

ADVICE TO STORYTELLERS WORKING IN MUSEUMS

Telling traditional stories that either...

Relate directly to images that the audience can see in the museum e.g. Greek myth shown on Attic vase incorporate objects on display in an appropriate story e.g. Irish myth about a cauldron, a ring etc...

Might have been told in the period that the exhibition relates to e.g. Egyptian folktale telling history in the form of a strong narrative that relates to the exhibition e.g. the story of the Roman conquest of Britain

Telling either among the objects (unless busy public access) or in an intimate space near the exhibition

Katy Cawkwell, Storyteller

'A good storyteller is someone who probably asks, unprompted, what is the programme. How does my story telling fit into this? And if they don't ask, fair enough, but then the project manager, or the museum education side need to say – this is the programme, this is how you fit into it, do you have stories that will work in this context? And the storyteller will either say – yes, I've got loads. Or they will say – a few, but I need to do some more research, in which case it is not unreasonable for them to ask for a bit more money for research. And it is up to the museum, again it depends on whether the museum wants to go for a story teller with a huge repertoire, so they don't have to pay for preparation, or a good storyteller who is very sensitive to the environment and the context, but they have to pay a bit more to research stories that will fit.

Anna Salaman, ABL

'I believe that good Storytelling immerses the listener fully and takes them on a journey into their imagination. It involves even, and especially, those lively children whose imagination is pronounced and who often have trouble sitting still to concentrate on the more mundane. The journey is piloted by the Storyteller who, if taking the audience into the past, must make it as accurate as possible for ' stories set in the past do not have to be true; they have to be authentic. While anachronism has no place in good stories about the past, imaginative reconstruction

'So best practice, I guess, be open minded and plan and respect the story teller, but together you have to think of what the audience are going to get out of it, and what they are going to take away with them. And also, on another level, does it fit into the programme as a whole, does it fit with the aims of the organisation, the profile, do we want to do family friendly stuff? So it is multi layered. But never, ever, treating it lightly'

Jane Cockcroft, Handel House Museum

9.2 Tips for Telling In Museums

Yvonne Healy, a highly successful British storyteller based in the US is frequently employed by The Detroit Institute of Art amongst other museums. Sessions are sometimes general & other times she receives commissions to research and create programs to support special exhibits. Yvonne has developed some general ideas to bear in mind for museum telling.

Museum Storytelling By Yvonne Healy, Storyteller

Museum exhibits typically engage visitors' spatial, natural, and logical-mathematical intelligences. The more ways a museum can pique the visitor's interest, the deeper his experience will become. Storytelling provides a way to enrich the visitor's experience by stimulating the linguistic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. The chants and rhythmic gestures of participatory storytelling engage the bodily-kinesthetic and musical intelligences.

Storytelling programs in museums may focus on stories with a general appeal to suit the tastes and ages of those present at that specific time. At other times, storytellers are offered commissions to design specific programs in advance which support special exhibits. Tellers who are commissioned to create a specific piece dialogue with the event planner to pinpoint the museum's mission, the goal of the specific exhibit, the focus audience, the time of day and year when it will be performed, and the physical attributes of the performance space. Use this time to clarify whether the artist or client holds the copyright on the created material. The storyteller's research for such a commission will be deep and accurate since museum staffs and visitors will be well-versed in the subject.

Museums may have one or two regular tellers or may select from a roster of numerous tellers on a rotating basis. Asking the museum directly for the name of the programming department allows the storyteller to discover the specific requirements for acceptance as a museum performer. Typically, a storyteller wishing to be considered for the museum's roster submits a brochure and references to the Department of Education, Events, Special Exhibits or Programming. Frequently museums may be limited by grant requirements to employ only those artists included the state artists roster. Individual state art and humanities departments distribute national and state funding for the arts. This provides the storyteller with further incentive to create a professional and responsible identity in her presentations, references and promotional materials.

