

# Making Objects Matter

A Case Study on Historical Violins  
and Personal Meaning

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A welcoming forest scene greeted visitors. The so-called "Musical Woods" (the forest in Italy's Fiemme Valley) is a source of spruce wood for violin makers. We evoked the feeling of being in a forest by using a backdrop image, gobo floor lighting, and audiovisual content.



### About Our Partners



#### Musico del Violino

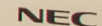
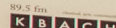
For five centuries, Cremona, Italy, has been the world's capital of violin making. The city's Museo del Violino celebrates this heritage and welcomes visitors to its exhibition halls, research laboratory, cultural and study centers, and world-class auditorium. The Museo del Violino presents some of the greatest works by luthiers from the Cremonese workshop of the Amati, Guarnieri, and Stradivari families. Other highlights include original models and tools used by Antonio Stradivari in his workshop, formal competitions from all over the world, and winning instruments of the International Historical Competition of Violin Making "Antonio Stradivari" (called "Tremonti"). Multimedia installations allow visitors, from novices to experts, from children to adults, to enjoy an enlightening visit in which history, instruments, techniques, sounds and images converge.

#### friends of STRADIVARI

Launched in 2009, the Friends of Stradivari is an international community of people who share a passion for violin making and who collect, play, and safeguard instruments made by the great masters of the Cremonese school.

The Friends facilitate a permanent exhibition housed in Cremona's Museo del Violino. Their growing collection includes important instruments made by the venerable Cremonese masters owned by private and public collectors worldwide.

### Exhibition Sponsors





## This article looks at how the work and legacy of Italian violin maker Antonio Stradivari, or “Stradivarius,” is represented in temporary exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>

I write from my perspective as the curator of the exhibition I’m about to describe, and also from my perspective as an interpretive planner concerned with visitor-centered content. My primary goal is to create opportunities for visitors to insert themselves within an exhibition story, and to empower visitors to seek and find content that is resonant and meaningful on a personal level, regardless of preexisting interest or knowledge before their content encounter. The methods employed in this project could potentially be adapted for interpreting many object types, in particular when considering how to make historical objects relevant to contemporary lives.

My case study is the exhibition *Stradivarius: Origins and Legacy of the Greatest Violin Maker* at the Musical Instrument Museum (MIM) in Phoenix, Arizona ([intro image](#)). The exhibition ran from January to June 2016, and was a partnership between MIM, the “Friends of Stradivari,” and the *Museo del Violino* in Cremona, Italy.<sup>2</sup> As the in-house curator for the exhibition, I selected themes and content and developed the narrative, but content took shape through consultation

with MIM’s in-house designers, educators, audiovisual staff, and curatorial team members (hence I often use the term “we” in this article). Our partners provided subject matter expertise, coordinated loans for 10 instruments from private and museum collections, and provided artifacts associated with the Cremonese tradition of violin making, such as tools, patterns, and violin forms from the workshop of Antonio Stradivari. The oldest artifact was a 1566 violin by Andrea Amati, the newest a 2012 viola by Ulrike Dederer.

### Violin Exhibition Paradigms

The violin maker Antonio Stradivari (ca. 1644–1737) is among the most frequently represented subjects in music museum exhibitions. Commonly referred to by his Latin moniker “Stradivarius,” his name is widely recognizable. His is one among only a few instrument maker names to enter popular, global lexicon, often used in common parlance as a term implying the highest of quality. His work, and that of his predecessors and contemporaries in the Italian city of Cremona, remains a topic of fascination for violin specialists and nonspecialists alike.

The ever-evolving mystique, elitism, and public fascination associated with Stradivari’s life and work is rooted in 19th-century culture of art collecting and dealing, when a small group of dealers, desiring to inflate sale prices, formulated myths of the master’s mysterious techniques and genius to add cache and desirability. Ongoing public fascination has been spurred by frequent media coverage of lost or stolen “Strads.” The perception of this legacy as belonging to the financial elite is perpetuated by the ever-climbing prices that his instruments fetch at auction.

