a long-term process.

Building toward what is inherently a normal way of doing things will have big payoffs along the way, however: the larger life of objects conserved in their stories, more relevant and authentic relationships with communities for museums, and greater sense of shared stewardship. Museums should be seen as the safest place to go, where you are always welcome to share your stories. Working toward that vision, the bywords should be respect, sensitivity, the intent to establish trust, and transparency at every stage.

An emerging model suggests that through a public service orientation museums can contribute to individual lives and communities. Community-focused cataloguing – representing “animated” objects, diverse communities, and community-based voices being heard and honored, as it does – is both a fundamental and a crucial element. Gordon Yellowman had suggested the ultimate value of what is offered to museums in sharing the words of an elder, a Sundance priest. “Continue to live your life, to tell your stories, to keep your traditions and cultural ways. If you do that, what was lost will eventually come back to you.”