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ENTERTAINMENT

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The next issue will feature:

The AHI Discover Heritage Awards 2017

For more information about the Association for Heritage Interpretation [AHI], send an email to admin@ahi.org.uk or write to the Administrator, AHI, 54 Balmoral Road, Gillingham, Kent ME7 4PG. Tel: +44 (0)1634 329065. Individuals can join AHI as Associate or Student Members or can apply to be elected, subject to qualifications and experience, as Full Members or Fellows. Businesses can join as Corporate Members with the same rights as individual members. All members receive *Interpretation Journal*, and other mailings. They can participate in AHI events and (if paid-up) can vote at the Annual General Meeting. Printed in UK © AHI 2017.

Foreword

We are in the entertainment business. In fact, interpretation occupies a unique position in the increasingly interlinked worlds of culture, heritage, leisure and entertainment. Alongside attracting and holding our audience's attention ('entertain' literally means 'to hold together') we aim to educate, to affect people's emotions and to create playful and social experiences.

Heritage has always been part of the entertainment industry – even the taxonomic, educative and moral institutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tried to entertain in one form or another. It was the new learning theories and knowledge-based economies of the twentieth century that shifted the focus to the visitor and laid the foundations for memorable heritage experiences; now heritage professionals were no longer 'legislators' of cultural meaning, they were 'interpreters'.

And if these days interpretation is rooted in the entertainment sphere, it is equally a part of the business world. Our memorable experiences must compete with a growing and varied market of attractions whilst still providing education and social value and, ideally, generating income. The business of interpreting our heritage places and the need to charge or not is a hot topic and is explored by Darren Barker in our regular Debate feature.

In this Journal we explore the concept of entertainment from a number of angles:

- We ask what makes an interactive interactive? And what makes a good one? (Hamish MacGillivray's fascinating historiography of the world of interactives)
- We explore how China's museum and heritage boom is embracing the need to 'edutain' on a massive scale (Matt Jones)
- We try and uncover the secrets of bringing wonder and delight into our interpretation – and how we can learn from the wider entertainment industry (Elin Simonsson)
- Torre Abbey's Head Gardener Ali Marshall has some inventive and humorous ideas to entertain family audiences without breaking the bank
- We see how entertainment can be delivered via a compelling programme of blockbuster exhibitions (Linda Lloyd Jones)
- And we also continue our journey through the palette of media that interpreters use to entertain, with Sam Ham writing about his favourite interpretive device: people

The articles collectively show how fun, play and wonder alongside thoughtful and popular programming are entertaining our audiences. In addition, I would like to raise the concept of *challenge*. Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihályi is the benchmark here. For him real enjoyment, pure entertainment and self-actualisation occurs when you are doing well at something you want to do with a level of challenge that is just right to gain an optimal experience. This is Csikszentmihályi's concept of 'flow' which he defines as: 'the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.' The message here is to create exhibits and experiences that are both captivating and challenging. This is something I would like to explore in a future edition.

Our next journal will be dedicated to the AHI Discover Heritage Awards 2017, entitled 'Excellence'. We will showcase the very best of interpretation – for further information please see the AHI News feature. The journal format will be slightly different to accommodate the wide range of projects and AHI Chair Bill Bevan will guest edit with input from the AHI Journal team.

Normal service will resume in 2018. Until then I hope to see many of you at the AHI - Interpret Europe Conference in October (see AHI News for more details).

Eric Langham
Founder, Barker Langham

Website Members' Section
The AHI website has a 'members only' section full of useful resources for the practising heritage interpreter. This is the place where you will find back issues of *Interpretation Journal*, conference papers, best-practice guidelines and a host of other materials relevant to professional development. We are adding more resources all the time and will publicise them in the AHI e-News as well as on the website.

You need to be a member of the AHI and register with the website to access this section. To register, you will require your AHI membership number (shown at the top of your e-News) and the email address your copy of the e-News is sent to.

You then enter your membership number and the common case-sensitive password to log in. The password will change with each issue of the journal and the password is Inverness2017

The resources link is www.ahi.org.uk/www/resources

News & Views

2017 is another big year for AHI with two major events. They are being held against the back-drop of Brexit negotiations, which may have a big impact on future interpretation and international co-operation. It is in this context that we are delighted to welcome interpreters from across Europe to a joint AHI-Interpret Europe Conference in the UK, when we will also announce the winners of the AHI 2017 Discover Heritage Awards.

2017 Discover Heritage Awards

The 2017 Awards have now closed for entry. The Judging Panel has met and entrants will know whether they have been shortlisted, commended or – sadly – not. The shortlisted entries once again offer an exciting range of best practice projects.

Shortlisting projects is a difficult decision-making process for the panel partly due to the high quality of entrants we receive. But also due to the enthusiasm and effort that entrants put into the projects, which comes through in the entry forms. We can tell the amount of dedication to good interpretation that organisations and individuals are making across Britain and Ireland.

AHI site judges are now beginning to fan out across the countries to assess the shortlisted entries. We will announce the winners at the 2017 Awards Ceremony, a glitzy occasion to be held on 5 October in Inverness as part of the 2017 conference. It should prove to be another nail-biting affair!

AHI-Interpret Europe Conference

Join us from 3 to 6 October 2017 in Inverness, capital of the Scottish Highlands, and enjoy bellowing stags, late running salmon and a warming whisky with old friends and new.

Planning for the joint AHI-Interpret Europe conference is now well-advanced. Under the theme *Making connections: Re-imagining landscapes*, interpreters from across Europe will gather to discuss the interpretation of natural and cultural landscapes and to take inspiration from those landscapes for their own practice.

AHI is trying out a few new things at this conference – online booking, separate accommodation booking, a call for papers and parallel sessions. We look forward to finding out what you think about the format to help plan future conferences.

We have a great line up of site visits that showcase the Highland landscape and Scottish interpretation. We are finalising presentations from the submitted papers.

You can find out more about the outline programme and how to book via our dedicated conference website www.interpreteuropeconference.net

Bill Bevan
Chair, AHI

Inverness, capital of the Scottish Highlands

Reviews

REPORTING RESEARCH

Philip Ryland focuses on 'hot' interpretation and the use of 'many voices' to support its goals.

The concept of 'hot interpretation' was initially introduced back in the 1980s as a way of recognising the need for visitors to engage more fully with the material being presented to them but also to encourage a stronger cognitive and greater affective as well as reflective on-site and post-site experience (Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998). David Uzzell and Roy Ballantyne defined hot interpretation as 'interpretation that appreciates the need for and injects an affective component into its subject matter' (1998:154).

Hot interpretation has been discussed widely in the literature over the last twenty years and is recognised as a valuable approach notably at sites where the content of material being presented is of a controversial, challenging or emotional nature. Typical examples of such locations have been suggested as battlefield sites, castle and jails, places of societal/political protest and/or civil rights development, sites associated with slavery or forced relocation and sites of atrocity. Uzzell and Ballantyne suggest that such locations 'excite a degree of emotional arousal which needs to be recognised and addressed in the interpretation being presented' (1998:152). Thus, the use of hot interpretation can play a key role in conveying the messages, meanings and most importantly perhaps the significance of the material (and the site as a whole) which is being presented to the visitor and upon whom cognition, reaction, reflection and perhaps even a change in attitude might take place.

This relationship between the materials, the site and the encouragement of a cognitive and affective response from the visitors is however not a straight-forward one. The emotional connection to the interpretation will depend upon a number of factors such as: the length of time since the event took place; the location itself (atmosphere and sense of place are viewed as being particularly important); the nature of the material being presented; the way in which the site is managed (notably in terms of remaining physical features, visitor facilities etc.); the types of interpretive media being employed and the nature of any potential personal connection between the site and the visitor (Ham, 2013; Knudson *et al*., 1995; Uzzell & Ballantyne in Fairclough *et al*., 2008). This latter is a particularly interesting point because on many sites individuals from history will be identified and their story explained as a means of engaging with, and making potential connections for, the visitor (Ballantyne, Packer & Bond, 2012; Ham, 2013).

These personal narratives can often be profoundly powerful and are a very important way of enabling the visitor to understand the impact of an event which may be centuries old or something perhaps which the visitor only has the vaguest understanding or appreciation of. Some examples of the visitor responses reported by Ballantyne, Packer and Bond (2012) focus on an exhibition about the forced removal of Aboriginal children in Queensland (1869-1969) and illustrate this personal connection, they include:

> 'I want to learn more about Aboriginal people. These stories are important and need to be told';
> 'Some of the people featured in the exhibition are the same age as me …I had no idea that this practice was occurring at the time';
> 'I am much more aware of what happened. These were ordinary people, like me and my family';
> 'The personal accounts were very moving, reading the letters … brought home the feelings in such a personal way';
> and,
> 'The exhibition made me feel very sorry, but also very lucky for my own upbringing'.
> (2012: 157-161).

The recent increase in the adoption of 'smart' technology has meant that frequently interpretation now turns to the use of multiple and/or parallel voices to support this emotional connection and personal experience and a recent article by Hvenegaard, Marshall and Lemelin (2016) has explored the use of 'many voices' as an interpretive approach at Batoche National Historic Site, Saskatchewan, Canada. This location requires the presentation of a controversial historical event, where in 1885, Metis and First Nation allies were defeated by the Federal Government's North West Field Force and were ultimately forced to surrender. 'The Resistance', as it is preferred to be named, sadly claimed the lives of many soldiers and others associated with the event (brief summary derived from Hvenegaard, Marshall & Lemelin, 2016:47-8). The cultural sensitivities of the location and the events which took place there in 1885 meant that it is important to present the broadest possible picture of the Batoche NHS which means not only the political and military events culminating in the Resistance of 1885 but also the broader interpretation of the Metis Nation, their social and economic story. Hvenegaard, Marshall and Lemelin illustrate this by reporting on the work of Parks Canada and stating:

> 'the presentation of these events as acts of rebellion against the Canadian Government were balanced by the Metis view of these events as a desire to secure livelihood, own land, and receive respect for their cultural traditions.' (2016:52)

Hvenegaard, Marshall and Lemelin (2016) suggest that the inclusion of 'many voices' is a useful approach to adopt on a site where no agreed single viewpoint of the events being interpreted is, or can be, presented. Thus 'many voices' provides the opportunity to present the site from multiple perspectives but also provides on-site staff with an opportunity for the visitors to hear 'storytelling from direct experiences' (Hvenegaard, Marshall & Lemelin, 2016:53).

The approach also provides interpreters and on-site managers with the opportunity to engage with local communities or groups of affected people more widely dispersed and this act of gathering and sharing stories, memories and even artefacts can be enormously important for them as well. The process may also reveal 'hidden stories' which can provide richness and even diversity to the main story being presented in the exhibition or on the site. 'Many voices' also provides the additional opportunity for discussion to take place either directly between 'the voices' or between the story teller, the voices and the visitor thus encouraging the visitor to be informed, connected but also challenged, culminating, as Pannekoek states, with visitors being given the opportunity to 'select those [voices] that resonate with their [the visitors'] experiences' (2000:208-9).

The use of a 'many voices' approach has raised a number of issues in recent years and some of these are briefly summarised below:

1. '*Does one voice provide the 'dominant narrative' or do you offer multiple, parallel narratives*'. Critics of a 'many voices' approach often focus upon the difficulty for the visitor in understanding who, when, where and how to engage with the people, stories and narratives which are being presented to them. One suggestion is that a single, balanced narrative (of a non-judgemental nature) should guide the visitor through the range of people, stories and narratives which will unfold for them during their on-site experience. Another possible approach could be the use of a fictional (or real) character who then introduces the 'real people and their stories' as the visitor progresses through the exhibition or around the site.
2. '*The types of voices used*'. Critics have suggested that visitors will tend to focus more on a voice which they recognise either because of the accent or dialect, language used, tone or gender. It is suggested therefore that care should be taken to ensure that a dominant voice(s) does not emerge inadvertently through the interpretation. A good example of this is where a visitor applies 'authority' to a voice simply due to its tone (or other characteristic) even when this assumption is largely incorrect based upon the stories being interpreted.
3. '*Too many ideas and themes are being presented*'. Whilst 'many voices' is designed to encourage debate in what might be a controversial or emotional subject, it is not designed to confuse the visitor. It has been suggested that key stories need to be clearly identified and that the use of 'parallel voices' in particular should only concentrate on these key stories thus enabling the use of other forms of on-site interpretation to bring in other ideas or themes. This danger of confusion should not imply however that this type of on-site interpretation needs to be commodified to the extent that it is unduly 'wrapped up' for the visitor.
4. '*Giving time for reflection*'. As a potentially powerful tool 'many voices' can be challenging for the visitor, the 'shock value', indeed a charge of 'over-sensationalising' the event(s) has been suggested by some and it has been recommended that this approach requires a longer 'processing time' for the visitor. Opportunities should therefore be provided where the visitor, either in isolation or in their social group, can take a little time to think, process and ideally discuss what they have seen and heard. This can also be supported through the involvement of an on-site interpreter who can gently guide, encourage and even facilitate a conversation between visitors, and thus support any reaction and/or resulting reflection which takes place.
5. Finally, 'many voices' should provide visitors with '*somewhere to share their experience*'. Whilst the response from visitors will of course vary greatly, the approach can be hugely powerful for many and in consequence it is important that the visitors have the opportunity to share, reflect and comment upon their experience. Opportunities with on-site interpreters have already been mentioned; other obvious outlets might be: a visitors book, a response wall, blog or social media posts specific to the exhibition or site as a whole where visitors can react to, and respond to, what they have seen and heard. In many exhibitions, it is now quite common for these responses to be directly incorporated such that the final 'exhibit' becomes something which demonstrates an active and 'live' contribution from the visitors (Ballantyne, Packer & Bond, 2012; Haan, 2005).

