MARCH/APRIL 2023

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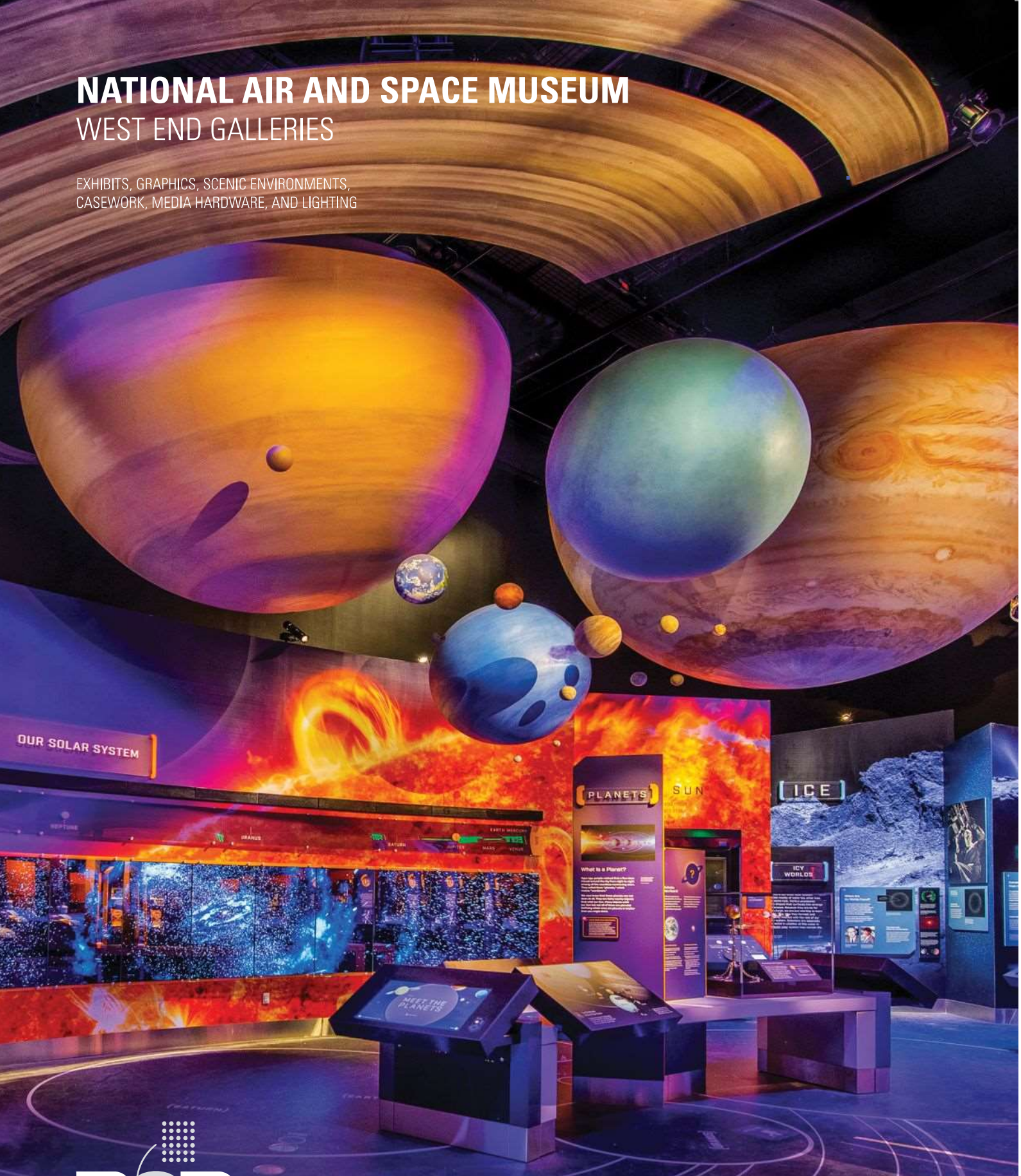

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American Alliance of Museums

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MUSEUM (ISSN 0027-4089)
MARCH/APRIL 2023, VOLUME 102, NO. 2
PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY (J/F, M/A, M/J, J/A, S/O, N/D)
BY THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS
2451 CRYSTAL DRIVE, SUITE 1005, ARLINGTON, VA 22202; 202-289-1818; FAX 202-289-6578;
WWW.AAM-US.ORG.

Annual subscription rate is $38. Copies are mailed to all members. Single copy is $7. Overseas airmail is an additional $45. Membership in the Alliance includes $22 from annual membership dues applicable to a subscription to MUSEUM, except for students and retirees. (This notice is required by the US Postal Service.) POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MUSEUM, 2451 Crystal Drive, Suite 1005, Arlington, VA 22202.

MUSEUM is indexed in The Art Index, which is published quarterly and available in public libraries. The magazine is available from ProQuest in the following formats: microform, electronic and paper. Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Alliance. Preferred Periodical postage paid at Arlington, VA, and additional mailing offices. Printed in the US by Lane Press, Burlington, VT.

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The Subject of a Story

By the time you read this, I will have just joined hundreds of museum advocates on Capitol Hill for AAM's annual Museums Advocacy Day, making the case to government leaders for supporting museums. This event is one of the key strategies in our field's collective advocacy efforts, which have led to major victories in recent years, including billions of dollars in relief funding, allowances for museums to participate in Small Business Administration and tax relief programs, and historic funding increases for the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

As you would expect, part of making this case involves sharing numbers, the many eye-popping statistics about the contributions museums make as destinations and employers. But there is another component of advocacy that is equally important: telling a good story.

In meetings with representatives and their staffs, I'm always struck by this. Numbers may get them to listen, but stories get them to pick up their pencils and start taking notes. Hearing the stories of museums in their districts—how they're supporting the community and how the community is supporting them—brings the facts about their impact to life.

Sometimes we forget about this power that storytelling has. We look to data and facts as the highest form of truth but forget that they are only meaningful with context to explain them. Facts only become relevant to people when they know what story they tell.

This is as important to recognize in the work we do inside museums as it is in the work we do to build support for them. Some of my most illuminating experiences in museums are when I have a tour guide to fill in the gaps on what was going on in an artist's life when they made a painting, or what was happening in history that made an object significant. More than the names, dates, and characteristics associated with an object, it is this storytelling that makes me most likely to remember something, and to want to share it with others.

As museums continue to work on becoming more relevant to more people, we can't neglect this reality. All our potential starts with the ability to form a connection and build understanding, no matter how much a person knows about the subject beforehand. This visitor experience is what distinguishes us and makes us worthy of public support. It's too important to treat as anything less than a top priority.

As the articles in this issue of the magazine demonstrate, museums are already on the task, experimenting with novel ways to immerse people in the stories they tell, using forms like virtual reality, theatrical experiences, games, and comics. They are also reconsidering the kinds of stories they tell and how they tell them. Some of the most exciting, pioneering work on this front is in approaches that tell multiple stories, allowing many perspectives to create a nuanced account instead of privileging one "objective" voice. Historic Sotterley's work with descendant communities, as described in this issue, is one example.

Going forward, I hope that more visitors can have experiences that fill their minds with fascinating, complex stories, bringing objects and facts to life and leaving them feeling more deeply connected to humanity. That's what wins hearts in our communities, and what convinces decision-makers that museums matter.

1/20/2023

Laura L. Lott is the Alliance's President and CEO. Follow Laura on Twitter at **@LottLaura**.

Museums and Storytelling

9x

The increase in the feel-good hormone oxytocin that children experience when hearing a good story.

1–3 seconds

The time it takes for a listener's brain activity to begin to mirror that of a storyteller's.

50%

The increase in moral judgment fiction readers experience compared to those who do not read fiction.

Courtesy of Planet Word

Sources: From top to bottom: Brockington et al., "Storytelling increases oxtocin . . . ," *PNAS*, pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2018409118
Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson, "Speaker-listener neural coupling underlies successful communication," *PNAS*, pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1008662107
Tamir et al., "Reading fiction and reading minds," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4733342

By the Numbers was compiled by Susie Wilkening, principal of Wilkening Consulting, wilkeningconsulting.com. Reach Susie at Susie@wilkeningconsulting.com.

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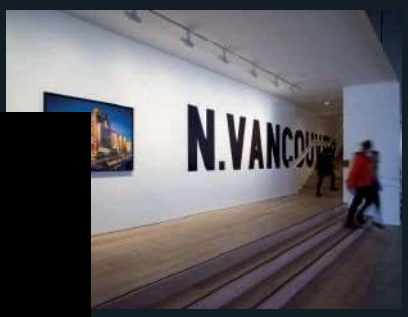

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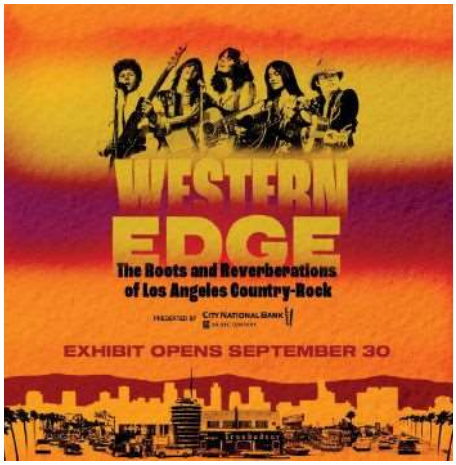


Monterey Museum of Art

"Flora Fauna" presents a visual celebration of the natural world centered around the work of two California representational artists, Elizabeth Barlow and Susan Manchester. Set in conversation with flora- and fauna-inspired works from the Monterey Museum of Art's permanent collection and select loans from the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, the exhibition examines how representations of the plant and animal kingdoms have evolved over the past three centuries.

Location: Monterey, CA

Dates: through April 16

Learn more: montereyart.org/upcoming-exhibitions/flora-fauna/

Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum

"Western Edge: The Roots and Reverberations of Los Angeles Country-Rock," presented by City National Bank, traces the Los Angeles–based communities of visionary singers, songwriters, and musicians who, between the 1960s and 1980s, frequented local nightclubs, embraced country music, created and shaped the musical fusion "country-rock," and, ultimately, made a lasting impact on popular music. By blending hard-edged honky-tonk, Mexican folk music, rockabilly, and punk rock, they provided inspiration to future generations of country and Americana artists.

Location: Nashville, TN

Dates: through May 2025

Learn more: countrymusichalloffame.org/calendar/western-edge-exhibit

UCI Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art

"The Bruton Sisters: Modernism in the Making" features the works of Margaret, Esther, and Helen Bruton—pioneering artists who propelled the advancement of modern art in California. The presentation, which includes related works by several of their contemporaries, reveals the Bruton sisters' innovative use of materials, creative approach to design, and fruitful collaborative process.

Location: Irvine, CA

Dates: through May 6

Learn more: imca.uci.edu/exhibition/bruton-sisters/

Susan Manchester, *California Condor Feather: Left Wing*, 2021, courtesy of Andra Norris Gallery; photo by Shayla Blatchford; courtesy of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum; image courtesy of SITE Santa Fe

What's New at Your Museum?

