

Telling stories with museum objects – Reflection on Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

Story telling is a fundamental phenomenon in our culture through the ages. From rock art to the modern `talking trees', the information through stories are communicated to the audience. The rock art and murals conveys the story of mankind silently, whereas the talking machines illustrate with emotional voices.

Why story telling? It adds flavor to the fact. It increases the interest of knowing. It stimulates the thirst of knowledge. It kindles the appetite of understanding the subject. In total it is the best way to communicate. Kids' like grandmothers than their own mothers. They have the patience to narrate stories. Not only the kids, but people of all age group like stories, both telling and listening.

Using story telling method in interpretation field is the latest trend in museums. Museums are magic places where man travels to various time, culture and places mentally. It is not mere exhibition; but education. Interesting interpretations are essential.

Museum objects are main part of the cultural and natural heritage. Relevant stories will reveal the tangible and intangible cultures.

Every object has a story, sometimes many. Explaining through stories is essential and innovative. Collecting the data, analyzing

the authenticity, detailed documentation, 360 photographs etc., are important for framing the stories.

The communication between the exhibit and the visitor must be natural and spontaneous and providing this facility is the duty of the museum officers. The display, narration, lighting and other formalities of the museum should be upgraded from time to time as per the requirements of the visitor and the technologies in practice.

The museums are in the service of man yesterday, today and tomorrow. Museums primary function should be always in the service of the mankind. The museums are the facilitators for communication between the material cultural heritage and the visitors. Initially there could have been healthy communication. The usage of three different languages for labeling and narrations found in the earliest museum site in Babylonia's Ur is the best evidence for this. But we can say that afterwards especially in the modern museum movement there was less communication. Minimum labels were practiced in the museums. It was believed that it was the right way to communicate. It was expected that the visitor would converse silently with the object whereas the object will speak itself without any words, spoken or written. Only scholars and highly educated visitors were able to enjoy the museums. For a layman they were just store houses. But the trend was changed.

Communication has become one of the comprehensive functions of the museum.

The main function of the museums must be education related and there has to be a proper teaching method. Unlike the regular education systems museums must have different innovative and interesting methods to convey the message.

Telling stories is the old but golden way of communication. Narration in the form of stories is the latest development in the museum field. We could say that history repeats.

A great Tamil poet stated that as “it is better to hear than to read”. It may be upgraded as that it is better to see than hear. If the latest technologies are blended with authentic stories of the objects it will be the key to the success of the interaction between a visitor and museum.

Though the basic idea of a museum is not mere exhibition but also to educate, the rapid changes in the technology and advancements in the scientific field reduced the footfall to the museums ruthlessly. Especially the archaeological museums missed their attraction due to the monotonous display and insufficient information. The minimum labels and meager interpretation materials discouraged the data collectors. Their thirst of knowledge was not satisfied by the conservative policies followed in the museum field. The youth lost their interest in entering the museums. While the science museums attract the people of all age group archaeological museums struggled to drag their attention.

It was felt by our government at the right time and the Ministry of Culture, Government of India framed the fourteen point reforms for the upgradation of Indian museums. The necessity of providing relevant and related information about the museum objects by interesting ways and means and telling stories about the artifacts was decided as the best among all the methods. Thus the story telling reflected in the interpretation.

Telling stories method has two major components. The first and foremost is the collection and compilation of the relevant data of the antiquities, documenting them in a best way with latest application and developing them into suitable stories.

Second and sensitive part is the selection of mediums for the story telling process.

COLLECTION OF DATA AND COMPILING STORIES

This collection process needs more concentration. We all are aware that the full details of the antiquities are not recorded in the accession registers. Many of the columns are unfilled and unanswered. Some of the identifications are wrong and some of the information are mismatching. It is high time to do the rectification in the information as well as the recording. Therefore serious research has to be done with the help of primary and secondary sources related to the object chosen for research and final authentic data has to be made ready for making stories. The stories about the museum objects must be the factual stories. A committee of museum personals like curator, director and also experts in the field must get involved for authenticating the data collected.

The relevant and authentic data about the selected object must be collected and arranged orderly. Documenting them in a best and easy manner for reference is very much essential. The data must be classified in different columns with required photographs. Here comes the role of CIDOC for this purpose of providing assistance in using the latest JATAN software and this is under process in many of our museums.

COMPILING AND CONVERTING INTO STORIES

After proper documentation the process of framing stories must be taken up.

The stories can be short stories, long stories, a bunch of stories, complete stories and incomplete stories.

Short stories may be a small with one single incident or matter whereas the long stories should be a long narration of continuous incidents related to the object.