1 The maker and his musical instruments are both commonly referred to as “Stradivarius,” the Latin cognate of the name “Stradivari” (i.e. “Stradivarius lived in Cremona” or “she plays a Stradivarius”).

2 The “Friends of Stradivari” is an international network of people who collect, play, safeguard, and study work by instrument makers of Cremona. The *Museo del Violino* in Cremona houses a permanent collection and loaned instruments in its permanent and temporary display spaces.

The maker's legacy is kept exclusive to the financial elite by the high prices of tickets to attend concerts performances of musicians who play his instruments (making the legacy of Stradivarius accessible only to those who can afford it).

With few exceptions, temporary exhibitions further contribute to exclusivity. They represent historical Italian violins as the domain of the financial or cultural elite, and perpetuate these representations through a historical paradigm of museology including content choices, display styles, and interpretative approaches. Typical design/interpretive models draw from "fine art" and artifact display methods, where objects are the focal point and finality of the conversation. The primary thrust is comparative: one maker versus another maker, this time period from that, and examples to fill each "category" of maker or time period. The resulting design esthetic is that of a room filled with violins; a situation where experts can "decode" the differences between objects (and the meaning of each difference), but where nonexperts perceive a room filled with identical-looking objects. Such exhibitions align with object-centered models of museum learning that assume a "majority of visitors are motivated to visit the museum to gather object information," and which focus on *what* people learn "rather than *how* people learn."<sup>3</sup> Exclusivity is perpetuated through reliance on language and categories defined by subject matter experts, with few opportunities for visitors to understand possible meanings of the legacy in their own lives.

Museums also tend to represent the world of violins as a primarily (if not exclusively)

male domain. Even though women have been important players in the continued legacy of Cremonese string instruments (as makers, collectors, musicians, and promoters), exhibitions almost exclusively privilege male-centric perspectives and rely almost entirely on the lives and perspectives of male makers, male collectors, and male musicians as sources and mediators of information. The air of exclusivity is further entrenched by the lack of critical contextualization about financial "value" and the cultural currency that these objects seem to embody within the public imagination. Price acts as an additional factor in distancing visitors from content: average exhibition catalogue prices and associated programming prices (usually concert tickets) range into the hundreds of dollars – making them inaccessible to visitors of limited means. Combined, these trends perpetuate a culture of exclusivity, distance visitors from the story of Stradivarius, and widen the gap of "belonging" between object and visitor. The overall message to visitors is that the Stradivarius legacy is one of priceless artifacts that they might admire at a distance, but which actually belongs to an exclusive circle of elite (and male) collectors, connoisseurs, makers, and musicians.

### **Accessible, Inviting, and Relatable**

The Musical Instrument Museum's objective was to create an accessible, object-driven, gender-inclusive, visitor-centered (and affordable) exploration of the ongoing legacy of Stradivarius. The term "accessible" in this case implies making information appear welcoming, approachable, digestible, and personally meaningful. Our goal was for visitors to see themselves within the legacy of Cremonese instrument making, and to realize it as a legacy that could be meaningful to everyone, regardless of background or personal interest.

<sup>3</sup> Merilee Mostov, "Adopting New Habits for Visitor-Centered Learning," in *The Manual of Museum Learning*, eds. Brad King and Barry Lord (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 165.

The exhibition's main messages put human action and visitor identity front and center. They were: 1) Physical objects, cultural currency, and market value are results of human action. They are created and shaped by humans. 2) You (the visitor) may be surprised that this story has something to offer you, that you have things in common with people who are involved with the legacy of Stradivarius. This messaging helped us to humanize the story, and to demystify rather than mythologize. We did not wish to represent objects as inherently mysterious, valuable, or "better than other violins," which are misconceptions that I found to be commonplace. Instead, we prompted visitors to consider why ideas of value exist in relation to this story, and *why* these particular instruments are thought of as important even centuries after the death of their maker.

The museum set the exhibition's entry and family programming fees at price points that we hoped would be accessible to visitors of modest means, and priced the exhibition book at less than \$10 (USD). Whereas typical string instrument exhibition catalogues present violin research and physical or historical data, our book kept with our mandate of visitor-centered content, presenting a widely resonant story that invoked themes and human-centered stories from the exhibition itself.