Do you have a new temporary or permanent exhibition, education program, partnership/initiative, or building/wing? Tell us at bit.ly/MuseumNewsAAM, and it might be featured in an upcoming issue.

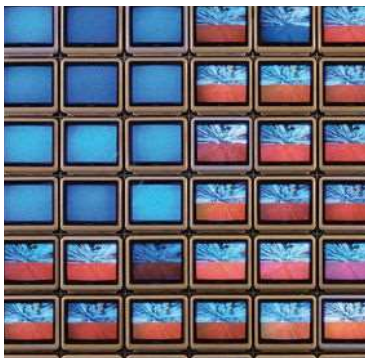
Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields

"Artists Among Us" features 72 original works across 21 departments of the museum and presents a wide range of media and styles, including paintings, drawings, and sculptures, as well as textile arts, found objects, and the written word. The diverse materials and approaches reflect the breadth and depth of the exceptional minds at Newfields.

Location: Indianapolis, IN

Dates: through May 21

Learn more: discovernewfields.org/artists-among-us



Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

"I'll Be Your Mirror: Art and the Digital Screen," a thematic group exhibition that examines the screen's vast impact on art from 1969 to the present, surveys more than 60 works by 50 artists over the past five decades. The artists included examine screen culture through a broad range of media such as paintings, sculpture, video games, digital art, augmented reality, and video.

Location: Fort Worth, TX

Dates: through April 30

Learn more: themodern.org/exhibition/ill-be-your-mirror-art-and-digital-screen

Image courtesy of Newfields; Nam June Paik, *Video Flag Y*, 1985, JPMorgan Chase Art Collection © estate of Nam June Paik

Thread sculpture designed by Zoila Torres installed in "Threads of Memory: An Introduction to World War II and the Holocaust" at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University.

Photo by Camden Anich

The Stories We Weave

Storytelling in museums can be a tool of liberation.

By Adina Langer

Museums preserve things of value. People look to museums to determine what is valuable while at the same time hoping that museums will value what they treasure. This axiom at the heart of museum practice hasn't changed. The change worth celebrating is that what—and who—museums value has expanded. We communicate that change through storytelling.

As a child, I knew that museums were special places where time could move more slowly. I treasured weekend excursions on New Jersey Transit to New York City to visit the American

Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. What I didn't treasure so much were the labels. I did not understand why museums spent valuable space relaying details about what I later came to understand as provenance. Why did the names of collectors, the materials used to make the art, and even the taxonomy of specimens get pride of place when so much was left unexplored and under-explained?

The art and artifacts in museums fired my imagination, but I often felt like I needed to sneak past the "official" narrative to get to the heart of what excited me. Who made these things, and why? Who used them, and who loved them? How did they work? Who were the people whose day-to-day lives intersected with the histories important enough to be described on gallery walls? Unless I encountered the right kind of docent, I would have to speculate.

College afforded me the opportunity to study the history of museums, and my desire to play with these spaces increased. And when I became a curator in the 2000s, change was already underway. Museums were experiencing an identity crisis at the dawn of the digital era. How could they compete with catalogues of data and sophisticated entertainment now instantly available to visitors?

Museums needed to embrace the simple reality that people were *coming* because they were curious, they were *staying* because they were empathetic, and they were *returning* because they were seeking authenticity. The best way for museums to signal these values was through storytelling. Art, artifacts, and collections of facts could only draw and retain a steady audience if they were wrapped in a cogent, relevant story.

The Power of Museum Storytelling

So how does storytelling free museums from the structures that held them back in the past?

- Storytelling removes limitations caused by rigid assumptions. If you assume only that your visitors are curious about the world around them, then there is no limit to the approaches you can take in connecting people with objects—and objects with their contexts.
- Storytelling pulls down the invisible barriers that sap visitor confidence and make them feel that they don't belong in museums. Visitors are not given a chance to become bored or feel excluded when there are so many possible stories for them to encounter in a museum.
- Storytelling frees us from our silos. Science is better with history. Art is better with science. History is better with science, art, culture, and economics.

Yes, storytelling is rooted in making connections, but in museums, storytelling can do so much more than it can in more traditional narrative media, like TV, drama, and documentary, because museums are spaces of free-choice learning. Visitor experience is not bound by linear time or singular emphasis. Storytelling as the backbone of museum experiences frees curators to create new and different pathways through collections. And revealing the truth of these multiple threads and possible pathways frees visitors to experience the same museum differently every time.

RESOURCES

Adina Langer (ed.), *Storytelling in Museums*, 2022

Artiflection, **artiflection.com**

Leslie Bedford, "Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums." *Curator: The Museum Journal,* January 2001

Colin Davey, Thomas A. Lesser, and Neil deGrasse Tyson, *The American Museum of Natural History and How It Got That Way*, 2019

Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2015

"Threads of Memory: An Introduction to World War II and the Holocaust," **historymuseum.kennesaw.edu/exhibitions/on-site/threads_of_memory.php**

At the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, where I am the curator, we have made this multiplicity of storytelling the centerpiece of our introductory exhibition, "Threads of Memory." In the exhibition, we emphasize how the same artifacts can tell multiple stories depending on perspective; how the same events—in our case World War II and the Holocaust—changed every category of human endeavor, including geography, technology, culture, and politics; and how individual people encountered each other, lived through extraordinary circumstances, and emerged changed by their experiences.

THREE-LABEL ARTIFACT CASES

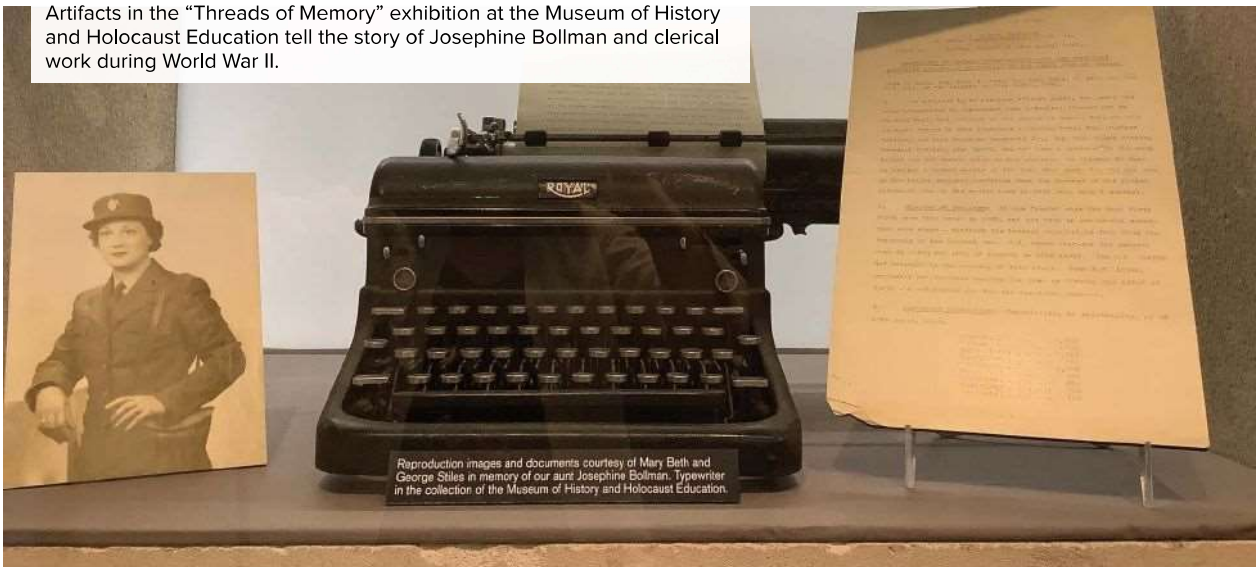
The same artifacts can tell multiple stories, and six three-label artifact cases in the "Threads of Memory" exhibition emphasize that point. Each label tries to live up to the standards Beverly Serrell offers in *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach,* including a clear "big idea" and direct references to the objects on display.

This collection of a portrait of a member of the Women's Army Corps (WAC), a typewriter, and typewritten pages in the exhibition have the following labels:

Portrait of a WAC. Sergeant Josephine Bollman appears confident and serene in her military uniform. Although her expression might be at odds with the harsh realities of the Second World War, it illustrates the pride and competence with which more than 350,000 women served in the United States military. More women took part in World War II than in any previous war in American history. Bollman, who was born in Colonie, New York, in 1913, joined the Women's Army Corps in January 1943. Stationed in Reims, France, she served in General Eisenhower's communications staff.

Tactical typewriters. Perhaps more than men or arms, wars need coordinated communication to succeed. Military clerks, like Bollman, used typewriters, a late-19th century innovation, to communicate during the war. The American government encouraged people to donate typing machines like this one to war agencies in need. Wartime communication also relied on new innovations, such as radio relay, to send messages quickly across great distances.

First draft of history. Five days after inspecting the Buchenwald Concentration Camp on April 16, 1945, Brigadier General Eric Wood, Lt. Colonel Chase H. Ott and CFO S.M. Dye dictated a report about their experience. The typed pages of their report, seen here in reproduction, remained in Bollman's personal collection of documents related to her wartime service. Reports like this one helped corroborate witness testimony during the Nuremberg Trials and enable us to understand and characterize the true horrors of the Holocaust.



Artifacts in the "Threads of Memory" exhibition at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education tell the story of Josephine Bollman and clerical work during World War II.

Photo by Adina Langer

Visual metaphors, including colored threads, guide visitors along this conceptual journey. They are encouraged to pick up "thread cards" that illuminate exploration opportunities in the museum (and on the web) based on their unique interests. The exhibition culminates in an art and poetry installation (yes, art in a history museum!) based on the concept of "transformation." Ceramicist Brad Dalton and poet Katlyn Dalton created a set of glazed jars that represent the lives of seven individuals, more and less famous, who were forever altered by the events of World War II and the Holocaust. Visitors are invited to reflect on the effects of this pivotal historical period on the threads that came together to form their own lives, and the way their own lives can, and will, affect the world around them.

Used with purpose and care, storytelling in museums can be a tool of liberation. For some, the metanarratives of connoisseurship and taxonomy will continue to animate interest. What kid hasn't wanted to collect something and share what they collected? For others, the invitation comes from wonder and shared humanity, from encountering the unexpected amid the ordinary.

As museum professionals, we have the opportunity to provide a multiplicity of pathways through the treasures entrusted to our care. In this way, stewardship and storytelling go hand in hand.

Adina Langer, a curator, oral historian, educator, presenter, and blogger, is the editor of the anthology *Storytelling in Museums*, published by AAM Press in July 2022. Follow her on Twitter @Artiflection and find her on the web at artiflection.com.

A MORE VISCERAL EXPERIENCE

Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center is preserving survivor oral histories for generations to come by using hologram and virtual reality technology.

