

USING STORYTELLERS IN MUSEUMS

Compiled by Tina Bilbé

This factsheet has been compiled in response to the many queries we have had from museums over the years. National Storytelling Week is the first week of February and many museums use this as a platform to encourage people to explore *History*. My thanks to Emily Johnsson, Evaluation & Research Officer of London Museums Hub, for her contributions.

WHAT IS A STORYTELLER?

- * A storyteller is an artist, an entertainer and an educator. Storytelling is one of the most ancient art forms, stretching back for as long as humans have had speech.
- * A storyteller uses words to take you on a journey of the imagination. Each person will hear something different as the story is created in the space between the teller and the listener.
- * Storytellers may tell traditional folk tales, written tales, anecdotes, urban myths, and stories from history, religious or moral tales, stories they have created themselves or which have been created for a specific event. Some storytellers will create a story spontaneously to suit the audience.
- * A storyteller tells stories from memory rather than reading them from the book, memorising stories image by image not word for word.
- * Storytellers may tell a story differently each time they tell it, interacting with their audience, choosing stories and images to communicate with them.
- * Some storytellers use music, dance, song, pictures or puppets.
- * Many storytellers offer workshop sessions, which may either teach storytelling skills or engage participants in creative activities linked to the stories.

WHY TELL STORIES IN MUSEUMS

Museums are about stories. Stories about people's lives, of things people make and use, stories about nature, the universe, of all living things. In comparison to other modes of interpretation, storytelling is unique in that both the tangible and the intangible can be explored simultaneously. Storytellers are important contributors to sustaining culture, by preserving and perpetuating intangible heritage through the oral tradition.

Museums are places with objects, but the objects in themselves mean little, only by telling about them, interacting with them and assigning meanings to them (Discursive interaction) can we understand their significance. A story can give an object a context and purpose. An object can be the focus for listening, aiding the imagination to create the world of the story. The story, like the object, can yield understanding and glimpses of another culture, different in place or time, a memorable way of communicating, without being didactic.

Stories, if pitched at the right level so they can make connections with the familiar, are often remembered, and can be analysed long after the event by those with many different learning styles. The narrative and the ancient stories formed the backbone of ancient civilisations – they structured the belief systems, and provided rules for people to live by. Using the ancient stories when looking at classical and prehistoric imagery and artefacts can only enhance the learning.

'It is essential to engage the emotions of students reading Virgil or Homer...or looking at a Greek vase painting that depicts Priam being killed on his own altar, beaten about the head with the body of his grandson' (Reeve 1988:76). How can we satisfactorily make sense of the motifs of the 'eye of Horus' or the 'Scarab beetle' on Ancient Egyptian artefacts if we do not tell the stories that underpinned the beliefs (and lives) of the people at the time? At the British Museum during the Festival of India, a children's trail encouraged the telling of the stories of Ganesa, Siva, Vishnu and the great Goddess Durga, around the sculptures (Reeve 1988:82).

Stories build bridges between near and far in both space and time, enabling the listener to journey in their mind to a different time and place. Words create images in the minds of the listeners and through imagination and memory can trigger all the senses, providing a rich experience.

Storytelling is accessible to a wide audience, it helps people with a variety of learning disabilities to enjoy and understand the treasures on display.

Museums are places for informal & formal learning (storytelling supports both). Including storytelling in your programme of events will draw people in. The telling of Stories was important in pre-industrial Britain. There are a large collection of stories about characters from history that can inform teaching and enhance collections of artefacts from Britain and other places connected with those people, and events. If allowed to assist with the construction of narratives within the museum education framework, communities can feel more of a sense of 'ownership of the collections'.

WHAT CAN A STORYTELLER DO FOR A MUSEUM?

Storytelling sessions in Museums can be used to bring history to life, focusing attention on special collections or exhibits; creating the atmosphere of a particular historic period and relating information in ways that are easily remembered.

What is special about storytellers and storytelling?

- Stories and storytelling are universal aspects of human communication - connecting people through time and across cultures
- Storytelling isn't just for children, storytellers work with all age groups, stories give people a reason to listen and something to remember.
- Storytelling looks at objects and events from a human perspective, making it easier for people to relate to them.
- Storytelling develops awareness of historical and global cultures, the need for inter-generational exchange and its rewards. A storyteller can widen the range of people's emotional, cultural and moral responses. Stories from a specific culture can be used to provide an insight into that culture.
- Hearing traditional tales can provide the atmosphere of the time and place the stories are set in.
- Traditional tales often provide clues that help us understand the past. Local tales are remembered long after paper records have faded.
- Storytellers frequently research stories or create stories, which can continue to be used by staff long after the event.
- Storytelling encourages a questioning attitude and inspires people to learn more about the past.
- A storyteller can teach storytelling skills to museum staff to enhance their interactions with the public.
- Some storytellers can provide other types of workshop sessions. Some specialise in reminiscence work encouraging older people to share their memories and provide oral history resources for use with younger visitors.

CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN BOOKING A STORYTELLER

With an ever-increasing variety of storytellers to choose from, how do you find those who will suit you? Whatever event you are planning, give yourself plenty of time. Many popular storytellers are booked up months in advance.

Decide what the main reasons are for wanting to book a storyteller:

- To give a 'feel' of a period in history – perhaps tacked onto an exhibition on 'life in the....' – e.g. the Viking saga Storyteller sitting in his authentic tent.
- To provide added value to education sessions – historical storytelling set in a time and place with a Costumed Storyteller to enhance understanding of an historical period.
- To enlighten understanding of a classical collection. Many museum educators emphasise the importance of linking storytelling to collections and/or the special environment in which the storytelling take place, as a special form of interpretation.
- To provide an entertaining performance for adults and older children linked to collections (perhaps during an evening)
- To provide family entertainment – perhaps a number of short sessions during the day.
- To inspire a reminiscence or local history project through the use of local folk tales
- To help the museum cover Literacy or History in the National Curriculum

Have a clear idea of the sort of event you want:

- Is this to be a one-off event or a residency?
- Do you want a performance or a workshop?
- Will it be formal or relaxed, a performance at a set time in front of a large audience or working with smaller groups as and when they turn up?
- Are you looking for stories on a particular theme or from a specific culture?
- How many sessions will there be?
- How long do you want each session to be?
- Do you want to link the storytelling with the collections in any way? If so how? Theme wise (e.g. Roman myths to 'Romans') or specific objects in your collection?
- If stories are to be linked with collections or objects, does it matter if elements of the stories are factually correct or not?

Audience:

- What age groups will be involved?
- Will the ages be mixed?

e.g. school groups, families or adults? Mixed?

- Have any of them special needs the storyteller should be aware of?
- How much audience participation do you want?

Timing:

- Consider carefully the time of the Storytelling session(s).
- At a family event do not expect the Storyteller to be able to perform all day.

Many Storytellers want to have dedicated time slots others like to be flexible depending on the audiences i.e. young children who normally may only have a short attention span may be so engrossed in the stories that they sit for ages.

Environment:

- Remember that extraneous sounds carry and can be disruptive to a storytelling session.
- Do you want it to be intimate or open?
- What venue are you planning to use?
- How do you want to arrange the performance space – will the Storyteller bring drapes, a set (backdrop), will they require a chair, table, water etc?]
- Do you require the storyteller to work outdoors?

Storytellers can be relatively low maintenance as far as stage performances go - they do not need lots of technical equipment - though some Storytellers do play instruments so may need to be 'plugged' in.

Compiling your ideas into a brief:

Your brief should include:

- The main reasons for wanting to book a storyteller.
- The type or style of stories you are looking for.
- Information about the collection / display that the programme should be linked to.
- Information about any research required or specific stories you would like performed.
- The sort of event you want.
- The audience you are hoping to attract – age and numbers
- The date of the event.
- Length and times of sessions.
- Where you are planning to hold the sessions and what the space is like.
- What other staff and/or artists might be working on the project.

In communicating with storytellers and finding somebody who fits your needs it may be useful to compile your thoughts into a short brief. However, this brief should recognise that storytellers are creative artists, programme managers may benefit from avoiding being too prescriptive and instead encourage artistic input from the storyteller.

Having defined the context for your storytelling event should make choosing a type of storyteller easier. Some Storytellers perform individually, or as a duo or a group, some with music. Sometimes the storytelling is very dramatic and sometimes - as if you are by the fireside!

When booking a Storyteller, first and foremost ensure that the storyteller actually is a storyteller and not somebody reading from books.

Remember that if you are requiring a storyteller to research and learn new material they will need plenty of time to do so.