To ensure that visitors with a broad range of education levels and English language capabilities could understand gallery content, we used inviting, familiar, plain language (grade eight level on the Flesch-Kincaid measure). We crafted each text panel as a story with one specific theme, using anywhere between 124 and 250 words (figs. 1, 2, & 3). The designer inserted plenty of "breathing room" in between text or

video content, which made content appear "easily conquerable" (a term I often use), meaning that content does not appear cumbersome or overwhelming, as opposed to clustering copious information within a small space which appears a daunting task requiring excessive work on the part of the visitor.

Four approaches gave grounding and thrust to the development of visitor-centred content. These four approaches were combined, weighed, balanced, and brought to life through intense collaboration with a variety of professionals who then created engaging delivery: gallery designers, photographers, filmmakers, conservators, archivists, violin makers, and professional musicians.

The first approach was to gather perspectives and perceptions from the public on this topic. This was gleaned through informal conversations. Over a nine-month period, I instigated casual conversation about the name "Stradivarius" with people from all walks of life in a variety of environments. My questions included: What ideas did the name conjure? What do they know about the name? What are things they have always been curious about when it comes to Stradivarius? Through dialogue, I was able to gauge some of the perceptions and points of curiosity in the public imagination. The responses shared with me helped me to decide which big ideas I wanted the exhibition to address.

The second guiding element was knowledge and nuance provided by experts in the violin world. This brought sophistication to the story and also an added burst of energy; people in the violin world are passionate about the topic and they readily convey their passion when asked. Visitors found that passion, when translated

figs. 1, 2, & 3. Gallery text drew from first-person narratives and familiar or pop-culture tropes. It invoked language that invited, engaged, and validated nonspecialist perspectives.

## *Stradivari vs. del Gesù*

Dedication to one's craft often inspires passionate allegiances to one tool or another. We can all think of tools that we prefer as opposed to another:

*Canon vs. Nikon, Mac vs. PC*

A kind-spirited rivalry persists today between musicians who prefer playing instruments by *Stradivari* and those who prefer violins by the rogue genius known as *Guarneri del Gesù*.



The "Artot-Alard" Violin, 1728  
Antonio Stradivari

The "Prince Doria" Violin, 1734  
Bartolomeo Giuseppe Guarneri "del Gesù"

## The "Artot-Alard" Violin, 1728 Antonio Stradivari (c. 1644–1737)

Endre Balogh. Courtesy of the Friends of Stradivari

If this is the first time you have looked upon the handiwork of this master, you may be thinking "it just looks like a violin." If so, you have made an astute observation that speaks to the immense impact Stradivari has had on violin making from his time forward.

## Violin, 1973 Bruce Carlson (1947–)

Private Collection

My uncle dropped off his huge classical music collection at our house when I was about eleven. I started listening, and I couldn't get enough of it. Later, I was in the US Navy for four years. I went to meteorology school and they sent me to Guam, out in the middle of the Pacific. There was not too much to do on the island; I swam and read in my spare time. During my reading, I discovered a book by the Hill brothers on Antonio Stradivari. I'd always enjoyed building things with my hands, so I actually tried to make a violin while I was there. In 1970, I found a violin maker in Flint, Michigan, and he got me started. I entered the International School of Violin Making in Cremona in 1972. I now call Cremona home.



Bruce Carlson, American luthier based in Cremona

*The fourth approach for visitor-centered content was to humanize the story of violins by making it about people, not about “things.”*

through video interviews, to be infectious. Our third element was to create visitor-centered content by situating objects within universally recognizable themes. Themes included family ties, quest for origins, insatiable human curiosity, pursuit of perfection, and overcoming obstacles. These align with themes found in universally popular “heroic quest” myths and therefore created a veneer of familiarity for visitors. We also believed they would motivate visitors to become emotionally invested in our story because they could see themes from their own lives reflected back at them, and could therefore become part of the quest.