By Sierra Wolff

Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center was founded in 1981 by survivors who remade their lives in the aftermath of one of the greatest atrocities in history. Their choice to share what happened to them, their struggles and resilience, is the basis for everything we do.

But as the museum grew and entered the new millennium, we faced a challenge to our mission: How can we preserve survivors' stories for future generations in a way that fosters empathy and understanding? How can we ensure their voices are still heard?

Seeking to answer these questions, we reached out to colleagues across the country and the world to understand the breadth of potential options to document firsthand accounts before our survivors passed away. At the time, the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation was beta testing its New Dimensions in Testimony technology that would create the experience of having a conversation with a Holocaust survivor.

This, along with virtual reality technology, were the answers to our questions.

Making Holograms a Reality

In 2013, several museum staff members, board members, and Holocaust survivors Aaron Elster, Fritzie Fritzshall, and Sam Harris met with Stephen Smith, former Executive Director of the USC Shoah Foundation. Sitting in the museum's boardroom, Stephen pulled out his laptop and provided a demo of the 2-D version of the first hologram they created with survivor Pinchas Gutter. Using voice recognition technology, Pinchas' hologram could answer all of the museum team's questions.

Up to this point, many in the Holocaust museum arena had been skeptical of the technology or hesitant to use it. They wondered if it was too gimmicky. Was it the "Disney-ification" of the Holocaust? But we were sold by the survivors' reactions to it. After the demo, they said, "This is it. This is what's going to preserve our stories." Their buy-in was all we needed to take the risk and move forward with hologram technology.

Next, we needed to ensure that the visitor experience would be focused on the power of the survivors' stories rather than the technology. We knew that if the technology became the focal point of the experience, we had failed.

Before filming the survivors to create their holograms, USC Shoah Foundation compiled the 100 most commonly asked questions of survivors and did extensive research on each participant. Once this was ready, seven Chicago-area survivors flew to Los

Visitors watch as Holocaust survivor Fritzie Fritzshall's hologram shares her story in Illinois Holocaust Museum's "Abe & Ida Cooper Survivor Stories Experience."

Robert F. Kusel

Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker Wallfisch recording her story for Dimensions in Testimony.

Angeles where they filmed under a dome of more than 100 cameras and lights, answering questions ranging from what they remembered of life before the Holocaust to their favorite color. After days of filming with each survivor and around a year of post-production, we had seven holograms—eight in total with Pinchas—that could each answer 20,000–30,000 questions in real time. While we were the first museum to partner with USC Shoah Foundation on this project, five more survivors were filmed shortly after and dozens more have been filmed since.

Dimensions in Testimony debuted in our "Abe & Ida Cooper Survivor Stories Experience" in October 2017 as part of our four-gallery Take a Stand Center, which showcases human and civil rights issues and "upstanders" working to champion equity and provides visitors with tools for civic engagement. The "Survivor Stories Experience" was the first space globally to use hologram technology in this way as part of a permanent, purpose-built theater dedicated to sharing with technology. It opened to rave reviews in media coverage around the world, including a feature on *60 Minutes* and being named one of the 12 must-see exhibitions globally by *Smithsonian Magazine*.

More important, animating these stories through a question-and-answer format using this technology has had an immense impact on visitors. For many, the concept of the Holocaust is too large to grasp or relate to. The museum's own research and national studies show that Holocaust survivors' stories humanize difficult history, helping visitors develop empathy, learn the dangers of indifference, and recognize their responsibility to stand up to hatred and antisemitism.

According to a recent study on dark tourism (travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy) and social mobilization conducted at the museum by the University of Illinois, the experience of visiting the museum and seeing the holograms empowered and motivated attendees to address injustice in their lives and communities.

We have also learned that audiences are often more willing to ask questions of the holograms than a living survivor. The holograms offer no judgment, allowing visitors to address their curiosity without feeling pressured or intimidated. In speaking with our audiences, we have found that this technology is helping them create memorable encounters that they wouldn't get from passively reading about history.

Turning to Virtual Reality

While our survivor holograms were a success, we knew we needed to do more to preserve survivor stories and Holocaust history. A 2018 survey found that more than 60 percent of Americans did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust, and more than 10 percent believed that Jews themselves caused the Holocaust. This, compounded with rising antisemitism and other forms of hatred around the world, spurred us to find other ways to share survivor stories.

Once again, we turned to technology, this time in the form of virtual reality (VR).

We realized that much like our survivors, there may come a time when historical sites like Auschwitz are not around for future generations to visit and learn from. This concern motivated the late Fritzie Fritzshall, a Holocaust survivor and former museum President, to become intimately involved in creating our VR experience in which visitors travel with survivors as they revisit important sites in their lives, personally connecting to the survivor's legacy.

In 2018, several museum team members traveled to Auschwitz-Birkenau with Fritzie to record her story, which would become a VR experience in "The Journey Back," a first-of-its-kind Holocaust exhibition created by IHMEC in partnership with VR/AR design studios eyelash.ai, 30 Ninjas, and Farm 51; Winikur Productions (film production); Gallagher & Associates (exhibition design); and Silver Sound

USC Shoah Foundation

Studios. She filmed for hours on location, sharing her experiences of her life before the Holocaust, her arrival at the infamous killing center, and the story of the 599 women who helped save her life.

When filming wrapped with Fritzie, the film crew continued to gather footage at the Mauthausen and Ebensee concentration camps in Austria. They brought back that footage to a Chicago studio where survivor George Brent, filming in front of a green screen, shared how he was separated from his father at Auschwitz-Birkenau, was sent to several camps, and later found his father after liberation. The result of this trip was two VR films: *A Promise Kept*, featuring Fritzie, and *Don't Forget Me*, featuring George.

Filmed in Austria, Poland, and Ukraine, these VR films utilize immersive cinematography, animation, photogrammetry, and 360-degree sound as viewers explore Fritzie and George's hometowns and the camps. Film techniques convey the passage of time and magnitude of the atrocities. Panoramic scanning and drone footage illustrate the camps' scale, overlays of historical photographs enable viewers to see the camps as survivors saw them, and "memory spaces" constructed with animated sequences that cue the viewer that these visuals are distinct from the actual footage in the rest of the film. These spaces include the inside of a deportation railcar, the women's and men's barracks at Birkenau, and slave labor sites near Auschwitz and Ebensee.

Participants control their own experience as they are immersed in present-day and historic camps, guided by the people who survived them. Visitors have said they do not just see and hear the story through a screen, they viscerally feel it. As viewers bear witness, we hope that they will be empowered to take action in ways that are meaningful to them.

Prior to debuting in the museum's VR gallery, both films received global recognition and awards from a variety of prestigious film festivals, including South by Southwest, Nashville Film Festival, and Vancouver International Film Festival. Knowing the films can elicit strong emotions, we also conducted beta testing before their museum debut to ensure guests have a safe and comfortable experience. The exhibition opened in January 2022 and has received worldwide coverage, including from NBC News, *Forbes*, and *Fast Company*.

When we asked visitors about their experience in "The Journey Back," a majority told us they learned something about the Holocaust and said they were likely to share their experiences and what they learned with others. One guest said, it's a "better way to visualize and experience, rather than learning about it in a textbook. It is immersive, helps people see what it was like there and a good balance of modern/past."

Plans for the Future

We plan to launch three more VR films in 2023, each with a survivor who experienced the Holocaust from a different part of the world—China, France, and the Netherlands. We are also excited that, unlike our holographic theater, this technology is more easily accessible and mobile, allowing these important stories to be shared around the world. Through licensing to other museums and VR educational platforms, millions of people will be able to journey with survivors to see where some of the most horrific crimes of the Holocaust took place. In doing so, we hope they will connect with history in a profound way while understanding the dangers of silence and indifference.

Survivor Rodi Glass is a subject of one of our upcoming VR films. After viewing the finished product, she removed the headset and with tears in her eyes said, "This is why I did this. It honors my family's history and the history of the Holocaust in Western Europe." As the last generation of Holocaust survivors ages, holograms and virtual reality help ensure their stories will not be forgotten after they are gone.

A guest in Illinois Holocaust Museum's VR gallery, "The Journey Back."

Sierra Wolff is the Communications Manager at Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie. Reach her at sierra.wolff@ilhmec.org.


16

THE SECRET SAUCE

Science North's recipe for success creating object theaters.

By Amy Wilson

All photos courtesy of Science North

Audience members in *Naamiwan's Dream*, an object theater at the Red Lake Heritage Centre in Red Lake, Ontario, that is delivered in both English and Ojibway.

"*That* is our Kite-a-lite. Our link to the Fleece-net: a worldwide communications network of woolly ungulates, dedicated to battling climate change. Climate change: it's here *lamby*, you can taste it in the grass!"

I still remember the first time I saw that giant kite object light up above the screen. It was introduced by Sheepy, the intelligent and sarcastic animated talking sheep–narrator in *The Changing Climate Show* object theater. It was my first week at my new job as an entry-level production assistant in the media production unit of Science North, Canada's second largest science center with a home base in Sudbury, Ontario. My onboarding included watching this and other shows to build my understanding of this new-to-me form of communication media.

The second show in the Science North trilogy on climate change features Sheepy the informed sheep and his Kite-a-lite.

Object theaters move beyond a traditional film experience—though film, whether live-action or animated, is a central feature. Beyond the film element, visitors can expect to witness objects light up, move, and change forms; participate directly with their bodies; make choices to direct a personalized storyline through different technologies; and contribute their own science knowledge and data to the experience. At Science North, we have found that object theaters are one of the best ways to communicate complex themes to audiences.

By physically immersing audiences in the subject of the story using everyday language and points of reference, they can meaningfully connect to the material and increase understanding. Object theaters are a staple in our own two science centers, and our home-grown experience has allowed us to create custom productions for science centers, museums, and cultural attractions around the world.

Since that first experience with Sheepy, I have become a producer and senior editor at Science North, and I've spent the past 15 years creating numerous object theaters. From my tremendously experienced colleagues and audience research, I have learned the "secret sauce" that forms the base of all successful object theaters.

The Ingredients for Success

The first ingredient for success in object theaters is **knowing your audience.** What do they know? What do they want to know? What don't they know? Science North works closely with project partners to better understand public knowledge of particular topics.

Visitors having fun in *Ready Set Move!* theater at Science North, a fully immersive theater experience that is directly impacted by the physical actions of the audience.

For example, while developing the *Climate Action Show*, we created several different versions of the show—one customized for our center and several others for institutions around the world. Teams from the Hong Kong Science Museum and Science Centre Singapore directed the creation of customized vignettes featuring local scientists and stories that would resonate with their audiences. For Science North's newest show, the *Big Impact* theater, which is still under development, we are working with leaders in the mining sector to understand what people in Northern Ontario know about mineral sciences and the industry's use of new green technologies. This show will run at Dynamic Earth, a Science North attraction focused on earth sciences and mining.