Types of Storyteller:

Depending on the specific type of event you are planning, you may choose between:

- A Costumed Storyteller with good historical knowledge. You may also need to consider if you want them to use 'authentic' language as this can make comprehension/involvement in the story more difficult for younger listeners
- A Storyteller well versed in the classics and a good knowledge of that historical period who may or may not want to be in costume (a number of high quality Storytellers like to dress inconspicuously believing that their appearance should not take the audiences attention away from the story)
- A performance Storyteller with a good knowledge of stories linked to your collection, and perhaps practical experience of working with the material
- A Storyteller who has experience of working with family groups and a repertoire of stories for 'tinies' who are often brought along to such events
- A Storyteller from the region or with a good knowledge of local stories or someone who is able/willing to do the research or use your research as appropriate
- A Storyteller of traditional tales and or someone who can organise workshops

When you have an idea of the sort of storyteller you are aiming for:

- Look in the quick reference section of the Directory of Storytellers, note those who meet your requirements.
- Look in the County listing to see which storytellers are local to you.
- Look through the Directory and pick out storytellers who sound as if they tell the kind of stories that would be suitable for the children in your school.
- Phone the storytellers on your short-list to discuss your needs, they may be able to give you more ideas about what you could do or help you fine-tune your plans.
- Ask what they charge and if this includes travelling expenses.
- Ask if they are available on the dates you want.
- Ask for a couple of references from people for whom they have done similar work in the last few years.
- Ask when they are performing and check them out by attending their events.
- You do not have to make a firm booking at this stage.

When you have decided which Storyteller you want to book:

- Phone to confirm they are still free and are willing to come.
- Write to confirm date, time, place and fee.
- If you are sent a contract please complete and send it back in good time.
- Include a map and a timetable.
- If you have discussed a potential booking with a storyteller, and decided not to employ them, please contact them in good time so they can release the date for other bookings.



GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR STORYTELLER

Employing any artist, writer, poet or storyteller is an expense and you want your money's worth. How do you ensure success on the day?

When you are planning the event:

- Choose a venue where the storyteller and audience will not be disturbed.
- Think about how you will set up the space so the audience can sit in comfort and see the storyteller clearly. If there is to be a workshop ask the storyteller how they want the room set out. Discuss with the storyteller how long each session is to be.
- Ask the Storyteller to provide you with publicity photos and media information and provide them with copies of publicity and reviews for the event.
- Advertise the event, including the storytellers name and giving some idea of what the session/s will be like.

The week before:

Confirmations of booking are essential for both parties – please note that some Storytellers have a cancellation fee. If you have to cancel due to inclement weather will you reschedule?

- Phone the storyteller to ensure that they have received your confirmation, map, timetable etc. Ask if there is anything they will need you to provide on the day. What are the plans for lunch or other refreshments? Confirm arrangements for payment.
- If they are coming by car confirm parking arrangements.
- Make sure all your staff know that there is a storyteller coming, where they will be working and when.

On the day:

- Keep a lookout to escort the storyteller to the exact venue where they will be working, offer them a drink, ask if they need help carrying anything from their car. Treat the Storyteller as a guest.
- Have a representative available to help unload and to orient them with the performance space, lighting, and electrical outlets.
- Before they start make sure they have a glass of water, know where the toilets and staff room are, check if there is anything else they need.
- If you are introducing them check how they want to be introduced and how to pronounce their name, many storytellers are happy to introduce themselves.
- Do not leave the storyteller alone with children, it is difficult to tell and supervise. This ensures you are complying with the Child Protection Act.
- Avoid interruptions during the session as this can spoil the magic.
- At break times, if the storyteller has joined you in the staff room, ensure they are included in the conversation.

Afterwards:

- Give the storyteller constructive feedback - what went well, any concerns.

- Forward any visitor comments sent to you via evaluation forms or thank you letters
- Ensure payment is sent promptly.

CASE STUDIES

The Handel House Museum is located at 25 Brook Street, London, and was the home to the baroque composer George Frideric Handel from 1723 until his death in 1759. It was here that he composed some of the greatest music in history, including *Messiah*, *Zadok the Priest* and *Fireworks Music*. The Museum celebrates Handel's life and works, displaying portraits of Handel and his contemporaries in finely restored Georgian interiors and bringing live music back to his house. Amongst their interpretative approaches, the Museum's Education Manager Jane Cockcroft currently uses storytelling to approach and interpret opera for broad audiences. One of Handel's great passions was opera, and amongst his operatic work, he wrote a series of operas called the *Magic operas*, which have strong supernatural, mythical and magical themes. The storytelling is based around the narrative components of the operas and include 'musical illustrations' with live music in order to provide a context and bring the stories of the operas come to life. Jane believes that the interchange between storytelling and the music will bring a deepened emotional impact of the music to their audiences.

'By bringing the story to life you are more likely to understand what the singers actually ... well, the kind of emotional impact of the music. Because Handel's music is incredibly emotionally direct and very ... it is actually very accessible. And you really know what the singers feel when you hear the music. But the story gives it that context, obviously. So we wanted to throw some light on the meaning of the music by using a story'

Jane also stresses that what makes the storytelling even more significant is the fact that the music, the stories of the operas were all written in the very same environment that the storytelling events take place. She feels that storytelling lends itself particularly well to Heritage sites of different kinds.