'Many voices' is a valuable interpretive tool; it enables the presentation of multiple views, perspectives and opinions to be heard at the same time which can be powerful in encouraging the visitor to take part in a conversation, to react and reflect on what they have seen and heard and thus hopefully leave the exhibition or site with a range of views from which they can form their own judgment or even re-visit a long-held opinion or belief which may now seem less valid to them.

Dr Philip Ryland (MAHI) teaches tourism and is also Associate Dean (Student Experience) in the Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University.

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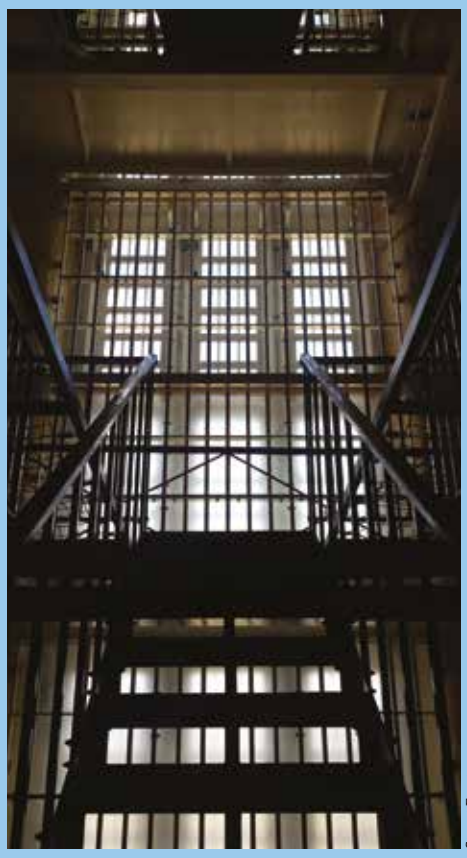
EXPLORING AND INTERPRETING LGBTQ HISTORIES

Lesbian gay bisexual trans and queer (LGBTQ) histories and experiences have traditionally been overlooked or underrepresented by museums and heritage sites. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in innovative, imaginative and inspirational LGBTQ programming. This is a significant change as even a decade or two ago, although there were some important, ground-breaking projects, they stood out because of their relative rarity.

Last year's Artangel exhibition, *Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison* (4 September – 4 December 2016) was a particularly memorable, moving and provocative recent display. Artists and writers were invited to present works inside Reading Prison where Oscar Wilde was imprisoned between 1895-97 following his conviction for 'acts of gross indecency with other male persons'.

Historic England's *Pride of Place: England's LGBTQ Heritage* project is another particularly notable example. It has created a rich resource with great potential to inform new interpretations of ancient to modern sites across the country. *Pride of Place* includes an interactive crowd-sourced map hosted by Historypin that has allowed members of the public to identify thousands of places that are relevant to LGBTQ heritage and history.



Stuart Frost

Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison

Marking an important anniversary

The number of projects coming to fruition over 2017 is likely to set a new benchmark; there will probably have been more LGBTQ displays by the end of this calendar year than any other to date. The reason for this exponential increase is the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the Sexual Offences Act which falls over the summer of 2017. This important legislation – which partially decriminalised homosexuality – received royal assent on 27 July 1967. Numerous museums, heritage organisations, libraries and archives have developed public programmes to mark the anniversary by focusing on LGBTQ histories. There is only space here to highlight a few key projects.

Queer British Art 1861-1967, Tate Britain (5 April – 1 October), will probably be the largest exhibition taking place during 2017. The show begins in 1861, a year which finally saw the death penalty for same-sex acts repealed. The following hundred years saw significant change in a myriad of ways; the works in the show reflect a remarkable range of artworks, identities and stories.

Pride and Prejudice at National Museums Liverpool is a research-driven project (including the Museum of Liverpool and the Walker Art Gallery) that is identifying objects within collections that have a previously unrecorded LGBTQ connection. The Walker Art Gallery has also been actively collecting new work. All of this activity is helping build collections that more meaningfully reflect LGBTQ lives, histories and culture, and make LGBTQ histories more widely known to the public.

The National Portrait Gallery recently published *Speak its Name!*, a book that pairs portraits from the Gallery's collection with quotations by and about prominent gay people. A small free display (22 November 2016 – 29 October 2017) features seven portraits from the publication; the accompanying labels include quotations from the sitters describing their personal experiences of coming out. This display complements an existing trail that highlights works with an LGBTQ connection in the NPG's permanent displays.

The British Museum's small exhibition, *Desire, Love, Identity: exploring LGBTQ histories* (11 May – 15 October 2017) takes its inspiration from Richard Parkinson's recent book *A Little Gay History* (2013) and ranges from very ancient history to the present day. The display is accompanied by a trail that highlights objects with an LGBTQ connection on display in the permanent galleries. The trail and display encompasses Europe, but also include objects that from around the world to offer a wider and more global view.

The National Trust's *Prejudice and Pride* programme seeks to highlight people connected with properties whose lives challenged conventions about gender and sexuality. Knole in Kent, for example, was home to Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962). Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) novel *Orlando* was inspired by her affair with Vita. The Trust has commissioned artists to create exhibitions and installations to highlight important connections and histories like these that have previously been omitted. A podcast series and a new LGBTQ heritage guidebook are also part of the new interpretive offer.

Silver medallion of the emperor Hadrian and coin depicting his lover Antinous

An opportunity to reflect

It is clear that the 2017 anniversary has provided the impetus to develop projects that will result in permanent change; the projects described have the potential to create lasting legacies and to inspire new developments. It would be unwise, though, to be complacent. Although the passing of the Sexual Offences Act in 1967 marks an important moment in England and Wales, prejudice and discrimination remain part of everyday life for many individuals. Looking beyond the UK, according to current United Nations statistics, homosexuality is still criminalised in 76 countries.

The extent to which LGBTQ histories are meaningfully integrated with sites and displays across the sector as a whole is arguably variable and uneven. A criticism often made of previous LGBTQ programming is that it has been of short duration, and focussed on temporary exhibitions rather than permanent displays or interpretation. Another frequent criticism is that not all LGBTQ perspectives and experiences are equally represented. The anniversary – therefore – also offers us an opportunity to reflect on where we are as a profession with regard to LGBTQ histories, and where we would like to be in the future.

A criticism often made of previous LGBTQ programming is that it has been of short duration, and focussed on temporary exhibitions rather than permanent displays or interpretation.

Stuart Frost is Head of Interpretation & Volunteers at the British Museum.

Find out more

Pride and Prejudice – National Museums Liverpool
www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/collections/research/lgbt/

Speak its name! – National Portrait Gallery
www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/2016/speak-its-name

Queer British Art – Tate Britain
www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/queer-british-art-1861-1967

Pride of Place – Historic England
https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/

Prejudice and Pride – National Trust
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/exploring-lgbtq-history-at-national-trust-places

Knole, Kent, home to Vita Sackville-West

EXHIBITION REVIEW

THE WONDER OF CURIOUS YOUNG MINDS

James Simpson describes how the Science Museum, London, rose to the challenge of answering the dreaded young person's 'so what?' question in Wonderlab: The Statoil Gallery.

Fuelling the imagination of a new generation is no small task, but it's one that the Science Museum should have all the skills to achieve. Wonderlab: The Statoil Gallery is the newest interactive gallery to take on the challenge with more than 50 experiences to ignite the 'hydrogen filled balloon' in all of us.

The gallery is presented as a series of linked, free-flow spaces with focal points for collaboration with other visitors or to gather for a demonstration. Divided into seven zones, each focused on a scientific strand (such as Forces or Light), there are more than 50 different exhibits uniquely designed for children of all ages to explore. The principle is familiar, with interactives demonstrating phenomena and concepts supported by a team of 'explainers' to add that extra connection to the subject through personal interactions and the wonderfully executed Science shows with enough whiz-pop-bangs to keep even the most energetic 5 year old enthralled.

Highlights include exploring forces on the Friction Slides, three chutes, each covered with a different material. Visitors are encouraged to travel down the slides to experience the frictional properties of each material. Elsewhere you can witness an electrical storm, the movements of the solar system or explore sound through vibration by biting down on a rod and sticking your fingers in your ears!

Inspiring minds

Understanding how to communicate to an audience is as critical for interpretation as the subject matter being communicated. One of the pleasures of working in this field is trying to view the world through a child's eyes. Witnessing the innate amazement, curiosity, wonder present in young children being fed through experience can be an inspiring thing.

I recall this imagination being sparked on childhood trips to Launchpad; the ability to learn through experience has left its mark. Although I haven't been inspired to fly into space or find a cure for the common cold, I have found inspiration in the art of communicating stories and concepts as a designer.

Now much longer in the tooth and perhaps now over-familiar with 'science centres' I have corralled a team of assistant 'junior' reviewers to help get a true picture of this new gallery.

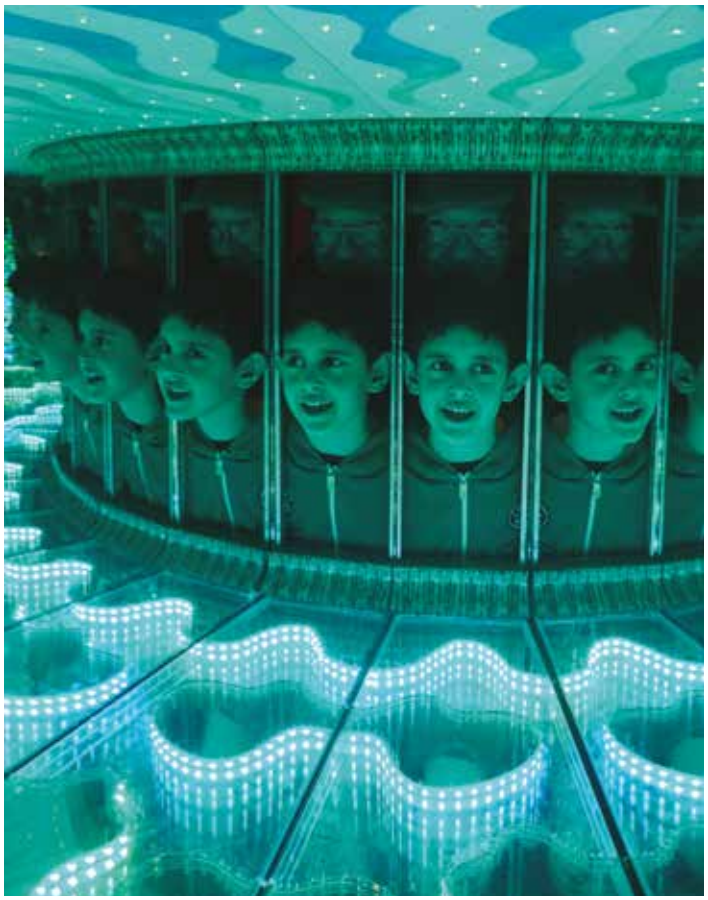
A different design approach

What struck me first was the obvious effort by the designers to do things a little differently here. Working with a team of artists, designers and craftspeople, Muf Architecture/Art have added a level of design flair and detail that is a departure from the normal 'wipe-clean' approach to education design. Gone are the base primary colours or laboratory white. In its place is a palette of tiles, metal, wood and fabric all beautifully executed. This mix could be too much but a sense of design unity has been maintained by Muf that leaves an enriched experience for adults and children alike.

In the school of William Morris, I'm a great believer that things must be functional as well as beautiful. Each interactive is presented in a creative and beautiful way, using technology sparingly, encouraging visitors to learn through interaction and observation.

Each interactive is supported by wonderfully playful illustrations by Andrew Rae. Gone are the mundane instructions of old, replaced by witty depictions of various visitor groups interacting with the exhibit and prompts that encourage you to question the world around you. However, the supporting text led to more questions than answers with my junior colleagues.

All of this works to a level, but some of the concepts being presented are complex, even for parents with a smattering of science education, let alone for small children. This is where the 'explainers' should come into their own, taking these ideas and breathing life into them for their audience.



'Staring into infinity and beyond'

Connecting to audience

Yet for all this, my junior reviewers felt let down by the level of communication or interpretation of the ideas. The big test for exhibitions like this is the 'so what?' factor and this where the gallery falls short. If the hook or intrigue isn't there the understanding isn't complete and there is a tendency to move from exhibit to exhibit not really understanding its purpose or meaning in the real world. This can unfortunately turn the exhibition from learning experience to playground all too quickly.

The quality of science demonstration through the shows or at the Chemistry bar was high as expected – what 7 year old is not inspired by rockets being launched, or a recipe to make your own slime. But the quality of one-to-one interaction by explainers was a missed opportunity. Even taking into account 'half-term' fatigue my reviewers failed to get the interaction with staff beyond a quick 'this is how it works', when they craved the answer to the 'so what?' question in a way tailored to them.

Future focus

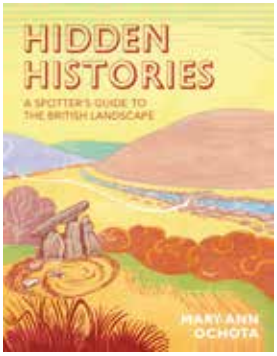
From a visual and design perspective, the gallery is a huge step forward and I commend the collaborative approach taken and in that part it is a success. It is clearly an exciting and engaging space with experiences that were new and delightful. This I'm sure will in some small part help foster a new generation of scientific minds (or at least some exhibition designers and storytellers).