To help build the content of our object theaters, we ask our visitors to answer questionnaires, and we often ask them to participate in a focus group. We ask what they'd like to learn on the subject while also exploring vocabulary, ideas, assumptions, relationships, and background on the topic. This helps us start imagining the show concept, a process that can last from six months to two years depending on the complexity of the topic. Once an object theater opens, a comparative evaluation helps us determine if we achieved our established learning goals for the show.

The next ingredient for success is **analogies**. Instantly relatable, everyday analogies help audiences make sense of complex science topics within their own frame of reference and personal experiences. The analogies are points of reference with which the audience is already familiar, leading to deeper understanding and the ability to remember and continue making sense of the material beyond the show's conclusion.

A prime example is the "fishing net" analogy for finding dark matter particles in *Secrets from the Sun,* a previous Science North–based object theater. The stage was set with a spotlight on a fishing net, and audiences were asked to imagine minnows swimming through the gaps in the net. The net is our dark matter detectors, and the minnows are dark matter particles, almost always passing undetected through the gaps but occasionally brushing against the net, alerting scientists to their presence.

In *The Changing Climate Show*, we used an analogy featuring "Feedbaäch," the death-metal sheep band. As Sheepy yells, "Cue the band!" the sheep singers have their mics too close to the amplifiers. The sound coming out of the speakers is picked up by the mics, then amplified again, picked up by the mics again, and so on, louder and louder. A similar pattern happens

with Earth's climate. The Arctic Ocean is mostly covered by ice, but as the planet warms, there is less ice. This means there is less white surface, which reflects sunlight, and there is more open dark water, which absorbs sunlight. This absorption further heats the water, resulting in even less ice, which in turn means more dark water to absorb even more sunlight—a feedback loop.

The *Take Over Control* show at the Niagara Parks Power Station explores, among other things, the necessary synchronization of electrical power generation and getting that power onto the electrical grid. Here, the analogy is of a game of double-Dutch jump rope: you must first get your body in sync with the two moving ropes in order to successfully jump in.

Analogies are like the connective tissue of an object theater's narrative. They work best when paired with other story elements, such as presenting different points of view or providing a mystery to solve or a quest to complete.

Last, but certainly not least, the third core ingredient of object theater is **objects**—including physical interactives and sensory experiences. These are all the other components beyond the screen that allow audiences to physically interact with the show's content. To emphasize the increasingly severe weather patterns resulting from our changing climate, *The Changing Climate Show* featured wind, rain, and heat effects resulting in the audience physically experiencing these elements—in other words, they got wet!

In the *BodyTrek Theater* at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, audience members engage with a live-action guide who is climbing nearby Mt. Evans and discovering the physiological effects of the hike on her body. As she climbs, the audience measures their own body functions, such as heart rate and blood oxygen level, using individual devices at each seat, giving them a personal connection to and understanding of the content.

In *Ready, Set, Move!* at Science North and Experimentarium in Hellerup, Denmark, body-sensing technology follows the physical actions of the audience to affect real-time outcomes in the animated content. When the main character Anna is navigating a flooded river, the audience is encouraged to act as a group and use their body movements to steer her raft safely around objects. Physical movement is part of the story and helps impart a message of active living to audience members. These tangible elements allow audiences to connect with the content in a way unique to object theater.

In the *Wildfires* 4-D multimedia show, motion seating and special effects immerse audiences in wildfire firefighting.

A **strong lead character** is the added seasoning that allows audiences to fully embrace the information being communicated. Simply put: shows with a strong character work very well, and those without do not. We've learned this through trial and error over the years.

For example, in *Club Genome*, a Science North object theater about human genetics, we knew our audience and their knowledge level. We employed a robust analogy between music-making and DNA sequencing throughout the show. However, we chose not to use a lead custom character, instead

using an authoritative, omniscient narrator. Feedback from that show made clear that while the analogy was mostly understood, audiences never felt fully drawn into the show and thus were not able to fully connect with the content and form their own deeper understanding. Through summative evaluation and informal conversations with staff and visitors, we concluded that the lack of a relatable character was the principal reason for this missed connection.

This is in notable contrast to shows that feature a strong lead character that have become audience favorites. For example, when Sheepy first appeared in *The Climate Change Show,* he was instantly beloved by audiences. The connection was so profound that not only did Sheepy become the focal point for our now-completed trilogy of climate-focused object theaters, he also became the call-to-action for green and sustainable practices at Science North and on our social media platforms. Characters bring audiences fully into the story and make complicated topics fun and relatable in a way neutral narration cannot match.

A Team Effort

Mixing together all the ingredients of great object theaters are the chefs—**the project team**. Every object theater team is made up of specialists in science communication, multimedia, and technology. They are then joined by topic experts, industry partners, and clients. This team works together to provide insight on the audience's knowledge level; determine what objects, effects, and analogies will lead to greater understanding of the subject matter; and create a character that will draw the audience in, allowing them to fully connect with the content. Each team member, regardless of their area of specialty, contributes to the conversations on content, story, and technological approaches.

The whole process is incredibly fluid: a new insight about audience will signal a piece of content to highlight, which will initiate brainstorming about what analogy to use, which will lead to the addition of a new object, resulting in research on different multimedia technologies, which often means a totally new direction for the story. This iterative process occurs throughout the show's development.

Science North crew filming on location in Churchill, Manitoba, for *Journey to Churchill*, a 360-degree film experience at the Assiniboine Park Zoo in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

While the "secret sauce" of object theaters provides the base recipe upon which to build a final dish, each new show involves a unique combination of ingredients. Currently, we are embarking on the concept plan for an object theater to play at a future site in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Relying extensively on community input and information gathering, that team will feature a deep collaboration with Indigenous knowledge keepers and creators to center Indigenous science and ways of knowing. We are not experts in this subject matter, and are deeply grateful and humbled by the generosity of the knowledge keepers and community members working as true partners with us in the creation of this new experience.

I have consistently seen object theaters help audiences understand complex information in ways that are engaging, fun, and meaningful. Building this genuine connection between the audience and the world around them is the most joyous part of our work at Science North.

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CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

An exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian-New York uses comics to tell relatable stories of past and present Native New Yorkers.

By Elena Guarinello

This view into one of the galleries of "Native New York" at the National Museum of the American Indian in lower Manhattan shows the Niagara Falls comic (on the right).

Image courtesy of C&G Partners, exhibition designers

From politics to pop culture, Native excellence and visibility is on the rise in 21st century American life. Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna) leads the US Department of the Interior, filmmaker Sterlin Harjo's (Seminole Nation of Oklahoma) *Reservation Dogs* is an acclaimed television series, and the football team that takes the field in Washington, DC, is now called the Commanders rather than a racial slur.

Despite these gains, negative stereotypes about American Indians persist, along with misunderstandings about tribal sovereignty and the contemporaneity of Native peoples. As 2018 research from IllumiNative's Reclaiming Native Truth study asserts, "Accurate information, authentic representation, and narrative disruption are essential to ending racism, bias, and discrimination against Native peoples."

The exhibitions, educational materials, and public programs produced by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) seek to change the narrative about Native peoples. Centering Native voices and experiences, as well as telling more accurate histories, is essential to NMAI's interpretive practice. And in the new long-term exhibition "Native New York" at NMAI's location in lower Manhattan, that interpretive practice includes original comics. Created in collaboration with Native experts, writers, and illustrators, each comic relies on a different narrative technique, from a poem to hero's journey, to tell stories of past and present Native New Yorkers.

RESOURCES

Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study, Michael Sheyahshe, 2008

Telling Stories with Pictures: Collected Comics from Native New York
americanindian.si.edu/nk360/resources/Collected-Comics-from-Native-New-York

Red Planet Books and Comics, publishers and sellers of Native comics, run by Dr. Lee Francis IV
redplanetbooksncomics.com/

alterNative Media, a creative, media, and software development firm, founded by Michael Sheyahshe
alter-native-media.com/

The 2018 Reclaiming Native Truth study and other resources about narrative change
illuminative.org/resources/

The Exhibition's Goal

As a free museum, NMAI cannot gather information about our visitors through ticket sales or similar data streams. But we do know a significant, albeit obvious, fact about each of our visitors—their location. The visitors who walk into NMAI's lower Manhattan location either live in New York or made a point of visiting. New York, and New York City in particular, loom large in the imagination. This fact provided the exhibition team with a rich opportunity to seek common ground with our visitors and connect them to the exhibition's content in immediately relevant ways.

The very title of the show—"Native New York"—invites visitors to consider what makes a place Native and who is a "Native New Yorker." Using geography as an organizing principle, each of the exhibition's 12 sections begins in a specific New York location and from there travels through time and space.

For example, visitors start their journey at Battery Park/Kapsee, which is located across the street from the museum. They are transported back to 1626 to consider the misunderstandings between the Lenape and the Dutch that underlie the so-called "sale of Manhattan." Similarly, the other sections serve as jumping-off points for a wide range of topics, from Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) lacrosse to the Lenape diaspora.

The exhibition presents visitors with not only more accurate stories of the past but also how these histories impact contemporary life and Native people today. When visitors leave the museum, we hope they will see the city differently, wondering—and finding out—what other Native New York stories surround them.

Why Comics?

In "Native New York," large-scale environmental graphics wrap the gallery walls, providing a sense of place that unites the 12 sections. The sections in turn employ a range of interpretive techniques, from objects and first-person testimonials to videos and interactives. Four sections feature original comics.

Why did we turn to comics as a storytelling medium? One reason was our target audience. As one of the few free museums in New York City, NMAI-NY has long attracted school groups, especially those in fourth through seventh grade. We wondered if

Image courtesy of C&G Partners, exhibition designers

A visitor touches shells that represent the process of making beads. The tactile element is part of the comic about the Wampum Magic workshop on the Poospatuck Reservation.

the comic medium could disrupt expectations for museum text while also being visually dynamic and appealing to this age group and beyond.

"We're not telling the stories in a pedantic way but a vibrant and dynamic way that draws people in, which is really the best part about using a sequential art medium," says Dr. Lee Francis IV (Pueblo of Laguna), a co-creator of the comics.

Necessity also drove our choice. Just do an internet image search for the "sale of Manhattan," and you'll see why. Historical visual material is full of both inaccuracies and harmful stereotypes about Native peoples.

The comic format afforded the team creative license in crafting the content into digestible, relatable, and hopefully memorable stories. For example, the comic in the Van Cortlandt Park section tells the story of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians. It begins with a Revolutionary War battle and continues through successive waves of immigration to present-day Wisconsin, covering many miles and more than 200 years of the community's history. We might have needed several blocks of text and images to relate this story in a more typical museum format. Instead, the story is crafted as an illustrated poem, charting the emotional landscape as much as the historical one.

In the Niagara section, a fictionalized Tuscarora grandmother holds a finely crafted beaded bag while telling her grandchildren about the Tuscarora's return to the north and their traditions of aesthetic adaptation and survival. While each comic is grounded in historical accuracy, they are not a series of facts, but rather stories of people, packed with memories, emotions, heartaches, and triumphs.