'It [storytelling] is really powerful, I think, in museums. And the fact that, you know, it is very particular to historic environments as well. I think you find in lots of kind of English Heritage sites and historic houses, lots of story telling, you know, the Royal palaces, they use a lot of story telling. Because you have got this kind of environment where people actually lived, and of course, stories ... everybody tells stories all the time. People's lives are stories. And so, you know, the fact that Handel actually composed the music in that space means that the whole space has a resonance. And he would be thinking through these stories in his head, thinking through the complexities of narrative, how to bring it to life to music, so by telling

the story you are almost recreating that process'

Jane Cockcroft, Handel House Museum

Jane also believes that it is valuable to include elements at the very beginning of storytelling sessions which serves as a kind of pre-ambule to stories, focusing on what stories are and oral storytelling tradition. This way, learners will enter the storytelling session with the idea that they are part of a much bigger picture, of stories as connecting people through time, of the story that they are listening to and participating in as part of an ancient but living art form and tradition. Jane also emphasises the importance of trialling and evaluation of storytelling programmes. She says '*... it has taken us a while to actually really understand how it is going to work best. I think that is something that has to be, inevitably there is going to be a process of learning what works best'*

Storytelling in Historic Royal Palaces by Lucy Worsley, Historic Royal Palaces

Historic Royal Palaces is the organisation that looks after The Tower of London, Hampton Court Palace, the state apartments at Kensington Palace, the Banqueting House in Whitehall and Kew Palace. Few people realise that we are an independent charity with no government funding. Recently we have become concerned that our charitable status and purpose of conservation and education is not recognised either by our visitors or by the wider world. Because of this, we began a major review of our purpose – 'The Identity Project'. We realised that our resources consist not only of five wonderful buildings, but also a rich store of stories. We began to wonder how we could apply the best features of the oral tradition of storytelling to everything we provide for visitors. We quickly decided that a story is a useful metaphor for the experience of visiting one of our palaces. The stories that Historic Royal Palaces can tell may begin with something familiar, before taking you on a journey away from normal life into unfamiliar territory. We hope that visitors will end up somewhere completely unexpected, learning something completely new about either the world or themselves. Following this definition, we hope to take visitors on a journey into the lives of the kings and queens of England, but also into their servants' lives and behind the scenes of a palace. We can open up histories of style, gardening, water-closets and food, power and politics. We can see the palaces through the eyes of the people from all over the world who have flocked here throughout history, as well as through the eyes of the people who look after the palaces today. We are only halfway through our review, but we are looking at all sorts of ideas. We're considering training in oral storytelling for both front-of-house and behind-the-scenes staff such as conservators. We are looking at a visitor's journey as a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, and we are investigating how we tell stories to the world through all our work that takes place off site. This little word – storytelling - has spurred us on to re-think all the different kinds of work we do. '

KINDS OF STORIES

Professional storytellers will have a solid repertoire to offer. When commissioning storytellers, it is helpful to brief them about what kind of stories you would like them to tell. Various people have put forward definitions of different kinds of stories, and the following descriptions are adapted from Grainger, T. 1997:23, *Traditional Storytelling in the primary classroom*. Warwickshire: Scholastic Primary Professional Bookshelf.

Folk tales emerged from the need that communities have for sharing their wisdom and experience in a memorable manner. Animals often feature alongside, or instead of humans. Includes the trickster tales of Ananse (Africa/ America), Coyote (North America), Baba Yaga (Russia)

Fairy tales are also folk narratives, which open up the world of magic, of kings, queens, little people and the supernatural. Includes many tales collected by historians, scholars and folklorists including the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Andrew Lang.

Legends and sagas usually refer to kings, great heroes and others who lived in the period before written records such as Kings Arthur and the Greek Legends of the Trojan War.

Myths tend to refer to stories, which explain the origins of natural and supernatural phenomena, and human and superhuman characteristics. Examples include Greek and Norse Myths and the great Hindu myths.

Fables are often very short tales with overt morals, few characters and a strong element of the fabulous.

Epics are stories, which were composed as poetry.

Ballads are closely related to tales of heroes and epics and are sung or chanted to recount heroic deeds.

Tall tales are those in which exaggeration has run riot and the story has become extravagant, nonsensical and yet entertaining.

A further category is the **urban myths**, which are set in modern times, and more particularly are often passed off as truth.