It is hoped that the controversial entrance fee will help with continued investment in training and development of the key factor that enriches interpretation – people. This will in turn develop a great exhibition into something truly *wonder-ful*.

James Simpson is Senior 3D Designer with Bright 3D, focusing on interpretation and heritage. www.we-are-bright.com
Junior Reviewers: Archie Hamilton (14), Zach Roff (9), Charlie Roff (5)

HIDDEN HISTORIES: A SPOTTER'S GUIDE TO THE BRITISH LANDSCAPE

by Mary-Ann Ochota
Frances Lincoln, £20.00



The British landscape today is complex, layered and often completely overlooked. It remains as a testament to thousands of generations who have shaped their environment and left physical marks that provide an insight into their activities, values and beliefs. Much of this history is visible and yet ignored, until now.

Ochota's second book, released in late 2016, gives its reader a transformed understanding of the British landscape, replete with both ancient monuments and modern revival. Organised thematically and broadly chronologically, the book provides a clear and often humorous look at the history of the British isles visible through what remains to the unassuming viewer.

Ochota's success throughout is due to her encouragement of exploration, with the very real possibility that what is being sought could be something else entirely. The process, the interrogation of familiar landscapes, is the key to discovering something new rather than the result. The reader is encouraged where to look, the key details of the artefact given (whether an Iron Age hillfort or Norman church) and then 'what else it might be'. The distinction between what has been made by man and what is simply a result of the forces of nature is at times difficult to decipher. The joy remains in the exploration. The guide opens with the chapter of 'lumps and bumps' as a literal description for Britain's most ancient archaeology. Each type of tomb, barrow and hillfort is described, along with a selection of the finest five to be found today spread across Britain.

Written to appeal to both the specialist and enthusiast, the book nonetheless at times veers into aspects of British landscape that require greater levels of dedication. The page titled 'how old is this hedge?' is one such page that may grab the ecologist but leave others heading on to areas of greater historic significance. Across the whole book, however, these pages are few and relieved by humour and wit. For example, Ochota suggests that one of the best ways to date ancient trees is judging their diameter by a new measure of length: the hug.

While the book provides a brilliant and thorough guide to viewing the landscape around us; a new way, encouraging a better exploration of our surroundings, it also contextualises each feature within wider historic events, both in Britain and Europe. History becomes engaging because there are tangible products of great moments in human development all over the country. The more recognised monuments like Silbury Hill round barrow and the Antonine Wall are juxtaposed with milestone markers and 'polite' cottages. The etymology of pub names is treated with the same detail as ancient rock art, proving Ochota's grasp of both ancient and modern history, and the appeal of this book to both specialist or enthusiast.

The book is a fascinating introduction to the historic landscapes of Britain and conveys what can be complex archaeological processes in clear and accessible ways. It makes British history and archaeology so captivating because it is everywhere, if you know how to look.

Liza Rogers works in the cultural heritage sector.

Typology

One of my favourite interpretive devices is...

the human being!

Sam Ham, a self-confessed 'media nerd', takes us on a journey of his much-loved devices of the day to his all time favourite.

I've always considered decisions about media to be fairly pragmatic and a near final step in the interpretive planning process. Decisions about strategic purpose, content, organisation and sometimes sequencing must usually come first. That only makes sense. But eventually media must be selected and interpretive products must be rolled out – each one a purveyor of interpretive content for an audience.

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, USA. Photo by Arthur Wierzchos

An interpreter helps visitors connect a rock sample to magma as it is erupted from an active volcano

First the 1970s

Every decade or so, I've seen new media possibilities hit the streets in lockstep with technological advances and new ways of transferring language, imagery, sound, light and other sensations to the human perceptual system. I was around when the first lapse-dissolve units were developed. [For contemporary readers, these amazing electric boxes allowed images from things we called 'slide projectors' to fade in and out of each other.] I'd bet that almost every interpreter in the world viewed these little gems as semi-magical, so pleasing was the dissolve effect to the eye. This was what people in the 1970s called the 'new media'.

Kelly Farrell

A guided wildlife walk in an Arkansas state park, USA

Then the 1980s

In the 80s came the first programmers and micro-processors capable of automating multi-media presentations. Brand names such as Wollensak and Spinder & Sauppé were the talk of the profession, and hardware giants such as 'Digi-cue' and 'Director-24' were considered top-of-the-line and state-of-the-art. These were clearly the 'favourite' audiovisual media of their time, especially for media nerds like me.

Naturally, parallel evolutions were also going on (and still are) in static display materials for exhibitions, wayside interpretation and trail applications. New technologies evolved for fabricating interpretive panels, and we watched metal-photos, fibreglass embedments, porcelain enamel and other innovations come and go. Each one a favourite medium of mine at its time.

And finally...

Of course, we have since witnessed many, many iterations of 'new media', each even more loved than the one it supplanted or replaced. But there actually is one medium that, for me anyway, has remained a favourite during all this time despite all the technological change going on around me. It turns out that this original communication medium – indeed, the veritable mother of all new media to follow – is as effective today as it ever was.

Some of its qualities will amaze you:

- It's fully interactive.
- It works via the fastest, most powerful data processor ever conceived.
- Its software includes highly sophisticated fuzzy logic allowing it to adjust its content, tone and communication approach instantly whenever immediate circumstances suddenly change.
- It performs well in virtually any indoor or outdoor setting, even in inclement weather.
- It very rarely breaks down and is normally easy and inexpensive to repair.
- It's nearly impervious to vandalism, even in unattended outdoor settings.

Photo courtesy of Sovereign Hill Museums Association

Interpretive theatre at Sovereign Hill Outdoor Museum, Victoria, Australia

Of course, I'm referring here to the warm-bodied, skin-bound interpreter, a human being who presents interpretation via face-to-face personal contact with an audience.

Good old face-to-face interpretation

I'm not saying the personal contact is necessarily the 'best' medium for interpretation. I don't believe any format for interpretive exchange is inherently better or worse than others, despite occasional claims to the contrary. And, of course, every medium has its tradeoffs. For instance, each is better suited to reach audiences in some settings than in others; some are more logistically feasible in certain situations than they are in others; and, of course, factors of cost and availability can also come into play. But on the whole, when a situation lends itself to interpretation by personal contact, good old fashioned face-to-face interpretation is usually going to serve well as long as the interpreter is skilled.

Barbara Ham

The most basic interpretive encounter – the visitor information desk, Haleakala National Park, USA

It is true that some people think of personal contact mainly as presentations delivered by the proverbial 'sage on the stage,' as in the case of talks and guided tours, for example. But personal interpretation takes many other creative forms. These include living history and theatre, storytelling, puppet shows, extemporaneous (so-called 'roving') interpretation, interpretive musical performances, interpretive dance, among myriad other possibilities. And even in its most basic form – for example, the interpreter fielding questions from behind an information desk – personal contact brings a quality to an interpretive exchange that no other medium can match.

High touch v high tech

The frequently invoked dichotomy 'high touch' versus 'high tech' brings this distinction to the forefront. In an age when we are increasingly frustrated by automated phone branching systems and being prompted to 'say repeat to return to the main menu', we are reminded of the purity, authenticity – perhaps, the necessity – of personal communication. Yes, my favorite interpretive medium of all time is the interpreter her/himself.

Sam H Ham is Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho, USA and author of *Interpretation – Making a Difference on Purpose* (2013).

Benchmark Project

Illustrating a point

Clare Dalton assesses how the valuable process of consultation leads to unexpected rewards at a site of one of Britain's most important industries.

The Cromford Mills 'Gateway Centre' is the bustling starting point for exploration of the industrial and natural heritage of the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site. Tandem were engaged by the Arkwright Society to develop the interpretation for the Gateway, to welcome visitors to the wider World Heritage Site and provide an entertaining and accessible introduction to its heritage.

A Lancashire Man

The visitor centre stands on the site of the world's first water-powered cotton spinning mill. Its inventor Sir Richard Arkwright, 'a plain, almost gross, bag-cheeked, pot-bellied Lancashire man… of copious free digestion', played a key role in the Industrial Revolution and the industrial heritage of the site is now plain to see.

The Arkwright Society wanted to tell the human story of the area and to address the contested histories of the cotton industry – the role of enslaved Africans in providing the raw material which created the wealth of the valley and the impacts in other cotton-producing parts of the world.

But what of the scores of other people who toiled and sweated to supply the cotton industry with its resources, both human and material?

The human story

The Arkwright Society wanted to tell the human story of the area and to address the contested histories of the cotton industry – the role of enslaved Africans in providing the raw material which created the wealth of the valley and the impacts in other cotton-producing parts of the world.

Approached by Dr Susanne Seymour, lead researcher on the 'Global Cotton Connections' (GCC) project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Arkwright Society committed to improving their interpretation and information on the sources of raw cotton used in the Valley, as part of a wider exhibition development project.

The GCC project provided data for an interpretive map on the sources of raw cotton to the Derwent Valley. However, in collaboration between Tandem, the Arkwright Society and the GCC, it was mutually felt that the interpretation could, and should, go further.

Interpreting slavery for today

We then entered into a process of deciding what form this should take. How could we provoke visitors' attention, increase their awareness and encourage them to draw their own conclusions about the industry?

Brian Gallagher www.bdgart.com

The final, agreed illustration for Cromford Mills visitor gateway

An initial idea was floated of a gallery display of portraits of the Derwent Valley's 'founding fathers'. The sixth and final image would be a contemporary portrait of an unidentified slave, painted in the same dignified manner as the others, representing the thousands of enslaved people who helped to build the industry. However, this portrait's inclusion was felt to be inappropriate by the GCC project and one of its community partners, the Nottingham Slave Trade Legacies group, one reason being the unequal power relations of the time in artistic portrayals.

Having sought further advice from the Sheffield Hindu Samaj Heritage group, and other academics including Professor Celeste-Marie Bernier, an expert on visual imagery of slavery, the GCC project suggested alternatives. These included using the work of a modern black painter, or commissioning a new illustration of a range of workers who helped to found the valley. All options were considered, with the final consensus on rethinking the portrait concept and instead developing a large-scale illustration of enslaved cotton growers, 18th century factory workers and Indian weavers. This would occupy a prominent place within the Gateway site and be visible to anyone who entered the historic Building 17.

Why – and how – to illustrate?

The creative medium of illustration worked most effectively because it allowed us to interpret complex ideas which would otherwise have required acres of text or photographs. It meant three disparate scenes could be merged into one coherent, impactful whole. Finally, it accorded some degree of artistic license in how we depicted the mood and content – to create maximum effect in limited space.

When the illustration was commissioned from artist Brian Gallagher in 2015, a brief was initially sent out for comment. It covered the interpretive rationale behind the illustration, the content and desired style – a high impact, black and white scraperboard style. Dr Seymour collected feedback on the brief from academics and the community groups involved with the GCC project, who advised on elements to include and to be emphasised by the illustrator.

Working with the constraints of the wall location, which had a sloping ramp and an angled viewpoint, the illustrator produced an initial concept sketch which was again circulated among the members of the team. Here the subtleties of the image were put firmly under the microscope as all members agreed that the initial sketches didn't go far enough in capturing the suffering of the enslaved workers, and the grueling and arduous conditions faced by all.

While not a call to go back to the drawing board, the feedback did make us all take a step back and re-evaluate the messages that the illustration was giving out. Taking the time to share the concept and illustration process with a wider group including those from Black and Asian minority ethnic backgrounds, allowed a range of voices to be heard. Gallagher then implemented changes which ultimately strengthened the power of the illustration.

Signs of success

Cromford Mills Visitor Gateway opened to the public in March 2016. The GCC have made return visits to provide further guide training related to talking about slavery, and to present their 'legacy outputs' to the general public, including a film and poetry readings. A new guidebook, 'The Story of Cromford Mills', has a dedicated section about the sources of cotton and the slavery connection. Most pertinently, the illustration itself won a prestigious 2016 World Illustration Award in the Public Realm category.

The resulting display has proven a powerful way of getting across a complex system of supply and exploitation. The collaborative process allowed a range of stakeholders a chance to have their say on what was depicted and to take ownership of a significant element of the interpretation within the Gateway site. Tandem, Global Cotton Connections and its associated community groups continue to work with Cromford Mills and more interpretation is planned to delve further into the complex history of the cotton industry.

Ashley Franklin

Visitors can take in the larger-than-life illustration as they go through the Gateway centre

Claire Dalton is an Interpretive Planner at Tandem, based in Holywood, Northern Ireland.

Benchmark Project

Lawrence of Arabia's Camera, 1910 (MHS inv. No. 21126)

Unlocking fascinating stories

Silke Ackermann explains how the new guide to the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford helps to reveal the secrets of strange, rare and beautiful objects.

A quirky old building with a creaking staircase in the heart of Oxford, full of curious devices with unfamiliar names and even more obscure uses. Even the title 'Museum of the History of Science' (MHS) can be a challenge: 'Science' is in many ways a misleading term for the collections, a modern label that by definition excludes a wealth of topics that were key contributors to the knowledge of their day. The Museum includes subjects that are now seen as dangerous and dark, such as alchemy, astrology and divination, but also topics that are now too ordinary or vocational to count as science, whether surveying, drawing or designing sundials. Nor is the term 'History of Science' especially helpful as this may suggest an encyclopaedic overview (such as in 'From Babylonian sky-watchers to in-vitro fertilisation').