The larger the museum, the less predictable is the audience make-up. The current trend in science museums focuses on the interests of children. These museums are highly interactive and visitors respond very well to information presented in story form. In addition to producing performances, science museums sometimes hire storytellers, theatrical artists or filmmakers to both develop programs and to train docents to present exhibit information in an entertaining manner. Following are some general ideas to bear in mind for telling in museums gleaned from years of storytelling in art, science and history museums:

More is more: Forget architect Mies van der Rohe's famous advice that "*less is more!*" With the unpredictability of audience make-up, museum storytelling requires preparation of three times as many stories as you will have time to tell. Vary the material in repeated shows; after all, the guards and docents are listening, too.

Vary the type of stories. Prepare simple participatory tales as well as complicated plots and history because listeners have vastly different tastes.

The chairs in front of you may seat intensely active pre-schoolers, Gen-X-Y black-garbed art students, and world-traveling senior citizens – at separate performances or simultaneously! My anecdotal observation is that art museums attract a larger proportion of adult listeners than do science museums and historical museums vary widely. In an art museum, a single program might include one story to physically engage children aged 3-6, one story with a complicated plot and classical references for educated adults with the remaining stories geared to older children and to general adult listeners.

Display information on local storytelling events and clubs. Display flyers and information for guilds and storytelling events as well as your own cards. Many adults discover storytelling for the first time in a museum setting. Use your position to discretely advocate for the art of storytelling.

Promote a scavenger hunt. Items found in stories may also appear in exhibits or artworks. Encourage your listeners to seek them after stories end. This promotes prolonged observation of museum displays. Things sought can be non-representational (e.g., *"blue that has yellow in it"*, or *"squiggly lines that look like numbers"*) as well as representational (e.g., animals, clothing, person kicking another person in the rear).

"Touch with your eyes - not with your hands" is excellent advice to share with your audience in an art museum. The museum staff appreciates such a supportive reminder. Many visitors become excited by the visual stimulation offered in museums. In their excitement they reach to touch, unaware that the oil from fingers can damage priceless antiquities. Science museums which are designed for more interaction by children still may appreciate the reminder to follow the exhibit signs for the correct way to touch an exhibit.

Make noise. Museums, like libraries, are traditionally quiet places where people do not expect to encounter animated storytelling behavior. Take advantage of the element of surprise. Storytelling is valued by museums for bringing its laughter, music and vibrant spirit to otherwise 'hallowed halls'. Bring an instrument to gather an audience like the Pied Piper. Include noisy participation stories. Storytelling - and art, history and science - can be rowdy and fun! Come to the museum for a wild and crazy time!

Work historical and scientific background into culturally appropriate folktales to provide depth without lecturing. Kendal Haven's many works including *Marvels of Math and Women at the Edge of Discovery*, Norma Livo's *Celebrating the Earth and Of Bugs and Beasts* among numerous others, *True Tales from America's Past* published by National Storytelling Association, and microfiche archives of local newspapers provide material for breathing life into science and history. Children's biographical picture or chapter books also provide springboards for you to create your own historical stories.

Choose stories to reflect the content or culture of origin of artwork. Some commissioned programs I've create are:

Tales of the Lowlands coordinated folktales and legends of the Netherlands and Belgium with a Rembrandt exhibit. Stories include my adaptations of *"Katya's Dream"*, Tyle Ulenspiegel stories, *"The Legend of Kinderdyke"*, and a personal story *"Lost in Amsterdam"* among others.

Ballet and Beyond celebrated an exhibit of Degas' dancers with stories from classic ballets and participatory folktales with dance as a theme. Stories include my versions of *"The Firebird"*, *"La Sylphide"*, *"The Weeping Lass"* and both *"The Girl Who Wore Too Much"* and *"Conejito"* by Margaret Read MacDonald's *Shake It Up Tales*.

