

Beyond information

Graham Black wonders just how far museums have gone in embracing interpretation as a discipline.

It is an exciting time to practise interpretation in museums. Over the last ten years in particular an increasingly audience-centred focus has replaced the traditional 'fetishing' of collections. Today, core agendas for museums focus on visitor access (including intellectual access), broadening the nature of museum audiences and enhancing the learning that takes place in museums. These agendas in turn have led to an increased awareness of differing audience needs and learning styles. As a result there has been a gradual move away from the concept of museum display as a vehicle for the mass communication of information towards one which seeks to enable visitors to create their own personalised experiences. At the heart of this remains the desire by museums to focus on the 'real thing' (including oral history, archive photographs and so on, as well as objects).

This should strike a chord with interpreters, and interpretation is a word now in widespread use both within the museums profession and by those working in the field of museum display. And yet... I have serious doubts about whether many museums really understand the term. While curators are redefining their role as interpreters of their collections and what we used to call education officers are being given new titles as interpretation and learning officers, the focus is still too often on the structured transmission of information rather than on enabling visitors to make connections and engage in their own meaning-making. Yes, museums are looking at new ways to convey information to meet the needs of different learning styles, but this tends to mean looking at the display media used rather than supporting the active involvement of audiences with relevant, revealing and provocative display content.

Closer attention to planning, exhibition structure and a wider palette of interpretive media has led to increasing use by museums of interpretive masterplanning in design briefs and HLF bids. This can be more complex than for natural heritage and historic site management, involving close collaboration between museum curators, learning and access staff, interpretation and audience consultants, designers and architects. It requires detailed audience evaluations and the development of statements of significance to define potential stories that will form the basis for gallery themes. Museum courses are increasingly including training in the development of interpretation plans as part of their core provision. Regional agencies are also now offering similar workshops as part of on-going career development.

I explored this topic in my book, *The Engaging Museum*. However, since writing it, I have had a 'road to Damascus' moment. By far the more important issue is the attitude of senior museum staff. The creation of display content is still seen by most

curators and museum directors as the end of a process, rather than the setting of a framework for on-going visitor engagement with collections and associated ideas.

What really matters – and where interpretation could make a huge difference very cheaply – is the day-to-day experiences of museum visitors up and down the country, and the extent to which they are supported in their engagement. Why do museum managers perpetuate the ludicrous notion that museum attendants are there primarily for security? Why do they not see that the visitor experience would benefit exponentially if the attendant role was replaced by the museum equivalent of national park rangers trained in interpretation?

Good work is being done – many museums have programmes of activities and events, usually developed by the learning officers. But these tend to be produced in isolation rather than as part of a holistic approach to interpretive provision which ensures there is always something new happening, and which caters for a wide range of audiences. This comes back to a failure to understand what interpretation is, to a lack of appropriate jobs and influence, and to a lack of training within museum courses. Change will only come, not through the training of new recruits to the profession, but through convincing museum directors of the huge benefits a trained interpreter could bring and the very limited costs involved.

Meanwhile all my students are now being trained in basic interpretive techniques and their potential for application within a museum environment (and for encouraging visitors to explore beyond the museum walls).

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The Lord prefers common-looking people. That is why He made so many of them.

Abraham Lincoln