An enigmatic exterior

So, imagine the unsuspecting visitor entering our Grade 1 listed, 17th century building via steep stone steps. It is impossible to look in from the outside and there is (due to the aforementioned listed status) very little to no opportunity to communicate any contents before one enters.

What do these visitors expect to see and experience? How do we guide them round three galleries, stacked vertically one above the other with the first gallery doubling up as entrance space?

Once inside…

'There were lots of objects, but no history of science …'
'I didn't understand why these objects are relevant to me …'
'The labels were almost unintelligible – but then I am not a scientist …'
'Some of the objects are really beautiful, but I couldn't find any info who used them and why …'
'I love this Museum and its atmosphere. Promise never to change anything!'
'I didn't get the main Museum, but the special exhibition [Dear Harry… Henry Moseley | A Scientist Lost to War] had me almost in tears – the story about a son, scientist and soldier was extremely touching'

No guide and very little interpretation

These diverging remarks from Tripadvisor, left within a few days of each other, are a randomly chosen sample of typical comments that MHS receives, exacerbated by the frequently lamented lack of any guide book over the past eighty years or so (a freely downloadable audioguide does exist). Clearly, something needed to happen in the long-term (i.e. a completely new interpretation and display plan that will enable access to our visitor on every level without destroying the unique atmosphere of the building) – but wasn't there another way in which we could communicate the stories behind the objects – and not just within the Museum

Curta mechanical calculator Type I, c. 1950 (MHS inv. No. 34662)

Armillary Sphere, c. 1580 (MHS inv. No. 70229)

> *Director's Choice in our case became the Director's choice from the objects suggested by the whole Museum team, whatever their day-to-day role.*

but on coffee tables around the world? Not a typical guide-book (*'when you turn right you will see in front of you…'*), but a story book, beautifully illustrated and with the added extra of representing a personal selection?

Enter SCALA and *Director's Choice*

The very portable size, the stunning images and engaging texts of the various volumes I knew (at least two written by personal friends) had appealed to me for years. But whilst the collections featured were very varied and represented renowned institutions around the world, there wasn't one that focussed on a science museum or even history of science museum.

But precisely that was our opportunity. Forget for a moment our modern classifications. Ignore that mathematics are famously 'difficult'. Park the notions that most of the objects are pretty enigmatic on first sight, especially if one doesn't know 'how they work'. Look at them in a completely new light, marvel at their beauty, be amazed by the story behind the production and be touched by the seemingly ordinary. In other words: give the objects a chance to be themselves.

Collaboration

Great in theory, you might say, but would SCALA's Managing Director, Jenny McKinley, share our enthusiasm? Amazingly, she did, and so did the project editor, Johanna Stephenson – and thus the MHS team together with the SCALA project team embarked on what became one of the most enjoyable publication experiences in my career to date.

Director's Choice in our case became the Director's choice from the objects suggested by the whole Museum team, whatever their day-to-day role. The gallery assistants were invaluable in suggesting what our visitors were most intrigued by, our educators had used other objects as an entrance to the seemingly obscure for schools' and family audiences, our cleaner had marvelled at his personal choice on his early morning rounds, the archivist revealed objects that had hardly ever seen the light of day – within a few weeks almost every staff member responded to my invitation to suggest 'their' choices. We enthusiastically shared the stories that these objects told, or rather: were capable of telling, had they been given the chance in the galleries. And it is this enthusiasm that we wanted to share with our readers, the reason for us to get out of bed in the morning.

Breaking the mould

Amazingly, SCALA allowed us to deviate from the established format, resulting in somewhat unexpected headings: 'Relic of a secular saint' (for Albert Einstein's blackboard), 'Fit for a Queen' (for the astrolabe of Elizabeth I), 'Our man in the

King Charles II's address book, c. 1660 (MHS inv. no. MS Gunther 20)

Middle East' (for Lawrence of Arabia's camera), 'Gunpowder, Treason and Ptolemy' (for a 16th century Elizabethan armillary sphere), 'A calculator for Hitler' (for Curta's mechanical calculator Type I), 'Seriously fascinated by curves' (for Richard Inward's Album of spiraloid curves), 'The art of dialling' (for Lewis Evan's collections of sundial manuscripts) or 'What – No Nell Gwyn?!' (for King Charles II's address book) – to name but a few.

Stories unlocked

For the first time in the Museum's history (MHS was founded in 1924), people and their stories took the limelight, not mathematics and optics. Or rather: people and their stories became the key to mathematics and optics. And our readers? '*In the past I've always found the exhibitions at the Museum fascinating, but fairly incomprehensible to a non-scientific mind like mine. The guide really helped to unlock the fascinating stories I always knew were there!*' wrote a reader shortly after the launch in April 2016 and many have since echoed this sentiment.

That is the guide book done – now back to that aforementioned interpretation and redisplay plan… With MHS' 100th anniversary in 2024 firmly in our sight we are focussing our efforts (and fundraising campaign!) firmly on 'unlocking the fascinating stories' in the galleries.

Dr Silke Ackermann is Director, Museum of the History of Science, University of Oxford.

Lewis Evans' collections of sundial manuscripts, 16th to 20th century

Main door lock, 17th century

Digital Update

WE'LL DO THE CONTENT OURSELVES...

Do non-interpreters overlook the art, skill and time required to create good content? Dan Boys argues that it may come down to growing confidence and shrinking budgets.

Over the last few years I have noticed something of a trend at work: more and more clients want to provide and curate their own digital content. I don't have an issue with this *per se*; there are plenty of talented people out there who can write fantastic interpretive text and work wonders with a camera.

At a project in the Forest of Dean the client supplied a series of over twenty animated gifs for inclusion in the *Hidden Heritage of the Dean* app. The images seamlessly fade from historical photos (some 120 years old) to perfect modern day reproductions. These accurate match-ups took months to produce. Firstly, the client had to identify the footprints of the original photographer before shooting a replica. Then, due to differences between the camera lenses used now and then, the images then needed tweaking in Photoshop to enable the seamless fade from old to new.

Underestimating the job

Unfortunately, I have found that this example is the exception rather than the rule. I think it is fair to say that most people do not appreciate how long it takes to bring high quality interpretive content together; the Forest of Dean team of volunteers had themselves massively underestimated the time resources required and were quite fatigued by the end of the project.

Arguably, we have noticed this trend because we have shifted from being solely content creators to offering app software. Apps themselves are a vehicle for delivering content but this issue goes deeper and I suspect the following two reasons play a major role:

© Mark Ward

Pike House now and then: one of Hidden Heritage*'s animated gifs in mid-fade*

1. People feel far more confident about making and curating their own digital media than they did just a few years ago
2. The content is seen as something that can be done in-house to save a bit of money, whereas app development is far more tricky and therefore out-sourced to external companies to deliver

Less is more

But what every interpreter will impress on you is that 'content is king'. You can't just chuck a few words on a page, snap a few photos on a dull day and use your iPad to record an interview with someone in a noisy room and think you've done your job – yes, we've seen all of these!

At the other end of the spectrum we have some clients who are so passionate about their subject that they will inevitably try and include everything they can, without realising that this overload of information will turn many people off. With a bit of guidance, clients are quite happy to accept that 'less is more'. However, it is a very hard discipline to execute well.

Early on I was told to make every word, photograph and second of audio/video earn its place. Question the content you have chosen to include time and time again and then leave it to stew. Invariably, once you return after a leave of absence you will wonder why you've included some of it, and further trimming can take place. Put yourself in the shoes of your target audience. Test it out on them.

Remember, the content needs to grab the end user, inspire and engage them. It needs to swiftly enhance their experience which in turn will encourage them to further explore the site and app.

Interpretive writing is an art

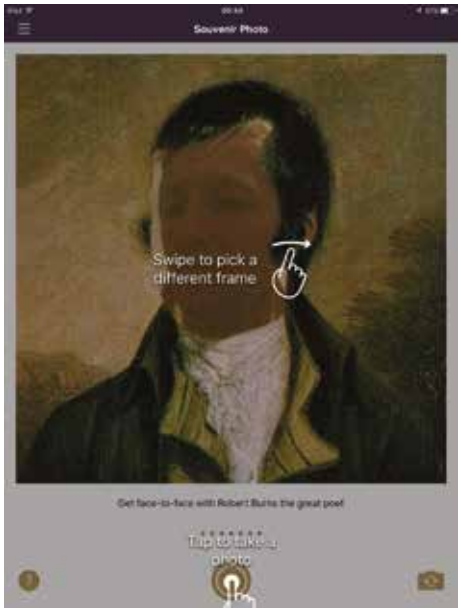
I've been producing interpretative content for 15 years and I am still learning. I will often revisit old course notes and learn from what others have done well to refresh myself on those little techniques that can make content come alive and grab the visitor.

© Audio Trails Ltd

Less is more: 18 words can say quite a lot! Magna Steelos Gallery

© Audio Trails Ltd

The MK Trails app has a good mix of thoughtful content for each place of interest



© Audio Trails Ltd

Create a souvenir photo on Ayr Through the Ages *and replace Robert Burns' face with your own*

> *At the other end of the spectrum we have some clients who are so passionate about their subject that they will inevitably try and include everything they can, without realising that this overload of information will turn many people off.*

And when I read a particularly beautiful sentence from a novel I add it to a document on my laptop for later inspiration, such as this one from Tess of the Durbervilles:

'The quick-silvery glaze on the rivers and pools vanished; from broad mirrors of light they changed to lustreless sheets of lead, with a surface like a rasp.'

Connecting people and place

Our app software connects people with place. Each Place page we have on an app doesn't need to contain chapter and verse because the page will scroll endlessly. When clients choose to supply their own content we break it down; treat each page as an interpretation panel – a panel with a maximum of 150 words, some pictures, plus some audio.

Capture the essence of the place with an opening paragraph (in larger or emboldened font). Use headers and images to break up text and introduce audio to enable visitors to lift their gaze from the screen and listen as they explore the place of interest with their feet and eyes. A mix of soundbite media will assist in the various ways people learn and consume content.

Adding questions and activities is a simple way to enliven the text further, and through apps we can add all manner of exciting functionality to make that content fly in ways we couldn't have imagined just a few years ago.

Dumbing down?

There is of course the concern that you may be accused of dumbing down your interpretation, but hopefully you will understand who your key audiences are and target content at them.

The bottom line is to treat content like your own children. Give it all the love and attention you can muster. Devote lots of time to it and in due course it will reward you when it flies the nest and becomes part of the wider community. You can then look upon it like a proud parent and pat yourself on the back for a good job done.

Dan Boys runs audiotrails.co.uk, a digital interpretation consultancy delivering audio trails and location-aware (native and web) app software.

In conversation with...

DOMINIC SORE

Dominic Sore is a Director at The Hub, a specialist fit-out contractor with over a decade of experience delivering national and international museum and exhibition projects. He gives Rachel Teskey his take on the role of the fit-out team and emerging sector trends.

Tell me a bit about The Hub and how you work

We've been established for over a decade and we're best known for our fit-out work on blockbuster exhibitions in London, although we work all over the world these days. We're a diverse team – the managerial team have backgrounds in everything from design to construction to joinery and that's something that filters through the whole company. And the whole team really cares about the sector, we go out to museums as visitors and bring back new influences and ideas. On holiday, I'm always taking my kids around museums. I love what we do, and it feels more like a hobby than a job. We work collaboratively with our clients, thinking creatively and practically to get the best result for visitors. As fit-out contractors, we're often the last people at the table, but we prefer to be involved in the process as early as possible.

© Jim Stevenson

Revolutions @ the V&A. Design by Nissen Richards Studio

So it's important for you to be on board from the beginning?

Absolutely. That way the end product is better informed from the start – we can contribute our experience of what works and what doesn't so that the client not only makes the best use of the budget but also ensures the highest level of visitor experience. We know how visitors and staff interact with exhibitions in real life and that understanding is invaluable. We've come onto projects where object displays can't be changed without standing on display cases, or where table-top interactives have been designed to be wheelchair accessible, but the designers don't realise that many people come with children and have them sat on their lap, which affects how they use the interface. With expertise and prototyping, we can identify these things before they become an issue.

© Ollie Potter

Ahmad Al-Jaber Oil and Gas Museum. Design by Event

As well as being involved early on, what else makes for a good relationship with the client team?

At the start of a new job we spend a lot of time trying to get under the skin of the project and understanding the challenges that have come before. We make sure that the whole team, from directors to the guys on the shop floor, have a rapport with the client. Doing fit-out for museums is a bit like going into the client's house – we need a strong relationship, respect and trust across the whole team. Clarity of approach is also vital to ensure that everyone gets the best end result. And we like to be involved after opening too – project evaluation with the client and professional team is a really useful tool.

© Daniel James

Museum of Liverpool. Design by Redman Design Partnership

© Real Studios

Lapworth Museum of Geology. Design by Real Studios

How did you get into the museum sector?

It was by accident to be honest. At university, my course focused on hotel and commercial design and I'd never even thought about museum design. Then I went on a placement with Haley Sharpe Design and I was hooked. I'm keen to get young people into the industry. I teach at De Montfort University on the Interior Design course and at the University of Leicester on the Museum Studies programme to reach out to a range of students.

What's been your favourite project to work on?

There's so many to choose from, but the Museum of Liverpool was a real stand-out. I was on the project in various capacities the whole way through, from the design on paper to meeting the Queen at the opening. It's the most important social history museum to open in the UK for a century and it really is about Liverpool, for Liverpool and with a Liverpool sense of humour. Throughout the project, the content and the people were great. At the opening one of the oral history interviewees came rushing up to me wanting to know where they could hear their interview – seeing that excitement from visitors is fantastic.