**A Story About People, Not Things**

The fourth approach for visitor-centered content was to humanize the story of violins by making it about people, not about “things.” We achieved this through the perspectives of ethnomusicology, which seek and ask questions about what people are doing with music (and why) as a way of understanding the human experience. As an ethnomusicologist, I am interested in how and why people use sound in daily life. I was confident that putting a human face on an often-faceless story would be an effective way of inviting visitors to connect.

We achieved this by incorporating design and AV content that underscored the message of human action. The museum’s designer and I purposefully accentuated the human form whenever possible. Every sightline in the gallery had large-scale paintings, etchings, videos, and photographs of people who perpetuated (or perpetuate) the legacy of Cremona’s string instrument makers.

We enriched our storytelling through emotionally evocative audiovisual content about people who make instruments, care for them, and bring them to life through music. Film footage was woven into compelling cinematic content and embedded throughout the gallery. We made audiovisual content appear recognizable and inviting to visitors by setting it in familiar-looking spaces, including a forest where violin spruce wood is sourced, a woodworker’s shop, a science lab, and a concert stage. I conducted several filmed interviews with makers and musicians who shared perspectives and experiences that extended beyond music into very relatable, “everyday” human experiences (such as a story of recovery from illness and a story about military service). These interviews served as the basis for audiovisual content and for in-gallery and exhibition book text. My questions to interviewees drew from those put to me by members of the public: why is there ongoing scientific inquiry into these instruments? Why has the violin been adopted globally for many styles of music making? Is “value” provable or perceived? What is it like to play one of these instruments?

Using personal narrative from violin “insiders” connected visitors with objects in two ways. First, it addressed visitor curiosity about concepts of value and quality in a way that showed those issues to be steeped in personal perception and perspective (showing that the conversations are ongoing and many-sided). Second, personal narratives connected the “violin world” with our universally recognizable themes, allowing visitors to connect with ideas about violins through personal stories. They welcomed visitors into the story of violin making – to learn stories that resonated with their own lives, and to understand the story of violins as a story of human actions like those in their own daily lives.





fig 4. A screen shot of violinist Angèle Dubeau describing the role of her violin during her breast cancer diagnosis and recovery.

Audiovisual highlights included:

- A whimsical, immersive cinematic introduction that introduced visitors to the two main messages by using “nature” and “work” as recognizable entry-points: familiar visuals included vistas of nature (the forest of the Fiemme Valley) and images of human hands at work. This imagery established a sense of familiarity with the content.
- “Can you hear the Stradivari?” was a comparative listening exercise through which sound quality and “value” were revealed as based on perception. Visitors were invited to listen to the same melody, played on two different instruments by the same violinist and orchestra. This exercise had the added value of making visitors feel like participants in discourse on perception.
- Audio tracks of music played by instruments on display engaged as visitors approached individual object cases (MIM uses touchless sound packs).<sup>4</sup> This helped represent objects as part of a sound-making heritage, designed to produce sound through human touch.
- A short film invited visitors to witness science in action: scientists and a violin maker creating a 3D-scan of a violin to map the exact physical dimensions of the instrument. We overlaid the voice of the same violin maker on the visuals; he explained to visitors why he thought scientific inquiry about the past is important for present-day workmanship.
- *Bruce Carlson: Master Luthier*, a cinematic presentation of an interview in which a world-renowned violin maker tells the story of how he was introduced to the craft, helped visitors realize that the people who make and care for instruments come from many walks of life, and that violin heritage is not the exclusive domain of a perceived cultural elite.
- Live concert footage and interviews by virtuosi Rachel Barton Pine and Angèle Dubeau invited visitors into the places where instruments are brought to life through music. The artists shared stories about the importance of personal taste and perception and what it is like to develop a lifelong relationship with an object. Dubeau portrayed her ownership of a Stradivarius violin in a way that felt very relatable: she shared an emotionally compelling story about the therapeutic role her violin had played in her recovery from breast cancer (fig. 4).

<sup>4</sup> The Musical Instrument Museum uses personal headset packs, through which sound is transmitted to individual visitors by radio signals at each “station.”



fig. 5. A facsimile of Stradivari's last will and testament, which we included to illuminate the very driven and supposedly controlling personality of the maker.