EXTENDING THE IMPACT

NMAI produced several resources related to the "Native New York" exhibition for classroom and at-home learning. These are available on the Native Knowledge 360° (NK360°) website (**americanindian.si.edu/nk360**; search "New York").

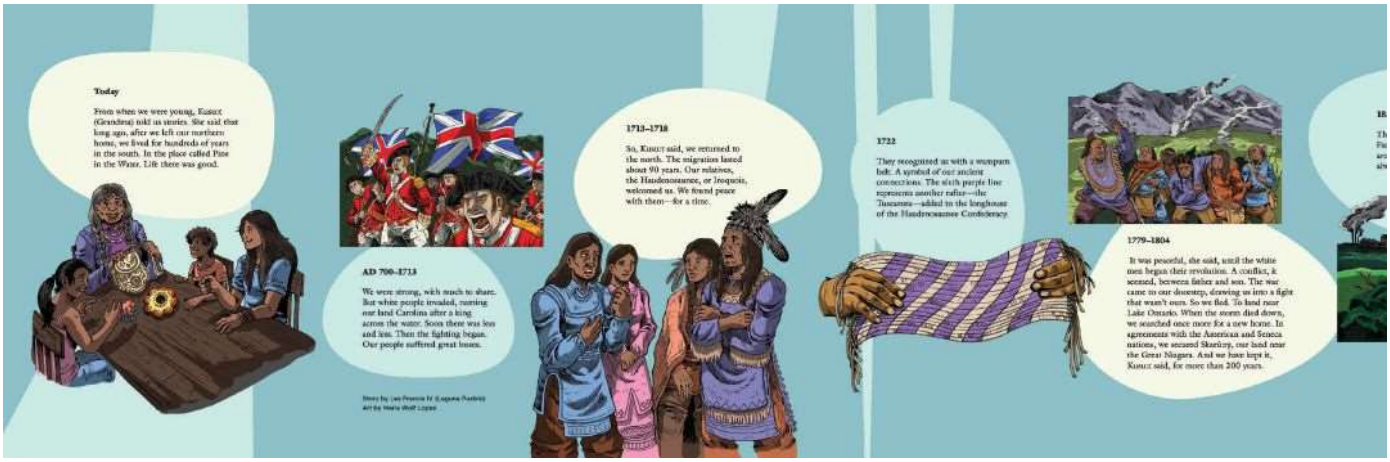
- **Downloadable comics.** All four exhibition comics can be printed at 8 1/2-by-11-inch scale and include historical context and questions for students to consider.
- **Lesson module.** "Early Encounters in Native New York: Did Native People Really Sell Manhattan?" uses original illustrations, videos, maps, and interactives to help students explore how the 17th-century fur craze brought together two cultures—Native and Dutch—each with different values and ideas.
- **Dialogue toolkit.** This guide provides basic grounding in the practice of dialogue and includes a program model that educators can use in connection with the exhibition.
- **Recorded webinars.** This four-part series is designed for education professionals who teach about the Native nations of New York state. The webinars are available on the museum's YouTube page by searching "New York."

The exhibition format gave our collaborators freedom to experiment with comics beyond the printed page. The comic about the "sale" of Manhattan takes inspiration from a circus poster with a commanding visual presence several feet tall. Touchable shells and beads are embedded in a comic in the Poospatuck section about making wampum, which are shell beads strung in strands, belts, or sashes. Small objects are nestled in cases beneath flip panels in the Van Cortlandt Park section. And mid-20th century black-and-white photos of the Tuscarora community surround the Niagara comic.

Consultation and Collaboration

Early in the development process the exhibition team worried that using comics might raise unfounded concerns that the museum was making light of serious topics or presenting caricatures of Native people. The end result couldn't be further from that worry, which has everything to do with the collaborative process of creating the comics.

Overall, the exhibition's scholarship is informed by years (2012–2017) of consultations with Native communities conducted by former NMAI museum curator Gabrielle Tayac (Piscataway). An advisory



board of tribal nation representatives and community members reviewed all exhibition content, including the comic art and text.

The museum hired Dr. Lee Francis IV (Pueblo of Laguna) and Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo) to spearhead the writing and art direction of the four narrative comics. Both are creative professionals steeped in the world of Indigenous comic creation and critique. They brought in Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva), Dale Ray Deforest (Diné), Maria Wolf Lopez (Purépecha), and Arigon Starr (Kickapoo) as illustrators. Sheyahshe and Francis' choice of a different illustrator for each comic brought visual variety to the "Native New York" comics.

"We were fortunate to work with other Indigenous creatives on this project, all of whom belong to various tribal entities and groups," Sheyahshe says. "Not only do these factors increase and nuance both our creatorship and editorial voice, Lee and I have both a long academic history of and real-world experiences with a multitude of tribal groups. Above all, we worked toward making the stories themselves engaging, and also making sure our collective Indigenous voice was still broadcast as loud as possible."

The exhibition team provided the comic creators with a grounding in the messages and goals of the exhibition as well as text-based and visual background material to inform each comic. For the comic created for the Poospatuck section, this included speaking directly with Unkechaug Chief Harry Wallace and his daughter, Lydia Wallace Chavez (Unkechaug/Kainai Blackfoot [Blood]), to seek their permission to be characters in the comic. The two run Wampum Magic, an artisan wampum workshop on the Poospatuck reservation on Long Island.

The comic is a hero's journey in which Chavez is a trainee who must fashion a wampum belt in only four days for a tribal alliance meeting at her father's request. The event, and Chavez's status as a trainee, may be fictionalized, but the people, the setting, and the difficulty of learning how to shape wampum beads from shells couldn't be more true. Such a relatable account, filled with challenges, humor, and accomplishments, is exactly the kind of impactful storytelling NMAI envisioned when we decided to create original comics for "Native New York."

"Something that always guides me in this work, and something that NMAI has always excelled at, is not to fetishize tragedy," Francis says. "Pop culture in America fetishizes the idea of the dead and dying Indian. What was really beautiful was that the curatorial team allowed us to write stories of hope in many ways. Native folks are everywhere in New York. We're everywhere in America. We're still here and we've got bright, beautiful futures."

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Image courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian

Titled "Returning Home, Nurturing Community," this comic features a grandmother telling her grandchildren about the Tuscarora Nation's return to the north, becoming the sixth nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and supporting their community near Niagara Falls.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

With its museum theater program, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation cultivates creativity in interpretation without compromising trust.

By Ellen Morgan Peltz and Peter Inker

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation began an African American interpretation initiative in 1979. Ruthie Carter, Dylan Pritchard, Deborah Jones, Rex Ellis, and Eddie Allen (l to r) perform the "African Traditions" program in the early years of the initiative.

Image courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

On a crisp October morning in 2022, Caroline Edman and Eva Blomkvist were preparing to attend a piece of theater. Museum theater, that is.

Rather than settling into plush auditorium seats as the lights dimmed, the two women perched on a wooden bench outside a reconstructed 18th-century tavern in the Historic Area of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the world's largest American history museum. They were joined by a varied audience of visitors, including children, grandparents, couples, and college students, who gathered to experience a 20-minute scene identified on the schedule of daily programming simply as *Intersections 1781*.

Edman and Blomkvist were hoping for more than a theater production that morning. Museum professionals themselves, they had traveled more than 4,000 miles from Skansen, Sweden, the world's oldest open-air museum, where they hope to introduce a museum theater program of their own. They wanted answers: How would it be received? What sort of training did their staff need? And most importantly, would anyone—staff and visitors alike—trust theater to deliver accurate, fact-based history?

The Evolution of Our Theater Program

Museum theater has been a staple of Colonial Williamsburg's interpretive toolbox since 1979, when we introduced the African American interpretive program, which sought to tell the historical stories of Black people during colonial times. In 1994, Colonial Williamsburg premiered a controversial interpretation of an estate sale, which included the auction of four enslaved women and men, played by a group of courageous and talented African American performers. The Black community's opinion was split on whether it was a necessary, honest portrayal of some of the horrors of slavery, or a needless production that did nothing for Black identity or dignity. The program was only performed once, but the experience made a profound impact on the future of museum theater and first-person interpretation at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. It demonstrated how emotionally raw and immediate the events of 250 years ago can still be to communities that remain marginalized today.

Colonial Williamsburg began an American Indian interpretative program in 2003, and by 2016 three full-time members with Indigenous heritage had joined the initiative. As costumed interpreters, they utilize third-person interpretation to connect the past with present Indigenous perspectives. More Indigenous members have joined since, and in 2022, Colonial Williamsburg hired its first full-time research historian focused on Indigenous studies to support the team.

The Nation Builders initiative was introduced in 2005 to portray "founding fathers" like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. It also portrays African American preacher Gowan Pamphlet and Lydia Broadnax, enslaved cook to attorney George Wythe. Nation Builders perform scripted monologues and scenes as well as improvised first-person interpretation with guests. In 2022, Oconostota, the Cherokee War Chief of Chota, was added to the Nation Builders program.

The foundation's recent museum theater program, *Intersections 1781,* begins with the narrator welcoming the audience, providing a brief historical context to the year 1781 in Williamsburg, and introducing the audience to members of the community, all of whom are actors playing real people from the historic record. In this piece, a British lieutenant convinces Mingo, an enslaved man, to join the British Navy in exchange for his freedom. All the while, a second British soldier circles the two like a shark. The scene takes an unexpected and gut-wrenching turn when the lieutenant uses Mingo to re-enslave Samuel, a free Black man who refuses to join the British. Samuel is dragged off the street screaming, "Please get word to my wife!"

The play ends with a brief epilogue in which the narrator explains that the historic record makes no further mention of Samuel and asks the audience to consider what might have motivated enslaved individuals to join the British during the American revolution.

Museum Theater Best Practices

In discussing *Intersections 1781* with Edman and Blomkvist, the Colonial Williamsburg team highlighted what makes this piece—and museum theater in general—effective: grounding the production in primary source research, using complementary forms

Guests from Skansen, the world's oldest open-air museum, meet with Colonial Williamsburg staff.

Photo by Brendan Sostak, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

of interpretation to help establish trust, and using trained actors. In addition, museum theater works well when all participants are trained to think like a historian—assessing the sources, weighing the evidence, and providing new and more nuanced understandings of history that is often otherwise portrayed as "unambiguous."

Primary Source Research

History, as we know, is not just the collection of facts. It is an ever-moving understanding of the past, which is modified as new information becomes available or new questions are asked. Samuel and Mingo were real people whose names appear in primary sources from Williamsburg in the late 18th century. But because Mingo and Samuel were marginalized members of 18th-century Williamsburg's society, very little information about them beyond these basic facts exists in the historic record. This makes it difficult to share their stories in a way that captures the hearts and imaginations of the visitors as is possible with well-documented historical figures like Thomas Jefferson or George Washington.