What emerging and future trends are you seeing in the sector?

Well there's a difference between what's happening and what I'd like to see happen! Technology, in my opinion, is being pushed too heavily as a means to tell stories. We ought to be going back to basics, telling stories through what's there in front of you rather than recreating it on screen – that's the real value of museums. On a positive note, there's been a major shift in museum design in recent years, from black boxes to bright, wonderful places to go.

Rachel Teskey is a researcher and writer in the cultural heritage sector.

On holiday, I'm always taking my kids around museums. I love what we do, and it feels more like a hobby than a job. We work collaboratively with our clients, thinking creatively and practically to get the best result for visitors.

Debate

To charge or not to charge?

Darren Barker lays down the gauntlet and asks – to charge or not to charge for entry to museums?

To charge or not to charge? This is the question that most cultural and heritage organisations have had to grapple with in Senior Management Team and Trustee meetings over the last decade. The near constant uncertainty of repeated cuts in funds as a response to the downturn in global economics, a consistent whittling down of core funding from government both central and local, and the disquiet caused by BREXIT have all contributed to this question being right at the top of the agenda.

Not unsurprising, given the £1bn drop in culture spending since 2010, and 45 museums closing down in the same period. It is not a new question – rather one that we ask on a cyclical basis – and as the policy makers encourage the sector to be resilient, and monetise our assets and experiences. We all know that the experience cultural and heritage organisations offer has great and diverse value – and it is a matter of policy, financial necessity, politics and some bravery as to whether charging structures are implemented. And when the decision is made, it is often seen as a policy that could restrict access, and create elitism.

But is this actually true? In many areas of our lives we very happily (and repeatedly by Direct Debit) pay for other leisure or 'edutainment' – so why not high-quality exhibitions or experiences, with the knowledge that our money will support the future of our cultural and heritage assets? Some of the paid experiences in life – such as £5.99 a month for Netflix or £10.00 [adult ticket] for the WonderLab at the Science Museum – we feel are exceptional value. Paying for a service or something enjoyable is something we are generally more than comfortable with. We pay for quality, and we know that our money has helped to make a great programme, exhibition or experience. There is a direct perception of value.

> *Clearly, people are buying great experiences and are willing to pay for something that has impact and benefit. Inspirational interpretation must educate, engage and entertain, and if charging for appropriate elements of a visit deepens this then there is a strong case to charge and many do.*

So, what impact does charging have? The excellent recent Association of Independent Museums (AIM, 2016) study of museum charging is a timely barometer of the state of play. From a 311 strong sample of museums the trends are compelling, and charging overall is seen as a positive step in terms of the engagement of the audience. In summary, 57% of these museums charge, and for those that don't charge 30% are planning to do so. Of those that now have charges, there has been some reduction in user numbers in the short term, but that charging has been received positively by users. The study also illustrates that great interpretation makes emotional and intellectual impact, but if we have paid for an experience our level of engagement is often deepened, users dwell longer, and crucially their secondary spend is likely to be higher in the shop and café. The other key finding was that when charges are in place there has not been any major impact on audience diversity. Organisations have found ways to maintain access – through specifically targeted policies such as 'local people go free', and particular low or no charge days for older people.

So does this mean we should charge? Clearly, people are buying great experiences and are willing to pay for something that has impact and benefit. Inspirational interpretation must educate, engage and entertain, and if charging for appropriate elements of a visit deepens this then there is a strong case to charge and many do. There is an opportunity through good interpretation to change visitors' relationship to this transaction – we could start to position 'charges' as investments – and tell that story, and like many sites give free repeat use as an incentive. But one size never fits all, and charging is only part of a far more complex mix of incomes for organisations. A large part of our work is about developing financial strategies for cultural and heritage institutions, and there is no single simple answer. Charging is only a part of the mix of incomes, and the mix is increasingly diverse, as the sector is changing and responding to shifting financial contexts. The content, narrative and interpretation is the engine

room for growth of audience and income – through programmes, exhibitions and activities that have a charge attached – but it cannot be looked at in isolation. Making a charge and developing income goes some way to funding the bottom line, but it isn't the silver bullet.

Perhaps the real question is: is there another way? There is the bigger picture of funding culture and how that financial ecosystem works. There are of course many creative ideas set out in various documents and publications – that look at 'leveraging assets', 'USA style philanthropy', 'crowd-funding' – and some of these have worked on some level. As a nation we are at a crossroads. Change is on the way, and fresh thinking is needed. We need to move away from grant funding to new 'investment' models where value and impact is central. Culture should be repositioned to the heart of financial policy given the depth of the very real social impact and huge economic impact it creates, but it's not currently seen that way in terms of funding. Rather, it's often seen as a 'nice to have', 'non-statutory' or the 'icing on the cake'. The reality is that culture creates places, social impact, economic value and identity – and that should be captured by a far more advanced system of cultural economics.

The collective work of the sector and funders such as the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council often drive the creation of significant economic impact and value of towns and cities. The originating cultural or heritage organisations don't often directly benefit from these 'good economics'. Rather, the transaction is one way – through higher rents, stronger property prices or the movement of a

Perhaps the real question is: is there another way? There is the bigger picture of funding culture and how that financial ecosystem works.

place up the competitiveness rankings. The people that benefit financially – such as local retailers, property developers, property owners and companies who can attract and retain workforces because of a good cultural infrastructure are not currently an integral part of the debate. This is because the value that culture creates is not often fully recognised. This is where the debate should be – and we need to open ourselves to creative ideas that allow our cultural offering to flourish and grow.

Potential strategies come from international sources. They are certainly not simple to implement, but have been successful as part of a suite of mechanisms for cultural investment such as a 1% payroll tax for business allocated for cultural activity in Brazil, hotel room/ cultural tourism taxation in Europe [note the Mayor of London has endorsed the January 2017 'Options for a tourism levy for London' report advocating this approach], and the 'Cultural District' models in the USA (such as the highly successful St Louis example). Some strategic thinking is needed here, and there are some excellent opportunities such as devolution in major cities to put some of these types of ideas and macro-economics in place. We need to go beyond the 'resilience' agenda to a real dialogue about investment in culture and heritage into the future. As Sir Peter Bazalgette pointed out in 'Create' [Journal of perspectives on the value of art and culture] – we do need a mixed model, and must be holistic both in making a case for ongoing public investment and how that works with business and philanthropy.

A chat with Mrs May? The recent appointment of Tristram Hunt as the new Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum is potentially a good sign – someone who understands both the economics and the politics. But in the meantime, Mrs May, I would be very happy to come over to Number 10...

Darren Barker is Founding Director of cultural planning practice Barker Langham.

Interpretation as Entertainment

Smog and sausages

Nanjing Tangshan Geopark Museum

Matt Jones looks at a creative cooperation of cultures transforming museum visitor experiences in China.

China – a land of mystery and surprises; a place rich in natural and cultural heritage; a place where the pace of change frequently leaves you breathless – along with the smog. Nowhere is the pace of change greater than in the growth of 'the creative cultural sector', where a seismic shift is taking place in approaches to planning and designing museums and other heritage attractions.

A tale from the Orient

I'd like you to picture a scene…
Ranged around a gigantic, dark wooden table are about a hundred Chinese people staring intently at a projection screen. Not a flicker of emotion is evident, just a steady, focused attention. I'm in the boardroom of a Chinese museum design agency talking about Western approaches to interpretive planning and design. Actually, I'm exploring the subject of 'experiential AV and pervasive digital media'.

Despite having the supreme translation and communication skills of my Chinese colleague available to me, I am hesitant about showing the next slide. The slide in question features a prominent picture of a nose, some sausages cooking in a pan and a plump sausage on a fork – I expect you can guess the message I was hoping to convey. The images are accompanied by two words – 'sizzle' and 'sausage'. At first the faces around the table remain motionless, but as the talk unfolds and I share various examples of how the 'putting-the-sizzle-before-the-sausage-principle' can transform visitor experiences, I start seeing the light gradually go on all around the room.

After the talk, and the CEO's lengthy reflections and thank you messages, something surprising happens as one by one we're approached by excited designers and planners eager to share their projects and explain how the sizzle principle has already started sparking ideas in their heads. I say this is unusual, because often these kinds of meetings have a strict protocol and it can be hard work soliciting any kind of open response. Question after excited question follows – admittedly aided by bribery through sweets – before eventually the meeting disperses and the CEO announces he would like us to repeat the whole thing to the rest of his staff after lunch!

Many museum buildings are simply vast, with implementation budgets to match. This means openness to big ideas and ambitions.

Smelling the sausage

I recite this little story because for me it epitomises what I see as the hunger and openness to 'new ideas' and the latent giant of innovation and creativity stirring in China. Everywhere in China it seems people are taking off their smog masks to smell the sausage – apologies to any vegetarians among you!

At this point I should explain that most of our work in China is in collaboration with Chinese museum design agencies for whom we provide conceptual planning and design services.

China museum boom

Now, I could bore you with a load of statistics about the reasons for the staggering growth in museums and the rise of the creative cultural sector in China, but if you're interested use the Ecosia web search engine to look up 'China museum boom'. It will have the added benefit of making you feel warm and fuzzy in the knowledge that your search has resulted in a tree being planted somewhere in Peru.

I'd like to point out a few 'museumy' things that are different in China compared to the UK as a bit of backdrop to talking about some projects we've been involved in.

Firstly, scale! Many museum buildings are simply vast, with implementation budgets to match. This means openness to big ideas and ambitions.

Secondly, there is a rapidly growing appetite for museum experiences among an expanding middle class. This is a group of typically very 'switched on' and tech savvy people immersed in all aspects of a ballooning popular culture entertainment scene. You know that song by Katie Melua – 'there are 9 million bicycles in Beijing'? Well sorry Katie, not any more, times have changed, and that's a fact. Cars, mobile phones, 20D cinemas, Starbucks, vast shopping malls and theme parks are default experience for many now.

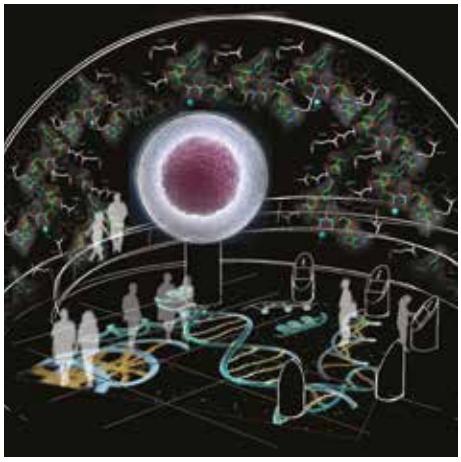
Thirdly, many museums have a lack of meaningful collections. Rather than this necessarily being a negative, it does give a certain licence to museums to pursue engaging forms of interaction and entertainment to enhance the story-telling power of the collections that they do have.

Fourthly, there is a lack of anything that we would recognise as interpretive planning. For us this represents a great opportunity, and it is very encouraging to see an increasing number of tenders actively specifying Western style planning approaches.

Fifthly, every project has a system of 'expert' academic advisors. Typically, these people know everything about their subject and want everyone else to do likewise. Words such as 'entertainment' and 'engagement' are completely alien to them. On reflection, maybe that's not so different from the UK!

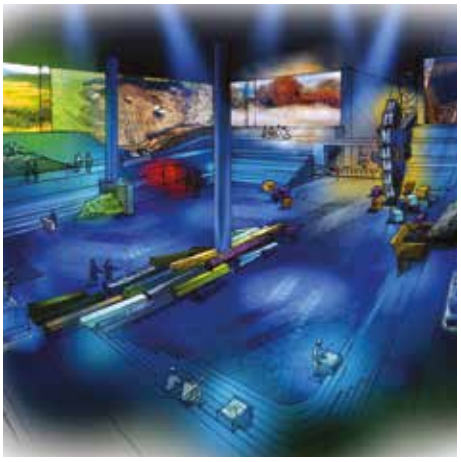
Media + Message + Motivation = engagement

From the outset of our involvement in museum design in China our rationale has been to bring a Western interpretive

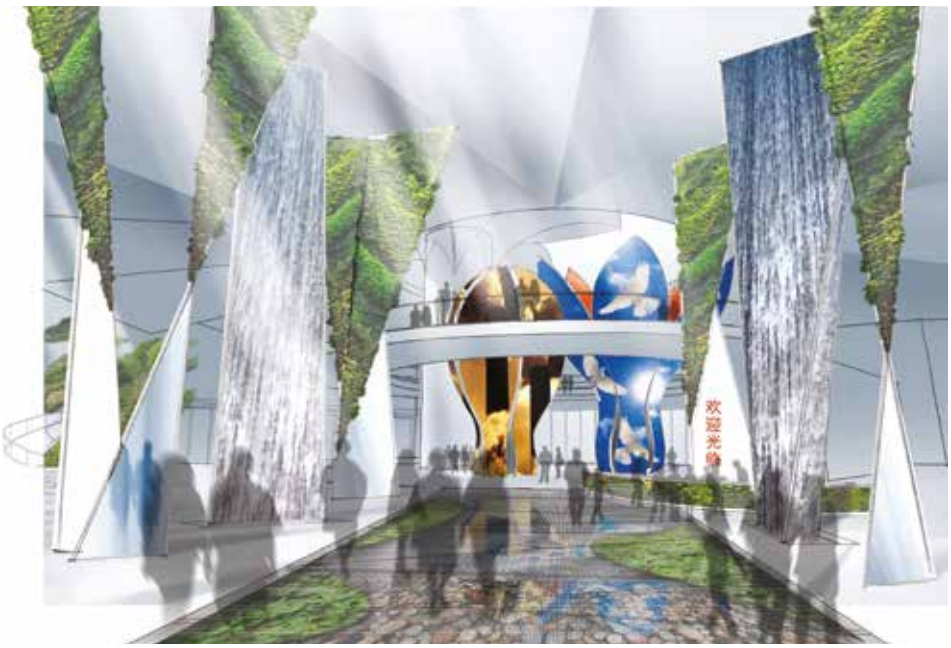


Industrial chemistry

The Dino trail



Geology rocks!