We dedicated a significant portion of gallery space to humanizing the mythical name of “Stradivarius” by revealing Antonio Stradivari *the personality*. We asked visitors to ponder the implications of the word “genius” by introducing visitors to a man who was driven and meticulous to the point of being controlling, both in his work and family life. Evidence of his pursuit of perfection was demonstrated in a display of drawn patterns and wooden forms of varied size and shape. We displayed a handful from among the dozens of existing workshop designs and forms made by Stradivarius; each was a testament of his quest to create an instrument with perfect proportions, ideal playability, and supreme sound quality. We illustrated his controlling personality with a facsimile copy of his last will and testament, in which he gives strict instructions for who is to perform which tasks in the household and workshop after his death (fig. 5). The will was accompanied by an English translation and interpretive text that further explained current theories of Stradivari as a domineering personality type with an exceedingly strict work ethic.

Providing gender balance was, to me, one of the most important contributions of the exhibition. As I mentioned above, museums tend to represent the world of violins as a primarily (if not exclusively) male domain. Exhibitions privilege male-centric perspectives by relying almost entirely on the lives and perspectives of male makers, male collectors, and male musicians as sources and mediators of information and as interpreters of the legacy. In order to bring gender balance to our story, the exhibition designer and I used this as an opportunity to consider how museums create gendered role models for young generations. If young girls and women could see visible, tangible evidence of women

## *My fixation on a human-centered story certainly omitted opportunities to deliver certain content.*

dwelling in this sphere, they might feel empowered to do likewise.

We addressed this through design, making it rich in female representation (images of female owners, musicians, makers, and perpetuators of the legacy). Video content featured two violinists – both female. And, of the four contemporary violin makers we featured, one was female. When possible, female voice talent narrated video content. Wall text acknowledged the absence of female contribution in violin history, not as an indication of lack of participation but as a result of male-centric historical inquiry: “While there is little evidence to indicate whether wives and daughters worked in the workshops, there is no proof that they did not. That history is simply not a written one.”

My fixation on a human-centered story certainly omitted opportunities to deliver certain content. It would have been wonderful to include “deep-dive” engagement opportunities related to the physicality of the violins themselves, and to provide visitors with the opportunity to explore knowledge that scientists and violin researchers uncover through detailed physical analysis. Such information would have satiated detail-oriented visitors, as well as curious visitors who enjoy discovering information through hands-on, interactive delivery methods.

## **Conclusion**

Although formal post-visit surveys were not conducted, anecdotal evidence shows that the Musical Instrument Museum’s approach led many visitors to recognize their own



identity within the legacy, regardless of pre-existing knowledge. A member of the museum staff remarked that visitors were having personally meaningful, emotional experiences: “I cannot count the number of guests that were moved to tears by it. I think it was very emotional for everyone!”<sup>5</sup> My favorite piece of feedback came from a frequent MIM visitor, a Phoenix local, who brought a husband and wife for their first visit to the museum. Leading up to the MIM visit, the out-of-town husband grumbled about his disinterest in a music museum, and especially in violins. After experiencing the exhibition, however, that same visitor expounded upon all the reasons why violins were interesting, so much so that his hosts could not get him to stop talking about the topic at dinner that evening.

From my perspective, this and similar feedback affirms the importance of connecting content to visitor identity needs (day-to-day concerns), and of learning and addressing visitor curiosities on a specific topic as an integral part of the planning stage. Visitor response to *Stradivarius* also reinforced my belief that museums should envision themselves not only as places to display a collection, but also as an opportunity to connect lives of the past with lives today. In this case, visitors were motivated to learn because the exhibition provided familiar entry points, validated visitor’s own perspectives, and created emotional investment as motivation to learn more about the story of a particular object type. At the same time, that object story also

reflected elements of the visitor’s own life back to them. By illuminating the contemporary life lessons that objects embody, exhibitions can build emotional bridges between things from “long ago and far away” and personal identities today.

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<sup>5</sup> “Teresa,” personal correspondence with author, June 5, 2016.