Museum theater allows interpreters to take the few known facts about people who have been archivally silenced and reanimate them—literally re-member them—by putting those facts in a living, breathing human. Everything that is true of any human—they experience emotion, they feel pain, they have relationships—becomes true of Mingo and Samuel. We also know a lot about other African Americans of the period, which we can use to support how Mingo and Samuel may have behaved or been treated.

Complementary Forms of Interpretation

No matter how well researched an individual or event is, that research won't help establish trust unless it can be effectively shared. One of the unique challenges inherent to museum theater and first-person interpretation is that the actor-interpreter remains in

character, making it difficult to share the historical basis of the interpretation with an audience.

To address this, Colonial Williamsburg often employs complementary modes of interpretation. If *Intersections* used only first-person interpretation, an audience might walk away from it thinking that Samuel and Mingo are fictional characters invented to serve a fictionalized story. While the actors know this is not true—there are footnotes in the script referencing the primary sources where Samuel and Mingo appear—the audience has no idea.

In *Intersections*, the program's narrator breaks away from first-person interpretation (still playing a character but speaking to the audience outside her 18th-century context) at several points to provide historical context about the setting and to share information from the historic record about the characters. This allows the audience to connect with the play emotionally while also offering historical accuracy, ultimately creating a guest experience that is meaningful and educational.

Many different pairings of interpretive modes can achieve this level of transparency and trust-building. If your audience is composed primarily of children, you could look for ways to make the primary source tangible and experiential. If you are in a space that supports multimedia, consider projecting primary source text or images behind the theatrical presentation. If budget allows, you might send everyone home with a handout that lists primary sources. Or you could offer a QR code that connects them to a resource page online. Ultimately, museum theater is most useful when it is considered a tool of—and not the key to—effective interpretation.

Using Actors

Over the years, Colonial Williamsburg has hired actor-interpreters from a wide variety of backgrounds including education, history, and theater. In general, it has been easier to provide staff who already have a background in theater with the training and research tools they need to be effective museum theater interpreters rather than providing historians and educators with the skills they need to be effective actors. Theatrical storytelling also requires playwrights and directors, and often one of the actors fills all three roles.

Building a team of museum theater actors from the ground up can be a daunting task, since this often involves hiring a new type of employee. Partnering with local artists—collegiate theater departments, for example—is a cost-effective way to integrate theater into a museum's interpretive toolbox.

Training for Theater Participants

Regardless of an actor-interpreter's background, ongoing content training is an essential part of a museum theater program. Traditional theater invites artists and audiences alike to accept as true the world of the play. In museum theater, creative choices about setting, characters, clothing, and music that aren't backed by primary sources need to be justified in order to maintain trust. This is a team effort—artistic directors, actor-interpreters, and historians working collectively to ensure that a piece of museum theater is sound history as well as a good story with relatable characters, a clear conflict and resolution, a relevant theme, and at least one moment that will challenge an audience to reexamine their thinking.

Colonial Williamsburg is currently implementing a new approach to training that will provide all employees with the resources they need to view program development and implementation like a historian. The foundation defines interpretation as "the process of communicating information about our resources to the visitor with the purpose of enhancing meaning for the visitor." Interpretation includes both interpersonal interpretation between staff and visitors as well as non-personal interpretation, such as information boards or the appearance of clothing or buildings.

Museum theater is considered a formal interpretation where the presentation is a set length with interpretive objectives that vary from production to production but generally focus on the five themes of freedom, revolution, community, ingenuity, and democracy.

We are working toward having a team of stakeholders, including historians and program planners and developers, set these objectives in advance and then guide the actor-interpreters through the complexities of the past. With a concept and source material in place, the playwright can work their magic. Throughout the process, the team will review

An audience experiences Colonial Williamsburg's museum theater programming during *Resolved: An American Experiment*, performed in the General Court of the historic Capitol.

Photo by Brendan Sostak, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

the scripts and critique the performances to ensure the final product is accurate and meets the planned interpretive objectives.

The Show Goes On

Edman and Blomkvist spent four days visiting Colonial Williamsburg sites, seeing our programming in action, and talking with historians and other staff members from departments across the foundation, including guest experience, training, museum theater, group interpretation, and site interpretation. They returned home to Skansen with pages of notes and countless ideas about how to translate what works for Colonial Williamsburg to their own organization and audiences.

Their visit allowed us to share what we have learned over the past 40 years as we've integrated museum theater into our interpretation. It gave us a clearer sense of where we currently stand and are headed. As we look toward America's 250th anniversary in 2026, we are focusing on how we can help our audiences better connect the stories of the founding generation to a broader 18th century historical context and ultimately to their own 21st century lives.

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FINDING COMMON GROUND

After a reinterpretation process, Historic Sotterley now tells the stories of all the people who lived on its land.

By Nancy Easterling

Historic Sotterley

Sotterley education programs bring the past to life for students on a field trip.

The slave cabin and manor house represent the people whose stories are now told at Historic Sotterley.

Storytelling is one of the most elemental functions of museums. Far more than simply providing facts, storytelling provides context for curated items and places by bringing to life the people they represent. But what do you do when you realize your stories are not as inclusive, honest, or transparent as they should be? Where does the change need to begin?

Historic Sotterley, which includes a circa 1703 historic house, 1830s slave cabin, and more than 20 other authentic structures on 94 acres in Hollywood, Maryland, was faced with this challenge. Sotterley today is a museum site with five full-time and seven part-time positions, a National Historic Landmark, and a UNESCO Site of Memory for the Routes of Enslaved Peoples that interprets 300 years of our shared history, including the realities of slavery that existed on this former plantation for over 160 years. Sotterley did not always tell this full story.

While Historic Sotterley is still improving how we connect to visitors, we have accomplished a lot since we began our reinterpretation process. This journey has not been easy because many of the stories can be difficult to tell. But, as many other museums and historic sites are realizing, it's a critical undertaking.

Where We Were

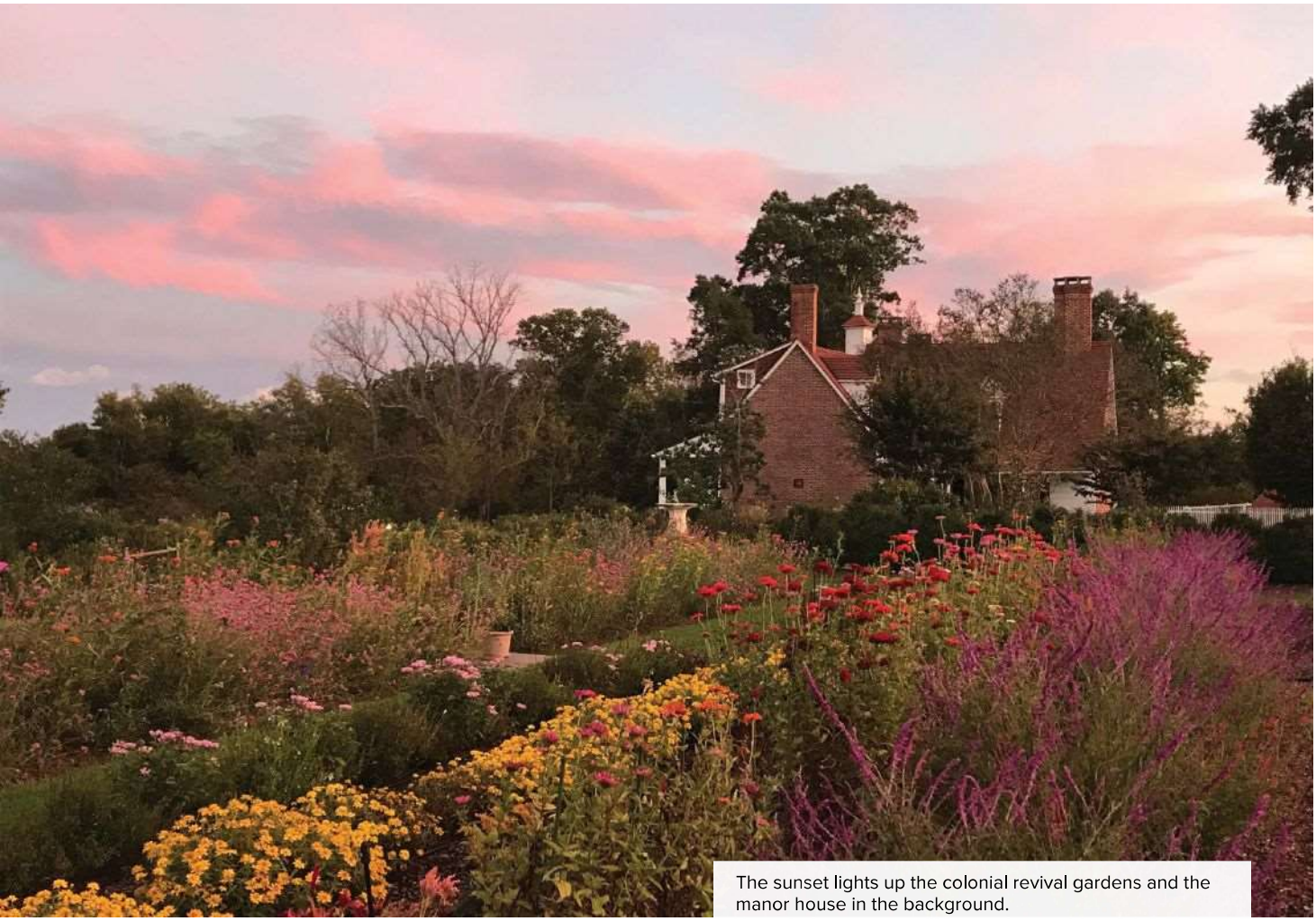
Sotterley's last owner, Mabel Ingalls, who passed away in 1993, deeded the site to the nonprofit she had created during her lifetime. The board of trustees soon realized, however, that Sotterley's visitation revenue did not cover its many expenses, and the board contemplated selling the site. In 1996, Sotterley was designated as one of "America's 11 Most Endangered Places" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Many people came to Sotterley's aid during this time, but two remarkable board members stood out: John Hanson Briscoe, former Maryland Speaker of the House, who was descended from the last enslaved-owning family, and Agnes Kane Callum, noted genealogist and researcher of Black history in Maryland, who was descended from those who were enslaved at Sotterley by Briscoe's family. These unlikely descendant allies and good friends brought attention to the site, and this helped the board procure key grants and donations that offered the breathing room needed to set up membership, donor, and event programs to provide a revenue stream. Furthermore, they started a model for descendant engagement that has continued over the past quarter of a century.

The stories Sotterley first told were derived largely from those passed down over the past century. While some were based on facts about the site, they also included many Colonial Revival stories (romanticized stories of the past sometimes only loosely based on facts), legends, and myths similar to those from other historic sites across the nation. They primarily focused on the manor house and the owners, engaging visitors with tales of hiding from pirates in secret passages and carving names into windows with diamond engagement rings.