The lobby

planning and design approach. Central to this is the notion that we need to think firstly about visitor motivations and design carefully structured and paced emotional and narrative journeys. Often we draw on the principles of gaming to think up experiences that involve challenge and competition, achievement and reward.

On the dino trail

Dinosaurs, for example, provide a great topic for entertaining museum visits. For one museum, we proposed a multi-gallery palaeontology exploration trail. Participants opt in by downloading an app and are then guided by a network of wireless iBeacons. En route they're prompted to fulfil various challenges in order to score points and progress through the ranks to the level of Senior Palaeontologist. Participants might 'take a selfie with the T.rex', 'scan a skull to discover more about theories of dinosaur intelligence' or 'explore the bone pit and record and identify your discoveries'. Real time scoring provides a constant motivation for players to complete challenges and unlock bonus challenges for more points.

Crystal Maze meets Costa

How does a museum about industrial chemistry go about entertaining a young audience? Well, our suggestion was to use one entire floor of the museum to create a multi-area gaming and hang-out space – think Crystal Maze meets Costa coffee shop. Organised groups book in to spend a good half-day competing amongst themselves and against other groups in a range of challenges relating to different applications of industrial chemistry to everyday life.

Wowsers!

Creating a WOW! factor is a big deal in China. Museum lobbies in particular are seen as ideal places to entice and entertain through large-scale interaction or artistic installations.

Geology rocks!

In one geology museum, we designed an experience in which visitors put on special miners' helmets and compete against each other to discover rare and useful minerals within a stylised, immersive mine environment. Wirelessly tagged helmets provide triggers for lighting, pyrotechnics, mechanical reveals, sounds and projection-mapped imagery. Elsewhere in the same museum, visitors can experience the life cycle of an opencast mine on a dramatic ride.

Geology rocks!

Blurring boundaries

In China, as in the West, the boundaries between out-and-out 'visitor attraction' and 'museum' are becoming increasingly blurred as institutions adopt more and more of the tactics and technologies of popular culture entertainment to attract, engage and retain visitors.

Content is king

I finish with the same statement that I left in the minds of those Chinese planners and designers at the beginning of the article – 'remember, content is king'. No matter how cool or whizzy or fancy the technology and how strong the impulse to entertain, we must ensure we've properly understood why we want to use it and how it drives forward our story or conveys our message. Many times within Chinese museums (and maybe sometimes in the UK) it is a case of 'all the gear and no idea'.

What came home to that group of Chinese planners and designers sitting around the table wasn't 'wow, that is a cool bit of tech' but rather 'wow, I can really see how that helps to bring the story alive'.

Yes, China continues to be a land of mystery and surprises in many ways – it constantly amazes me every time I visit. But I won't be at all surprised to hear sometime soon how China is making waves in creating cutting edge museums to match the best of the West – it is only a matter of time.

Matt Jones is a Senior Interpretation Consultant with Imagemakers Design & Consulting Ltd.

Interpretation as Entertainment

What do ghosts eat for supper?

Ali Marshall gleefully relates how she attracts family audiences to Torre Abbey Gardens through terrible jokes, horror and fun – all backed with the science of plants.

Why begin with a bad joke? Possibly not the most obvious introduction to a piece on interpretation but stop for a moment and think back to your last Christmas. Chances are you and your family or friends read out every cracker joke that fell on to the table, knowing full well that they would be atrocious, but sharing the experience anyway. Good comedy is not the easiest thing to do well, and should probably be left to the professionals, but old jokes are somehow comforting; common ground, whatever our background. We groan together as a group, at ease in each other's company.

The need for humour

Like all museums Torre Abbey, in Devon, wants visitors to be inspired and engaged during their time with us. We want them to connect and compare the wonders they see here with their own lives and experiences and to feel comfortable and confident in this setting that can often be seen as supercilious. Although it may not be appropriate in all circumstances, humour and a sense of fun can be a significant factor that works across socio-economic boundaries and customer types, especially as a conduit for engaging less traditional audiences. The serious side to funny is that having a good time improves memory and cognition.

Our core audience, the culture vultures and comfortable seniors, are well served by the latest round of Lottery funded restoration and reinterpretation, with plenty of well-designed, thoughtful interpretation panels and interactive displays to enjoy. However, we also know that we have a responsibility towards other sections of the community, as well as a financial need for their long-term custom. Recent work with 'harder to reach' audience panels along with other analytic research has shown us how much expectations and needs can differ from group to group and how differently we may need to present ourselves to achieve our goals.

Torre Abbey, Devon

Like all museums Torre Abbey, in Devon, wants visitors to be inspired and engaged during their time with us. We want them to connect and compare the wonders they see here with their own lives and experiences and to feel comfortable and confident in this setting that can often be seen as supercilious.

A good product

We are fortunate at Torre Abbey to have a 'product' that lends itself well to variety in interpretation. The Abbey and its gardens and grounds, after eight hundred years of almost continuous usage, already have a multiple personality disorder. Medieval monastic ruins, Georgian dining rooms, Pre Raphaelite art collections, a garden with tropical glasshouses, woodland walks and meadows are all metaphorically under

one roof, although admittedly Cromwell's men removed a considerable part of the actual roof when they had the chance! We think we are lucky to have so many options.

Torre Abbey Gardens, specifically, is playing a key role in attracting family audiences to the Abbey. Parents and carers have told us they want a relaxed, fun space to let their children both play and explore. This can be a difficult thing to manage in a building full of precious items but is much easier in an outdoor space. They also want to participate themselves in the experience on offer so we now design the majority of our garden activities for families as a unit, rather than just creating something to occupy children. Our activities must be fun for both adult and child and must allow both interaction and engagement with each other as well as with their surrounding environment.

For local families, particularly, pricing is also a big issue. Torquay has surprisingly high levels of deprivation so we took the decision last year to allow under 18s to go free and to provide free but hopefully interesting ways to spend time at a museum that would help us be seen in a somewhat different light.

Mix your own witches' brew

Eeeeek!

The garden's Halloween trail is just one example of this approach. Pumpkin trails round a garden are fairly common at this time of year but hardly innovative or special and we wanted to create something with a little more depth, that would challenge people's perceptions of Halloween whilst having a really good time together.

As financial resources are limited we created props out of junk; using pallets, glass jars, papier-mache, leftover craft materials with a minimal spend on some plastic bats and spider webs since real ones would be a little hard to keep in one place. We did manage to spice things up with a live tarantula in a very secure tank though – it happens to be my pet and yes, the risk assessment was interesting!

Key features and plants in the garden formed the backbone of the trail, each one a starting point for a discussion about the history and myths of Halloween and horror in more general terms. Each stopping point had some highly visible props, some interactive but nothing that would really terrify young children, along with written interpretation that worked on several levels; the ubiquitous bad joke, for children to share or despair at with their responsible adults, plus a longer story about whatever Halloween subject was appropriate.

Poison!

So in our poison garden (blame Agatha Christie's Torquay connections) we placed the accoutrements of the traditional fairy tale witch; a cauldron complete with eyeballs and green slime, a pointy hat and besom, bottles of revoltingly named witches' potions. The interpretation, though, concentrated on the history of witchcraft and the use and misuse of various hallucinogenic substances. We aimed for informative but light hearted text that would appeal to adults but that could also be accessed by curious older children.

Death and zombies!

In other areas of the garden we tackled urban and cultural myths such as the man-eating trees of Madagascar, the ecology of bats, the truth behind Jack o' Lanterns (not American in origin, even if the pumpkin is) and the more ridiculous aspects of medieval medicine, encouraging visitors to mix up their own potions. We even managed to cover urtication (skin irritation) in plants and animals, the tarantula having been conveniently placed in our Cactus House alongside an urticating prickly pear. The trail appropriately enough ended with death itself, connecting resurrection, the notion of the soul and zombies (I'm very proud of this one) and encouraging visitors to take a selfie whilst lying in a stone coffin.

Watch out – its behind you!

> *As financial resources are limited we created props out of junk; using pallets, glass jars, papier-mache, leftover craft materials with a minimal spend on some plastic bats and spider webs since real ones would be a little hard to keep in one place.*

As the week progressed, a positive reaction on social media and by word of mouth helped bring in many new faces, families who now return regularly to a space they feel good about. I've even been given a nickname by local children – Spiderlady. No superpowers, though.

And the answer to the joke? As is the custom, it's printed at the bottom of the page upside down.

A skull lurks amongst the plants

Ali Marshall is Head Gardener at Torre Abbey, Torquay, Devon.

'spook'hetti' …obviously.

Interpretation as Entertainment

Press the red button now

Hamish MacGillivray takes us via a time machine to some past and present examples of what might be classified as interactives. A few laws of physics were broken in the making of this article…

For some, an interactive is the latest audio-visual app for their smartphone to bring alive stories about a museum or historic site. For others, it is a bespoke kiosk with push buttons offering hidden facts about the exhibits on display to unsuspecting visitors. A few may regard an interactive as a bird-spotting activity booklet in a park.

For Mark Walhimer, an interactive exhibit requires 'branching outcomes' rather than a single outcome as with a push-button. For Mr Walhimer, such an interactive is a box of sand. He observes '…the sand is doing very little until you start to use it, then the action can be with the sand, other participants (past, present and future) as well as the conversation with other participants that accompanies such interaction, often the most important part of the exhibit dialogue is with other participants.'

Mr Wells

To further understand the use of interactives as interpretation tools we need to look at some examples from the past and present. I press the red button on my smartphone app for a Time Machine Guide. Suddenly, with a metallic clattering a giant metal spider, with only three tall cast-iron legs, appears above us in a cloud of orange steam. The body of this tripod is made out of hundreds of rusty bicycle wheels with an old aircraft jet engine on its back. Driving it gently down with levers is the small and jolly Mr H.G. Wells wearing goggles, a yellow linen suit and straw boater hat. He yells for everybody to climb the ladder under the tripod, find a seat and buckle up. We scramble up and hastily snap shut our seat belts. Mr Wells pushes a long metal lever and yells 'Tally Ho! Victorian entertainment!' We disappear, with a shudder, into a cloud of cold yellow steam.

For amusement only?

We appear in a field near the smells, noise and bright lights of a fairground in the English countryside of 1885. This, Mr Wells explains, as we climb down the ladder, is the dawn of the modern public interactive experience: the penny slot machines. We enter the arcade tent with a large sign that declares 'For amusement only'.

There is a row of large glazed wooden boxes with glittering small metal balls spinning around pushed by sprung levers, controlled by excited families clutching penny coins. Mr Wells stands on a beer crate and tells us to gather round. He says that these coin-operated amusement machines were first used by showmen in their sideshows. They now appear on coastal piers and city arcades in the USA and UK. The penny slots are in the categories of working models, fortunetellers, athletic machines, shooting games and film machines. Mr Wells points out us that the principles of the fairground machines are seen in 21st century video games and museum interactives.

The sandbox. Acme Museum Services

We depart the countryside and fly like a jet fighter over to 1903, to New York. We land like a helicopter in Bedford Park, Brooklyn, next to a huge Victorian villa mansion. We can hear happy children chatting and playing inside. Mr Wells insists, as we walk up to the building called the Brooklyn Children's Museum, not to disturb those inside. We peek through a large open window to see the curator Anne Billings Gallup conducting a tour for pompous city officials. Ms Billings Gallup explains she has set up a 'busy bee' room were children study natural history material they have collected. The children use magnifying glasses, microscopes and a press to identify and label minerals, insects and plants. To the amazement of the officials she says 8,000 children are members of the Museum clubs. Mr Wells whispers this is the origin of enquiry based exploratory learning, which will influence interactive design and education later on. He suggests we leave New York and zip 66 years into the future…

The animated Periodic Table at the Science Museum, London 1964-1977

We descend onto the roof of the Science Museum in London. As we enter a gallery we are confronted by a huge Periodic Table, looming above us, like a railway information board that has lost its way.

Library of experiments

It's 1969 and we are hovering above the cavernous Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco. Inside a very enthusiastic former physicist, cattle rancher and teacher, Frank Oppenheimer, assembles his crew of artists, educators and scientists for the opening of his 'library of experiments'. This is the Exploratorium. Mr Wells says that Frank is passionate for the public to explore scientific phenomena at their own pace, following their own curiosity, similar to Ms Billings Gallup. Apparently, we will come for a return visit but Mr Wells pushes us back onto the rusty tripod to visit Japan.

We enter the World Fair 'Expo 70' at Osaka that proclaims we will enjoy World Culture and Innovation. Mr Wells directs us into the huge 'Pepsi-Pavilion' full of pulsating lights and strange sound effects. Mr Wells introduces Billy Klüver, co-founder of the artists and engineers group Experiments in Art and Technology. Mr Klüver tells us there is no story to guide people here; the visitor is encouraged as an individual to explore the environment and compose his or her own experience. It is a wonderful sensory multi-media show. Mr Wells allows us to have a tea break and we then buckle up to cross the Atlantic again.