The bunch of stories may be the stories of various persons related to one object, for example, adding the stories of the freedom

fighters individually, while telling the story about the only surviving first Indian National Flag exhibited in Fort Museum Chennai, where I work.

The complete stories must be provided at the museum but the incomplete stories must be provided in the advertising mediums like newspaper, magazines, radio, television channels with a note that “for getting the complete story, please visit the museum personally” and this will be tactics to increase the footfall to the museum. Even in the museums, some stories could be left incomplete and the visitors may be asked to complete. This is engaging the visitor into museum activities and sometimes we may even come to know some unknown facts through them.

STORY TELLING MEDIUMS

To make the information interesting the method we adopt and the medium we use will should make the visitor to feel the importance. Here are few steps.

- The Narrative Write-ups
- The Picture Narration
- By Literature (Brochures (General & Braille), Leaflets, Hand Books, Calendars, Books etc.,)
- Explanation by person to person or person to groups
- By Dioramas and models of objects
- Audio guides
- Video shows
- Shows by Theatre Artists
- 3-D show using Augment Reality
- Q R Code method

Narrative Write-ups

This is the basic method used in all the museums. From the oldest identified museum in Babylonia to the modern museum this method is being used to explain and tell the stories about the

museum objects. Through write-ups also we can tell the story of the object interestingly. In the Science and Industry museum of Chicago, the German U-boat is exhibited with variety of narratives. Write-ups are in a large amount but it is not felt too much due to its interesting nature.

But this is possible for the museums which has more space and which are housed in the exclusively designed buildings. For smaller museums which has objects with longer stories this method will not be helpful.

Picture Narration

Through with the rock art of the early man, we could assume, a story or many stories by analyzing the pictures drawn. There we don't need words. Likewise the stories about the objects could be narrated through pictures. Actually this method will help the uneducated and child visitors.

Literature

Nowadays all the museums provide printed literature like brochures, leaflets, guidebooks, etc., containing information of objects. Through this medium also, stories could be popularized among the mass since they could be carried by the visitors.

Guide Interface

In many museums paid guides or volunteers are engaged to explain the artifacts. The efficient guides effectively tell the stories to the visitors. But these methods also have drawbacks. The voice of the guide may disturb the visitor who is engaged with some other object, or people may get stagnated at one place which will be hindrance.

Dioramas & Models of Antiquities

Explaining through dioramas will also be interesting. In the Chicago history museum the great fire of Chicago is described with the usage of diorama.

Audio

Making of life size models of antiquities with talking mechanism is also a best method for telling stories. In Fort Museum, Chennai, India the life sized cannon models of big cannons are provided with talking mechanism. The visitors themselves could rotate the cannon on the original platform meant for it used during British period to know the mechanism as well as they can listen to the cannon talking and telling its story by pressing the button. This receives a grand response.

Video

Providing high resolution videos of the documented stories enacted by the artists or with animation is also a best method for telling stories.

Shows by Theatre Artists

Organizing live programs of storytelling by trained artists in the museum theatres or in halls at important places may help to popularize museum at the same time the beneficial will have the fresh information.

3D shows through Augment Reality

The footfall to the art museums is less while comparing with the science museums. The reason is technology. Technology is a twin edged blade which has to be handled carefully. It is a boon as well as a curse to mankind. Using it in the correct sense will bring positive results in all the fields especially in the museum field. For telling stories with museum objects AR is the latest is the latest technology in use. Again Fort museum, Chennai, India claims to be the first in introducing this technology for telling the stories of

special coins in the numismatic gallery. In this the visitor could see his own image in the screen and he could see the enlarged image of a coin on his palms and the image will rotate itself to show the reverse of it and another coin will follow it. If the visitor wants a printout, arrangements are also made. While the coins make the parade the story is also conveyed both in the screen as well as through dialogue.

QR Code

Another latest application in the technology is the QR code method. In a small stamp size code, a lot of stories could be communicated. For this the museum needs a web site in which the coded stories could be stored. By downloading the application in the smart phones the visitor could scan the code provided near the objects so that he or she could visualize more stories with dialogue at leisurely whenever time permits. Those who cannot scan at the museum could take the souvenirs which have the print of the codes on them and scan it at their convenience to view the stories. These will be the best companions during long journeys. This is also introduced in fort museum and the souvenirs at present have the QR codes are T-shirts and picture post cards.

Conclusion

My strong belief is that the purpose of the museums is to educate the mankind. If the public are not coming forward to use the museums let the museums to go to their doorsteps. We can plan for mobile museums. For this, technology will support us a lot.

I conclude with a note that technology is inevitable for teaching to the present generation. If you agree that museum is for education purpose then technology is your teaching aid.

More museums
More stories
Thank You.

Save museums
Save heritage