Because Callum had provided Sotterley with research and oral histories, slavery was mentioned on tours, though often in ways that perpetuated the "benevolent owner" myth that so many plantation sites chose to tell. Interestingly, the education programs, which are still serving students today, were founded on Callum's research and included more information about slavery and the lives of the enslaved. While the organization wanted to be more inclusive in the way it told its stories throughout all of its programming, figuring out where to begin was daunting.

Historic Sotterley



The sunset lights up the colonial revival gardens and the manor house in the background.

Historic Sotterley

TOUR REVISION TIPS

Going through a reinterpretation process will affect everyone involved in your institution, particularly your docents and donors. Following is some advice for how to navigate a guided tour revision.

Clearly define why a new tour is needed. What are the problems with the current interpretation, and what are the goals for the new interpretation?

Bring the right stakeholders into the process. Who does the organization need to be part of the process? This may not be the same people who want to be involved. Bring in an outside consultant to navigate this. Do not try to tackle this internally; you need an objective, outside voice with experience in this process to mediate and guide the group.

Be prepared to make hard choices. Not everyone will be happy when certain elements are added or no longer included. Be as transparent as possible about why the changes must be made.

Provide the necessary training for docents so they become comfortable with the material. Some docents may decide to move on. Honor their service and continue with the new interpretation.

Be as transparent as possible with donors about the change. Have your interpretive team work with the development team to ensure they are well-versed in what is taking place and why. That said, accept that you may still lose some donors who are unwilling to embrace the change.

Include the changes you make in all elements of your site's interpretation. This will not be easy as it dictates that the website, along with many brochures, signage, and programs, will need to change. Prioritize and tackle these projects one by one.

Celebrate your hard work. This process might be difficult, but your stories will be more inclusive and will better serve your mission.

Our Storytelling Evolution

Our first step was to start a reinterpretation plan. Should Sotterley still cover 300 years—a large span of time to handle interpretively? What should be Sotterley's core stories and messaging? And just as important as deciding what needed to be included, we had to choose which stories would now be set aside.

Through a grant, we hired a consultant to help answer these questions. In the end, the consultant determined that covering the expansive time period was important since Sotterley was not tied to one person or one era. The site needed to talk about all who had lived and labored at Sotterley, from its earliest days when slavery was the economic driver to the years that followed when Sotterley and the nation continued to be shaped by it.

Some things became obvious when we holistically looked at Historic Sotterley's practices and operations. Only those who came for a guided tour of the site would know or understand its ties to slavery. People who took self-guided tours experienced the site's beauty and the authenticity of its structures, but they did not come away with the knowledge that slavery existed there or gain an understanding of the lives of the enslaved.

We realized that not only did we need to overhaul the tour, but we needed to ensure that slavery was covered across all platforms—in the tours (both guided and self-guided), exhibits, signage, brochures, programming, and website. One project at a time, as funding for projects became available through grants and donations, Sotterley started to change its interpretations.

One of the most significant changes happened when Sotterley was awarded an IMLS grant to create a new guided tour, a new self-guided tour, and an introductory video to be used both on the website and in the visitor center. This would help ensure that all visitors learned the realities of Sotterley's history no matter how they chose to experience the site. The next step was choosing a team to lead this reinterpretation.

A fish-eye view of the Slave Cabin's interior where people can further connect to the realities of our shared history.

Rob Plant

In the manor house, stories are told of the owners as well as those who built the structure and labored in it.

Historic Sotterley

Few processes are more painful for a museum than a tour revision. Even in a museum dedicated to giving a more honest and inclusive interpretation, docents, donors, and supporters who are passionate about historic architecture or collections can be reluctant to give up favorite elements of the guided tour to make room to tell more difficult stories.

We assembled a team to work through our tour revision process that included the project director of the grant, who was a college professor and former trustee; several current trustees, two of whom were docents and served on the Education Committee; Sotterley's Education Director and Executive Director; and a consultant who was a museum studies specialist. Their work was guided by these foundational questions: What takeaways should every visitor have at the end of every tour? Would visitors gain a more honest understanding of the past from the revised tour?

After the revision was finalized, we needed to retrain the docents, including requiring sensitivity and awareness training. Not all docents were comfortable relaying the new stories, and some left their roles. But those who continued became invested in the new material and more comfortable with it over time.

Descendants Leading the Way

This first critical step led to other changes. Historic Sotterley has recrafted its signage and brochures, overhauled its website, and created new programming and living histories, such as "The Choice," which told of the enslaved who escaped to fight for the British in the War of 1812. We installed permanent exhibits: "Land, Lives and Labor" brings to life the people upon whose backs the site was built, and the Slave Cabin exhibit allows all visitors inside this hallowed space. Each addition has brought Sotterley one step closer to its goal of providing every visitor with a holistic and inclusive interpretation of our past, but there is still much to accomplish.

Over the years, more descendants have become part of board leadership, served on committees, and taken part in programming. Their ancestors represented all aspects of Sotterley's past: enslaved, owners, and post-emancipation laborers. Historic Sotterley began a formal Descendants' Project in 2017 and now has over 200 self-identified descendants who are part of Sotterley's ongoing story. Their personal stories, genealogical research, and knowledge are shaping how Sotterley's stories are being told. They have been some of our best sources of new information about our history, which we have incorporated into our tours and educational programming.

Most importantly, the descendants project provides a model for how people can come together in honest dialogue to foster understanding and healing. Sotterley's Common Ground Initiative, now in its fourth year, does just this by bringing people together to provide education and resources that foster dialogue, promote social equity, and open a path to healing. Descendant involvement and leadership in this initiative are creating a way for people to learn about our shared history through a perspective other than their own.

Storytelling can seem like such a basic element of a museum's mission, but museums must have the courage and conviction to invite the right stakeholders into the process. Only then can you give voice to the honest and inclusive stories that every museum must tell.

Nancy Easterling is Executive Director of Historic Sotterley, Inc., in Hollywood, Maryland. She thanks board members and descendants Jan Briscoe and Gwen Bankins for their contributions to this article. Reach Nancy at execdirector@sotterley.org.

A visitor to the Children's Museum Houston solves a logic puzzle to properly reset optical circuit boards in the SECRET mainframe.

All images courtesy of the Children's Museum Houston

A SECRET Mission

At the Children's Museum Houston, stories are hidden in plain sight.

By Keith Ostfeld

In 2007, Children's Museum Houston broke ground on an expansion. The construction crew digging the hole for the new building's foundation uncovered a large vein of crystals that appeared to generate energy. The museum consulted the US Department of Geosciences, whose scientists confirmed that the crystals are a previously unknown form of quartz. With local universities, the museum developed a research agenda to determine how to harness the energy they generated.

Arcturus Vex, the lead researcher, was awed by the power of the crystals. But after his extreme experiments destroyed the lab, Vex was fired. Determined to regain control, he formed the Ridiculously Intelligent Villainous Agent League (aka RIVAL) and began to lay siege to the museum to access the crystals.

In response to RIVAL's unprovoked aggressions, the museum established the Special Elite Crime Resolution and Espionage Team (aka SECRET) to discover and thwart RIVAL's advances. But because the crystals were in a children's museum, adult agents would be easily spotted by RIVAL operatives. As such, the museum enlists kids as SECRET agents to fulfill various undercover missions to protect the museum and the crystals underneath it.

At least, that's the lore.

What is SECRET?

SECRET is a serious game Children's Museum Houston developed for kids ages 6 and older that features the timeless theme of good vs. evil wrapped in a compelling secret agent narrative. During each roughly 60-minute mission, kids, acting in the role of SECRET agents, and their families are immersed in a world hidden in plain sight in which they use critical thinking, observation, deductive reasoning, creativity, and other skills to thwart RIVAL's schemes.

The game takes place throughout the museum via a mix of digital and physical interactions. It blends the problem-solving experiences of puzzle hunts and escape rooms by tasking kids with finding clues, solving logic puzzles, and pursuing challenges that drive each mission to its conclusion. The game system records each player's progress through RFID wrist bands so it can assign them the next mission (they get progressively more difficult) on future visits. The SECRET game consists of three main parts: the story and substories (nine missions), the interactives, and the tools (or gadgets).

SECRET interactives are peppered throughout the museum in underutilized spaces (hallways and corners) and existing exhibitions to maximize the experience. The interactive pieces blend into the background of the galleries, challenging players to find them while nonplayers overlook their existence. During a mission, players use at least 10 different interactives, often traversing the entire museum to find them.

Gadgets, like a UV light seen here, are essential tools to complete missions.

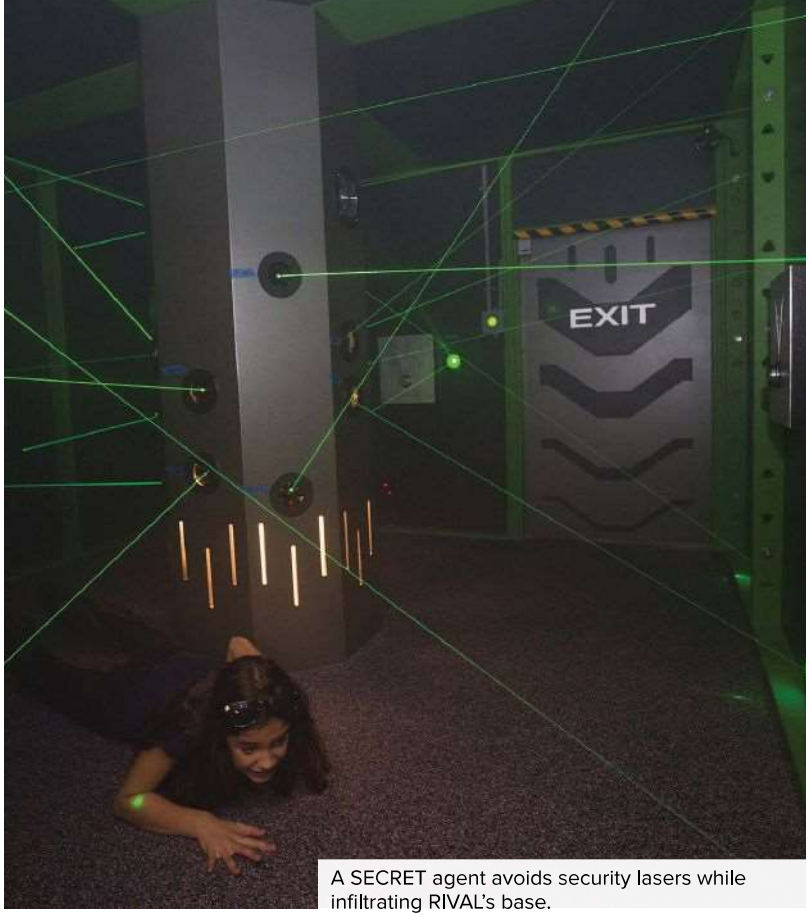
- Primary digital interactives are networked into the game and directly affect a player's progress. These activities include redirecting radio frequencies using RIVAL's control panel or adjusting the flow of the crystals' energy through SECRET's energy conduits.
- Secondary digital interactives are not networked but provide key information that aids a player's progress. These include rewiring a SECRET electrical panel to get a code or conducting experiments on the crystals at the crystal well.
- Static interactives, like signs and mechanical interactions, provide clues to solving a particular problem. For example, players find signs with nanite codes or get settings off the inside of RIVAL corruptors.