Large toy construction bricks used at Cowdray Park Ruins, summer 2016. Acme Museum Services.

We descend onto the roof of the Science Museum in London. As we enter a gallery we are confronted by a huge Periodic Table, looming above us, like a railway information board that has lost its way. It comes to life with lights flashing under the chemical symbols as a group of school children are merrily pressing all the buttons on a desk console. Mr Wells giggles as a teacher tries to engage the excited group about chemical names. However, the children pretend they are organising a light show for a rock gig and the teacher gives up and joins them. We also push the buttons on the console and then Mr Wells says we have to visit some ruins. This time the Time Machine tripod vibrates with clanking noises as we leave the 1970s and disappear into green steam clouds.

Explore and play

Mr Wells tells us not to be alarmed, as we are back in 2017. We have arrived in the ruins of a Tudor palace near the South Downs, England. With a grin Mr Wells points to a family listening very carefully to stories about Henry VIII and Guy Fawkes on their hand-held audio guides. This is Cowdray Park Ruins, near one of Mr Wells's old haunts. He points to some very large toy plastic blocks at the entrance to the palace. Another family are busy using the toy blocks making crenellations similar to the Tudor walls. Mr Wells asks us which will be the most memorable interactive experience for those families? As we ponder the question Mr Wells looks at his fob watch and mutters something about shadows, pushes us back on board, pulls another lever on the tripod and the ruins fade away as we fly upwards.

Playful tinkering at the Exploratorium, San Francsico

> *You people in the 21st century think that your technology is the best ever for interpreting history and science. But I ask you whatever happened to your Bluetooth? Or your QR codes?*

We glide into the loading bay of the Beall Centre for Art and Technology in Irvine, California. We walk into a darkened gallery of an interactive video installation. This is '*Shadows of Light*' created by British digital artist Alex May. Mr Wells chats to the artist, as we make slow, colourful, dripping shadows onto the projected screen. Mr May tells us that he enjoys the challenge of making a space for visitors to explore and play. Recently, one woman was seen practising yoga in front of the screen for 20 minutes. Mr Wells congratulates the artist and we return to San Francisco.

The Tinkering Studio in action

Breaking down museum walls

We appear inside the Exploratorium in 2017 and look down from the tripod. There are excited families fiddling with bits of wire, craft tools and some laptops. Mr Wells stands up on his cockpit and says:

'You people in the 21st century think that your technology is the best ever for interpreting history and science. But I ask you whatever happened to your Bluetooth? Or your QR codes? However, your smartphones and social media are amazing, with the potential of evolving into the ultimate interpretation toolkit. But look around us. These families are tinkering. It's part of the STEAM education movement.'

'Do you remember on our tour that whatever the technology used the most popular interactives use the principle of play? Be aware, you will have to think creatively about changing those monolithic institutions called museums. The use of exploratory play and new reliable technology with community groups will be very useful for breaking down museum walls. Now get off my tripod! I have a scientific romance to write!'

And with that Mr Wells pushes us down the ladder! He then waves at us, pulls a lever, and he and the Time Machine tripod vanish into a cloud of warm purple steam, followed by the noise of old motorbikes gently backfiring...

Mr Wells is now on tour in his play 'One Man and His Tripod' in various timezones.

Hamish MacGillivray designs low-tech interactives for exhibitions and historic sites. www.acmemuseumservices.co.uk

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Interpretation as Entertainment

Blockbusters!

Linda Lloyd Jones explains how, since its foundation in 1857, the V&A has unashamedly endeavoured to entertain as well as to impart knowledge.

The founding director of the V&A, Sir Henry Cole, wrote in his first Annual Report (1875) for the South Kensington Museum, as the V&A was then known, of visitors' '…looks of surprise and pleasure' at the '…new, acceptable and wholesome excitement this evening entertainment affords to all of them.' For the Museum, to fulfil its aim to be as accessible as possible to 'the whole people' (i.e. the general public), was not only the first in the UK to be open 6 days a week, but was open until 10.00pm 3 nights a week.

Enrichment through enjoyment

The desire to entertain remains apparent to this day, and is made explicit in the Museum's mission statement, which includes *enjoyment* as a major objective: 'Our mission is to be recognised as the world's leading museum of art, design and performance and to enrich people's lives by promoting research, knowledge and enjoyment of the designed world to the widest possible audience.'[1]

Blockbuster exhibitions too have been a feature of the V&A since its inception. Cole augmented the nascent permanent collections with temporary exhibitions, and in 1863, over a period of 17 days, 229,425 people came to see an exhibition of the wedding presents of the Prince and Princess of Wales. At an average of 13,495 people per day, by any standard this constitutes a blockbuster and the Museum's most popular exhibition. On one, free entry day 'the number of persons admitted from ten am till ten pm was 20,467, besides 372 babies in arms'.

Exhibition of the Royal Wedding presents

Queueing for Fabérge, 1977

The V&A's exhibitions programme continues to epitomise the desire to entertain as well as to present new research and develop innovative methods of display.

The criteria for selecting subjects to explore include:

- balancing historic and contemporary, popular and scholarly topics;
- balancing demographic appeal;
- ensuring topics relate to and make use of the Museum's permanent collections;
- making sure that design is central to the content and treatment of the subject;
- providing curators with time, space and assistance to conduct original research;
- publishing a scholarly book to accompany the exhibition.

Top hits

If the criteria of a blockbuster exhibition is size of audience and return on investment, few exhibitions make it into this category. Mass appeal relies upon public familiarity with the subject. And if comparisons are to be made with museums elsewhere in the world, cultural habits play a big part too. The top eight of most visited exhibitions of 2015 were held at the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and judging from the titles almost all relate to Chinese art. Elsewhere, big names in fine art dominate the league table, e.g. *Impressionist Masterpieces* at Tokyo's Metropolitan Art Museum.

1 V&A Strategic Plan 2015 to 2020

Revolution *poster*

The V&A's most popular exhibitions since 2000 fall primarily into the following categories:

- Fashion e.g. *Versace, Westwood, Alexander McQueen*
- Design Styles e.g. *Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Surrealism*
- Performance e.g. *Hollywood Costumes, David Bowie is, You say you want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966-1970*

The need for space…

A typical V&A exhibition contains a lot of 3-dimensional objects, be they product design, performance costume, graphic design, high fashion or architecture. This material generally requires plinths and showcases to provide protection, as well as walls for physical support. All of this takes up floor space and limits the number of visitors a gallery can accommodate. Making sure visitors can see every object and label is paramount: an exhibition with a lot of objects (*You say you want a Revolution* has over 800 objects) consequently limits the number of visitors in a gallery per time slot. This, of course, limits the income stream, which negatively impacts the budget. Fire regulations permitting, judging the optimum number of visitors at any one time is an art. Some visitors spent up to 8 hours in *David Bowie is…* they were so captivated, whilst the average dwell time for a popular show is nearer 90 minutes.

And words…

Unlike fine art, design and decorative art objects also generally require context to explain their presence in a show. This has to be conveyed within a coherent narrative that is both compelling and comprehensible. Explanatory texts are the usual (and very effective) method of imparting information, but as technology has advanced, so the 35mm slide projector has given way to sophisticated digital media providing moving images and sound to conjure up context, atmosphere and pace in support of the narrative and the objects. These additional hi-tech elements all require specialist designers, artists and technical consultants, adding to the complexity of the curator's role as custodian of research, storyline and narration. It also adds considerably to the cost of preparing and maintaining an exhibition.

To date the V&A has not employed virtual reality within an exhibition, but as soon as the equipment becomes less cumbersome, an efficient way to disinfect it between users is invented, and the price comes down, there is clearly a role for it in particular types of show.

And lighting and sound…

Lighting effects, moving images and particularly sound and scent are absolutely vital for an immersive experience – something visitors increasingly expect of V&A exhibitions. These media provide the magical backdrop to a subject, and when used appropriately they dramatically enhance the exchange of knowledge between curator and visitor.

Ambient sound in exhibitions has its fans and vociferous detractors. A well-known, respected broadsheet art critic damned one of our shows on the grounds that he could not read labels when music was playing (probably not an issue for most teenagers). But music is essential for subjects such as *Diaghilev* or *David Bowie*, so it seems contrary for a noticeable proportion of visitors to reject headphones when sound makes up 50% of the experience and they are provided as an integral (at no extra charge) element of the exhibition. Perhaps these visitors believe they are rejecting audio-guides droning on about key objects and would prefer to read label text? Or is it a phobia of placing something over their hair or head? As yet, there is no way around this as even light weight, open back headphones that allow the visitor to chat amiably to a companion provide far superior sound quality to buds.

And backup

The V&A pioneered the management of museum exhibitions through a department dedicated to the practice. It is a model now widely emulated, but 30 years ago it was unique. More than ever, as the presentation of exhibitions has become more complex and expensive, the role of exhibition manager to control expenditure

David Bowie is *poster*

and co-ordinate Curators, Object Lenders, Transport Agents, 3D, 2D, Lighting and AV Designers, Technical Teams, Interpreters, Visitor Services, Security, Events, Press and Marketing et al. has expanded, and is today crucial to the smooth execution of an exhibition.

Marketing naturally plays a critical role in creating a blockbuster, and the exhibition content provides a wealth of interesting material for use in the marketing and communications campaign. All campaigns begin with the marketing team working closely with the curator to fully understand the content, themes and narrative of the exhibition. From that beginning, key communication messages are established, and a range of visual assets developed. For some exhibitions, the positioning and visual identity is obvious from the outset. For example, for *David Bowie is*, an image from the iconic Duffy shoot for Aladdin Sane, but importantly not the one used on the album cover, struck the right note between the familiar and the unexpected. The exhibition title meanwhile provided opportunities to add different phrases to the prefix *David Bowie is…*, giving flexibility and intrigue across a range of advertising.

With other exhibitions, the proposition can be more complex. *You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966-70* is an ambitious exploration of the seismic cultural, social, political and musical changes that defined an era. It is impossible to communicate a myriad of messages in a single image, and so for the advertising it was decided to focus on the key protagonists featured in the exhibition, and to create a suite of images that each foreground a different rebel of the era. This enabled a planned approach where the most appropriate rebel was used, based on the specific audience targeted and the media employed.

Multiple marketing channels

The fracturing of the media landscape and rise of multiple channels has been a challenging one for marketing exhibitions; it's become harder to ensure adequate cut-through on tight budgets. But it also provides great opportunities to reach people with channel specific content which can be highly targeted. This was particularly the case with *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*. A range of digital content was produced, including a trailer, plus 'behind the scenes', 'Inside View', opening night and legacy films. This provided a unique look at not only what inspired McQueen, but also of the conservation process and exhibition installation. This insight into expertise and process is normally hidden from public view but is typical of the rich content that audiences now expect in marketing materials, and are integral to any campaign.

Multiple channels provide a myriad of ways to promote exhibitions and reach particular groups of people. Alas, it does not necessarily mean that budgets go further. The day of effective free social media coverage is vanishing as the landscape becomes more crowded: paying for advertising on social channels increases the chance of cut-through to the target audience.

The more essential the 'blockbuster' becomes to a museum's viability, the greater pressure there is to produce them. But divining what will be a 'blockbuster' is harder than one might think. Market testing helps prediction, but given it can take 5 years from first idea to opening day, that audiences are attracted to subjects they already know something about, and that new insights, scholarship, interpretation and treatment are essential criteria, nothing beats the serendipity of a chosen subject becoming a hot topic in the run up to launch.

Linda Lloyd Jones is Head of Exhibitions and Loans, Victoria &Albert Museum, London.

Interpretation as Entertainment

Let me entertain you

Elin Simonsson explains how the National History Museum in London aims to take interpretation beyond the predictable.

Weaving delight, joy and playfulness into interpretive experiences can be a very effective way for us, as interpretation professionals, to engage with our audiences. And if we truly embrace entertainment as source for inspiration and collaboration, it also represents a way for us to push our professional practice in to new territories. As we discover other ways of engaging and telling stories, we will take interpretation beyond the predictable.

At the Natural History Museum, we have a long history of inviting entertainment in to our interpretation. It is an approach that is essential for bringing life, joy and wonder to our storytelling about nature.

The power of delight and playfulness

Many of the interpretive experiences we see around us today follow quite predictable patterns. As an interpretation professional, I know it is easy to create interpretation that conforms to a certain mould of recognisable techniques, and not surprisingly as we all draw on our past work. But for a moment I want you to picture a different scenario, a world where interpretive experiences, large or small, fill you with sheer delight. Where they bring moments of wonder and playfulness, they amuse and entertain, and at the same time, they intrigue and spark your curiosity. It is a form of interpretation – and by interpretation I mean the overall approach that makes up the entire experience and shapes what people see, hear, think, do and feel – that truly embraces entertainment and joy.