Ancient Voices includes Egyptian and Babylonian as well as the expected Greek and Roman myths to highlight classical art and sculpture. Stories include my take on the myths *"Isis and Osiris"*, *"The Descent of Inanna"*, *"The Birth of Mercury"*, *"Romulus & Remus"*, *"The White Crocodile"*, a personal story/myth blend entitled *"The Island of Green Sand"*, *"King Midas' Golden Touch"*, and Aesop's Fables.

Follow The Golden Rule: Never, ever ever stand in front of nudes. Few stories are more interesting than snickering at nudes to certain 8-14 year-olds!

Final Note:

The storyteller speaks for the artwork or exhibits. Many children on field trips and many adults may have never previously visited a museum. This is especially true for art museum field trips. These visitors may feel like fish out of water. Storytelling offers a bridge to the exhibit content and colors the visitor's approach to art museums both that day -- and all the days of their lives.

Yvonne Healy, Storyteller

...the stories had absolutely no relationship whatsoever with the environment. So it wasn't anything to do with the castle, nothing to do with the period when the castle was built, nothing to do with the themes of the castle. And I thought – why am I here, listening to random stories in an amazing building? There is no point using stories unless there is a relationship. So unless there is a connection- don't bother'

Jane Cockcroft, Handel House Museum

'I feel really strongly that gallery events should be ideally linked to the collections. I think there are so many events at the museum that have absolutely nothing to do with the museum, they could just as easily be taking place in a shopping centre. The first rule of doing any museum event is – what is the link with the collection? And sometimes a storyteller might not be the best person; you could have an artist in to do an art activity. It should always start with the learning aim. Even with literacy it might not be the storyteller, it might be much better to work with a poet, or an artist that uses words, or something. The practitioner should be chosen because of the learning aim, not the other way around.'

Anna Salaman, ABL

'If the story teller was being employed to work with schools, it might seem a bit heavy handed to the story tellers, who, are artists...but writing down the curriculum links for the aim, crucially the learning aims of the project, and then it would be useful to have a conversation with that Storyteller about how they feel they are going to be achieving, or working towards achieving those learning aims, but also the curriculum links, and saying to them – look, I don't expect the world here, but do you think you might be able to get some of these curriculum links through the story?'

Anna Salaman, ABL

...with storytelling, because it is an oral tradition, you've only got a certain number of stories in existence, and they are only the ones that have been passed down orally, this is proper story telling. And you can't really get stuff out of ... I mean, you can get stuff out of story telling resources and some of those are printed resources, books and things. But you can't really say – I want a story about the Marie Celeste, please, because if you don't have a story about that in existence, you can't make one up. And if you do, that's a different kind of literacy project, and a very interesting one, but it's not proper story telling. So I found I can't demand content from story tellers because it is a bit like saying to a musician – I want you to play music from the baroque era, and I want you to play a piece on the viola by Bach, and them saying he didn't write anything for the viola. So you can't do that, there is only a certain amount of repertoire out there'

'...with families I think...I think humour is important for all age groups, but with family audiences for story telling, it works very well. So if you find a storyteller that is very funny then that is good at bonding those groups, both those generations together. The thing I have noticed is that if you have an informal learning programme, a family programme, and it is story telling, and it is a traditional family environment, it is quite difficult for everyone to get relaxed, and humour helps with them getting relaxed, but it is particularly difficult with families, so I think what I am saying is that it is very challenging for story tellers to work with families. They have to relax both the parents and the children, and the way they should do that is to be very outgoing, very down to earth, very funny. And I think it is very important to include the participants, make them participants rather than the audience...So in the brief you could say - it is anticipated there will be a family audience, this will include adults, and we would like the story tellers to pitch their stories accordingly. So at least it is stated in black and white that adults will be included. Some story building, so participative story telling projects that I have been involved in, have worked really nicely when you get the adults to work with the children. So the storyteller says – now we are going to make the noise of different animals in the jungle, and I want the parent and the child to decide what animal they are going to be. Something like that, because then you are really achieving some significant family learning areas, and you are involving everyone, and you are creating a more relaxed environment .'

Anna Salaman, ABL