Gadgets are an essential element of all secret agent experiences. All players are issued a "codex"—an RFID band that gives them access to SECRET HQ and the primary digital interactives. In addition, each SECRET mission uses one to three gadgets with at least one assigned at the start of the mission and the rest collected during the mission. The gadgets are low-cost items such as a USB drive, red-filter lenses, decoder cards, and polarized glasses. Each gadget is integral to completing a mission, its purpose unveiled as the agent progresses through the mission.

At the heart of SECRET is the narrative, which includes the background lore. Each mission also has its own story, such as discovering and disabling stealth drones or becoming a double agent to spy on RIVAL. The missions' stories unfold through interactions with staff, printed case files, and digital narratives provided by animated characters at check-in kiosks in SECRET HQ. Filled with excitement, intrigue, over-the-top plots, and a lot of puns, each mission is a subplot narrative that helps the agents find interactives, use their gadgets, and solve puzzles while keeping them energized, engaged, and immersed in their role as SECRET agents.

The SECRET Experience

SECRET missions begin at the museum's box office (where visitors pay for SECRET participation in addition to the regular entry fee). Kids are covertly welcomed with, "We're especially glad you're here today. The museum is under siege, and we need your help. Would you be interested in becoming a secret agent and helping protect the museum?" Once they accept, they are handed a card with an odd "C"-like symbol, the SECRET logo, and given a special code phrase: "What do you call a secret agent under water?" They are directed to check in at the Top Secret Gear Shop.



A SECRET agent avoids security lasers while infiltrating RIVAL's base.

When families walk into the Top Secret Gear Shop, it appears to be an adjunct to the museum's gift shop focused on secret agent and spy gear. But when they present the card and say the code phrase to the salesperson, the employee reveals themselves to be a SECRET recruiter, responding to the code phrase with "James Pond." They explain how thrilled they are to have an agent on hand because a dire situation is unfolding.

Agents are issued their codex, which is set for their first mission or, for returning agents, reenabled with their newest assigned mission. The recruiter pulls out a briefcase, dramatically opening it to reveal the agent's gadget for their mission and their case file, which will guide them through the mission. New players are briefed on how to use the case file and the enclosed map. They are then directed to a plain door with a glowing SECRET logo.

NARRATIVE TIPS FOR INTERACTIVE GAMES

- **Go big.** The more details you have, the more robust your game world will become.
- **Share sparingly.** Let players play—share only what is essential to keep the game moving.
- **Make it compelling.** Make participants excited to play your game from start to finish.
- **Make it relatable.** Help players slip into the role created for them.
- **Test robustly.** Test all aspects with your target audience.

As they press their codex to the logo, the door unlocks, revealing the hidden SECRET HQ. Inside are several check-in kiosks along with a giant monitor that displays mission updates and a screen showing current agents' progress on their missions. Using their codex, they activate a check-in kiosk screen where the digital narrative takes over. They are greeted by Director Angstrom, the head of SECRET, who helps new agents select their code names and introduces their mission. At some point during each briefing, Director Angstrom is joined by Agent Gemini, who is the main guide through the missions.

Each mission follows the same story beats: defining the problem, figuring out a solution, and implementing the solution. Each beat starts and ends with participants reporting to SECRET HQ where Director Angstrom and Agent Gemini help progress the mission storyline. Vex also makes regular appearances to taunt SECRET and the agents.

The printed case file guides agents through each beat with instructions, places to record data, prompts to use gadgets, and puzzles whose solutions propel the mission. Agents may be tasked with using a UV light to follow hidden trails, analyze wavelength readouts, download a computer virus, hack into a RIVAL control panel, record stealth drone serial numbers, create a foil hat to protect themselves against mind control, and avoid a laser security system as they infiltrate the RIVAL base. At the end of their mission, agents are rewarded with digital badges for missions completed and skills earned.

SECRET Origins

The museum's 2009 Strategic Plan called for new "high mission, high margin" experiences, prioritizing gamified interactions that would attract and engage visitors ages 8 and above. Schell Games joined as our core partner, and together we developed the project over 15 months. We assembled focus groups of kids in our targeted age range to test different scenarios based on popular shows, movies, and books, including eccentric inventors, outer-space missions, time travel, superheroes, magic/wizardry, and secret agents.

Once we confirmed the concept, we reenlisted the focus groups to help develop the secret agent theme. We started with narrative elements: who are the protagonists, what are they defending, who guides the players, and what are the antagonists' motivations. We tested visuals: the appearances of the protagonists and antagonists, blending the SECRET elements into the rest of the museum, and SECRET and RIVAL design elements. And we explored the experience: what do kids expect to do as secret agents, what is the appropriate level of story detail, how can we progress the mission, and how can we keep it exciting in an interactive environment like Children's Museum Houston?

We created an initial mission as a proof of concept for the SECRET experience and tested different types of interactives, age appropriateness, ideal mission length, and preferred types of puzzles. Using this data, we generated multiple storylines, which families tested. In the end, we had six initial missions.

With a narrative backbone confirmed, we assessed puzzles for appropriate complexity while ensuring

they meshed with the story. Simultaneously, we designed, prototyped, and fabricated all the interactive elements, testing each element with its related puzzle. The first six SECRET missions launched in 2015, followed by three additional missions in 2018.

SECRET Impact

Parents appreciate the educational value of SECRET, typically commenting on how kids are using problem-solving and critical-thinking skills in the experience. In evaluations related to the 2015 initial installation and the 2018 game expansion, 86 percent of parents described direct ties between what kids were doing in SECRET and what they were learning in school. One parent said, "My kids were forced to follow directions, focus on a task, pay attention to detail, use math and deduction, decipher codes and patterns, convert normal items into spy gear, and work as a team."

Essential to the educational value is the compelling nature of the game. In our evaluation of SECRET, 98 percent of families agreed that the experience was immersive and engaging for all genders. About 20 percent of families with children over age 6 visiting the museum opt to pay for a SECRET mission, and about a quarter of those agents return within six months to complete at least one additional mission.

Many families specifically cited the importance of mission storylines, describing how kids' imaginations were engaged while they were on the missions. Many parents shared how their kids invented their own missions at home using the gear they acquired. The importance of the narrative that drives each mission is best described by one agent: "It's like a comic book come to life!"

Keith Ostfeld is Director of Exhibit Development at Children's Museum Houston in Texas. Reach him at kto@cmhouston.org.

Case files guide SECRET agents through their missions.

New Jobs

Lisa Abel, *Chief Development Officer,* San Antonio Museum of Art, TX

Natalie Mault Mead, *Chief Curator,* Huntsville Museum of Art, AL

Kurt T. Steinberg, *Chief Operating Officer,* Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA

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Joshua Campbell Torrance, *Executive Director,* Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, CT

Jessa J. Krick, *Director of Interpretation, Collection and Archives*, The Rosen House, Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, Katonah, NY

Valéria Piccoli, *Ken and Linda Cutler Chair of Arts of the Americas and Curator of Latin American Art,* Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN

Adeze Wilford, *Curator,* Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, FL

In Memoriam

Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko passed away on January 21, 2023, surrounded by her husband, son, and friends. She worked in museums and with professional associations for more than 20 years. Since 2001, she led institutional change as the director of museums such as the Abbe Museum and Illinois State Museum. She also was part of a vanguard of systemic change across the field: she raised funds and created tools for small museums and sites; worked tirelessly on decolonization efforts; and shared knowledge and experience through board service, talks at national gatherings, and publications she authored or edited, most recently, *The Inclusive Museum Leader* (2021). Catlin-Legutko's life work transcends any one organization or community. She will be best remembered because she used her power to help change lives, inspire movements, and challenge the status quo.

Edward Arnold Munyer passed away on January 27, 2023. He worked in museums for over 30 years and was actively involved with the American Alliance of Museums and the Midwest and Southeast Museum Conferences. He served on the AAM Board of Directors, was a founder of the Standing Professional Committee on Education (EdCom), and helped organize the Visitor Research and Evaluation Standing Professional Committee (CARE). Highlights of his early career include serving as Associate Curator of Zoology at the Illinois State Museum, as the Director of the VU Museum in Indiana, and as the Coordinator of Education at the Florida State Museum in Gainesville. From 1981 until his retirement in 1999, he served as the Assistant Museum Director of the Illinois State Museum in Springfield. Munyer authored or co-authored over 30 articles, many of which are still in use today.

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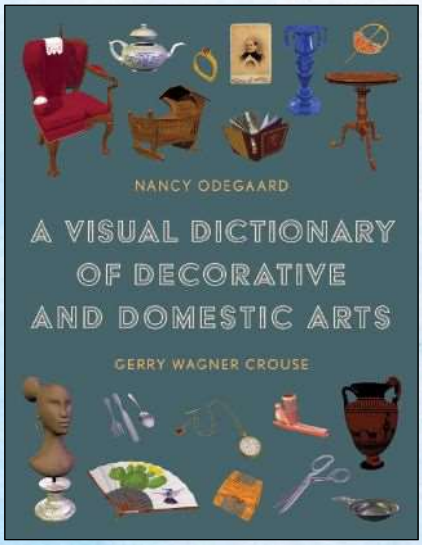

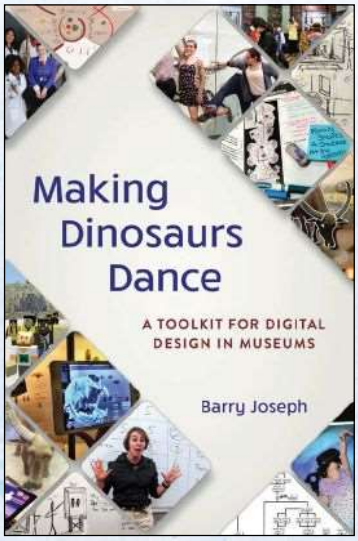

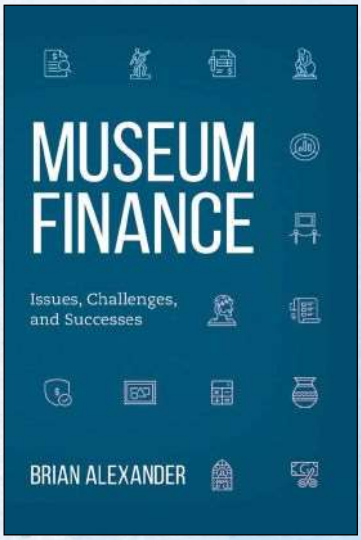

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