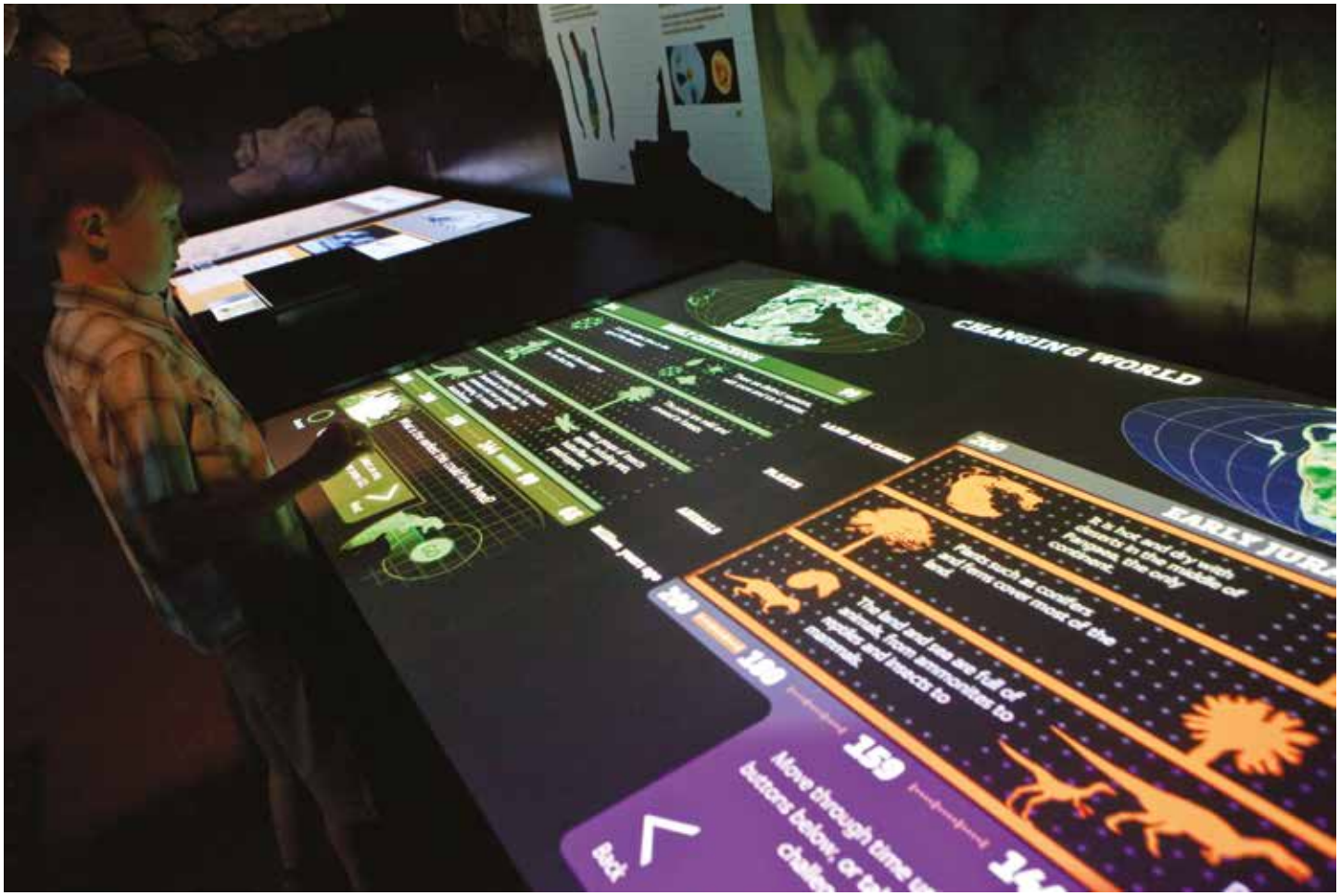
The power of this interpretive approach is immense. In my experience, both as an interpretation professional and someone who used to work as an audience researcher, interpretation that brings playfulness, delight and fun is more likely to capture and hold people's attention. If our interpretive experiences offer moments of true enjoyment and wonder, if they entertain, they are much more likely to spark curiosity and learning, and create a deeper and more rewarding form of involvement. It is a very effective way for us to connect with our audiences.

New territories, new inspiration

Embracing entertainment in this way could also hold the key to pushing our professional practice into fresh directions, beyond the expected. Especially if we, as a profession, are more imaginative in where we seek inspiration and collaborations, and look to a much broader field of entertainment disciplines for ideas, including those that may seem unrelated at first. Let's consider some examples.

We are just one of many professions that engage through that art of storytelling so why not reach out to learn from others that create compelling and powerful narratives? If we look to drama or comedy in film, TV and theatre we can explore how storylines are constructed and presented through visuals, movement and sound. What techniques do they use to connect with you and pull you in? How do storylines create suspense and wonder, or enjoyment and fun? What methods do they use to hook you to wanting to see more? Studying documentary-style film and TV could give you inspiration for how to create powerful narratives from factual information. How do these stories unfold to become a gripping narrative?

Age of the Dinosaurs exhibition: Animatronics



Storytelling through gaming in Age of the Dinosaur, the Natural History Museum

Magazines, novels and newspapers also rely on the power of compelling stories to capture your attention. How do they build their narratives? What different language styles and tone of voice do they use? How do they push you to encourage certain emotions and feelings?

Inspirational adverts

We are also far from the only profession that connects with people through messages and different forms of active engagement. Advertising in its many diverse forms provides an excellent source for new inspiration. Being a professional practice that works with target audiences and messages in creative ways, we have a lot in common and we could learn new tools for how to convey messages in interesting ways. How do advertisers craft powerful messaging through images, words and sometimes sound? How do they get across meaning and push you to feel and think, and ultimately act? From high-end boutiques to your large-scale shopping centres and supermarkets, retail experiences also employ techniques we could borrow for our own practice. Because of what they do – encouraging you to consume – they are very good at capturing attention and influencing people's behaviour. Understanding the tools they employ to engage can give us new tricks for doing the same. How do they interact with you to pull you in, to make you want to buy? How do they use design to add wonder, delight and spectacle? What methods do they use to shape how you behave?

Festivals and performances, theme parks and tourist attractions, hotels, cinemas and holiday parks, playgrounds and leisure centres all provide experiences that entertain and engage, that make you act, think, reflect, do and feel. And as such, they can give us ideas for new methods for engaging our own audiences through experiences. How do they connect and communicate, how do they bring wonder and enjoyment? How do they make you feel you have done something worthwhile and rewarding? And the list could go on. If something entertains and engages with audiences in some way, it can be a source for both inspiration and collaborative partnerships.

Bringing the wonder of nature to life

At the Natural History Museum, we have taken inspiration from different forms of entertainment for many years. We engage people with the richness and complexity of the natural world in ways that challenge how they think about nature and science, but this can be a challenging task when those stories are often told through specimens that are unimpressive or insignificant-looking, or just difficult to understand without knowing anything about them. Embedding joy and delight within our interpretation is therefore a vital approach for bringing the rich stories of nature to life. Those moments of wonder are essential for sparking people's curiosity, imagination and discovery.

Colour and vision exhibition: Art piece: playfulness

As a result, we have a long history of using entertainment and playfulness in our interpretation. The classic example is our dinosaur experiences, enjoyed by millions of visitors over the years, where moving animatronic models bring extinct animals back to life in awe-inspiring displays that bring true wonder to our storytelling about nature. It is an approach that demonstrates that borrowing elements from attractions-style entertainment is not only a very effective way of engaging visitors, it is also an approach that can be married with scientific rigour. But we weave elements of wonder and joy through all the interpretive experiences we create, not just our dinosaur exhibitions, and shape compelling storytelling through layers of interpretive methods that we borrow from many other entertainment disciplines. We have used elements of playground design, worked with writers from the advertising world to craft text and embedded humour and comedy in exhibition storytelling. We have used digital and artistic interventions, radio-style podcasts, nature documentary film, gaming and soundscape installations to create compelling and varied experiences. We have created visitor journeys through design inspired theatrical sets, layered film through our exhibition narratives and used CGI to bring extinct worlds to life. In one of our latest exhibitions, *Colour and Vision: Through the Eyes of Nature*, we worked closely with designers and artists to weave playfulness and moments of wonder into an experience that lets visitors explore how the intertwined history of colour and vision has shaped the beauty of the natural world. As visitors entered the exhibition doors, their journey began with a spectacular moment created by a specially commissioned art piece that immersed them in colour and light – a playful way to pull people in to an exhibition experience.

> *The Natural History Museum is an evolving place and we constantly push ourselves to find new ways to bring enjoyment and delight to our visitors through our interpretation...*

Sexual nature exhibition: comedy and humour

The Natural History Museum is an evolving place and we constantly push ourselves to find new ways to bring enjoyment and delight to our visitors through our interpretation, often inviting creative practitioners from other experience sectors as co-creators. Our recent exploration of VR technology has allowed us to create unique experiences that entertain and engage on a different level, allowing our visitors to step in to different worlds to engage with the nature in very novel ways. And we continue to look for new ways to bring enjoyment to our experiences. I encourage you to do the same.

Elin Simonsson is the Exhibition and Interpretation Manager at the Natural History Museum, London, and a member of the National Trust's Collections and Interpretation Advisory Group.

Toolkit

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

I like reading briefs. I like the feeling - both familiar and novel – of knowing that once again, I'm at the start of something new. I look forward to what unexpected ideas might leap out or what opportunities might present to try something I've wanted to do but never had the chance. On the other hand, as most briefs come to us in the form of pitches, curiosity mixes with apprehension as I wade through page after page, trying to work out what on earth the client actually wants. Museum design agencies are permanently riding the pitching roller-coaster, reading briefs, second guessing clients, giving it their all, and then winning or losing through misjudging any one of the myriad variables involved. When pushed for time, I skim through, picking out the clues I know to look for – what type of project it is, how large the budget, when the client wants it by: whether it's worth us going for it.

Swings and roundabouts

Briefs come in all shapes and sizes, each with its own style, tone and quirks. Many are wordy, formal tomes that include endless pages of supporting information. In contrast a single A4 sheet if well written can give everything you need to get going. For us, briefs are at their best when they clearly and concisely communicate a project's imaginative vision. In the same way that exhibitions aim to communicate stories in engaging ways and challenge visitors' preconceived ideas, a design brief needs to excite the designer, draw them in and get them to sense the possibilities. Briefs that manage to paint a picture through their mixture of technical and creative information, can entice a designer, pique their interests. On the other hand, its possible to go too far with this – briefs where a lot of prior visualisation has been done can be off-putting, forcing you to free your mind of other people's ideas before you can develop your own. An evocative phrase can be the spark that gets you going.

Fire! Fire! exhibition at the Museum of London

But if clients are going to be evocative, they need to be clear they're up for what might get evoked. It's easy to write some florid prose that doesn't actually match the rather more conservative tastes of the institution, and draw designers up a rather more immersive, elaborate garden path than the client actually wants. Even worse, some briefs seem to speak with different voices, contradicting themselves, and leaving designers unclear which set of priorities or which vision of the exhibition they should pursue.

Creative pitches make for more creative projects?

Of course, some pitches don't actually set a brief, asking just for a 'credentials pitch' showing past experience and a general approach, instead of a creative response. While credentials pitches are attractive because they involve less work and can be won more easily, they have their own risks. A credentials pitch can mean the client's initial vision for the project remains fixed, and they appoint the designer with an expectation that the designer will simply execute that fixed vision, meaning the project lacks a properly open concept stage, and the best ideas may not emerge. On the other hand, a creative response forces a client to consider the different ideas of the different designers who respond. Choosing one over another means the client has to at least partly accept the chosen designer's ideas from the start of the project, matching and merging their own ideas with the designer's, and embarking on the project with a deeper sense of creative collaboration.

Katherine Skellon is Creative Director of Skellon Studio, specialists in planning and design for museums, exhibitions and visitor centres.

Revealed

Interpretation that amuses and inspires...

'These figures are made of unfired clay. Although very crude, two of them certainly represent males. The third is either female or has lost a small piece of clay'. *British Museum. From Rachel Teskey*

An inspiring (and some say amusing) example of an interpretive installation at a viewpoint in the Cairngorms National Park. From Jacquie Barbour

Sutton Hoo. From Kevin Flude

MoSex (Museum of Sex), New York City. From Ruth Coulthard

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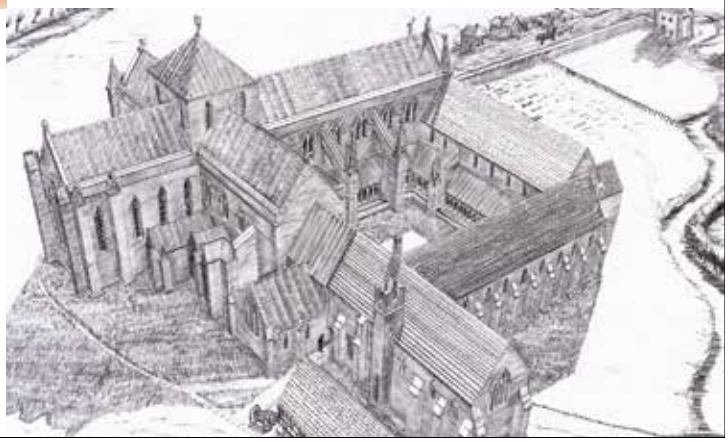

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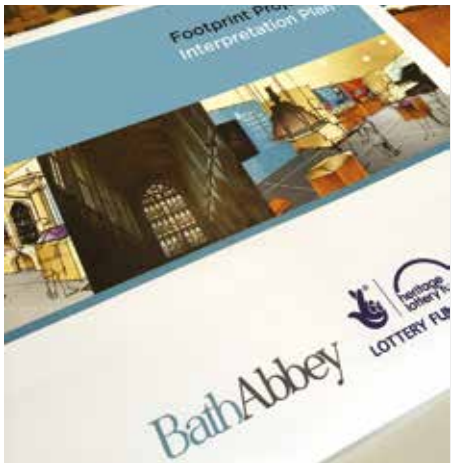
Visitor signage Tower of London, Historic Royal Palaces



Interpretation plan Bath Abbey

Visitor signage & orientation Heaton Park, Manchester City Council

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