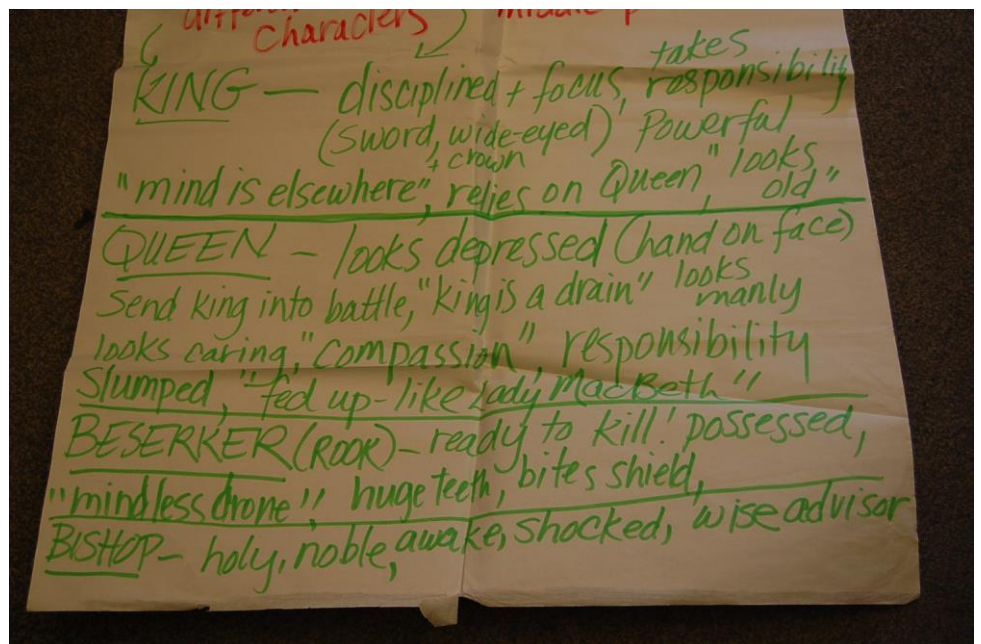


Fieldnotes **Storytelling**

This guide was devised by the Community Partnerships Team at the British Museum in collaboration with David Francis and Sam Gayton. David Francis is an Interpretation Officer in the heritage sector and a performer in the Fringe theatre. David supported a number of Talking Objects Collective projects between 2012 and 2014, merging these two forms of storytelling and combining the interpretation of objects with oral storytelling. Sam Gayton is an author and playwright working with museums and heritage spaces. He created a storytelling soundscape inspired by the Museum's Great Nef during the 'Exploring objects, sharing cultures' supplementary schools project at the British Museum.



Why use storytelling in museums?

Museums are all about stories! Objects have many stories to tell and can be used as anchors and triggers for a huge range of stories, both factual and fictional.

Telling stories can enable us to draw **links between past, present and future** and bring to life the **human presence behind any object**.

Stories afford **deeper understanding** of an object's function and meaning.

Storytelling is a **great medium for making sense of objects**, because of its **democratic nature**. Everyone tells stories about themselves and uses stories to understand the world around them. Key storytelling techniques such as setting the scene, building to a climax, or twist in the tale, are familiar to most of us through books and theatre. As **everyone has the capacity to tell stories** it also helps break down the division between the expert delivering knowledge to a passive receptive audience.

Museums are often seen as places of learning associated with the presentation of facts. However, they are also places **where curiosity is invoked and where wondrous things can be discovered**. Storytelling has the power to conjure up the magic of museums. In exploring the folklore surrounding an object, which in many cases has no factual basis, it helps to move away from notions of objective truth, and to explore the **creative potential inherent in objects**.

'I see the British Museum itself as one epic act of storytelling, with each exhibition as a sort of chapter telling the tale of the past. The British Museum has so much story potential, and storytelling is a powerful tool to use when young people encounter objects in the collection.'

Sam Gayton

Activities to try

Night at the Museum Something that continually seizes the imagination of visitors (particularly younger ones), is the idea of exhibits coming to life once the Museum has closed.

Visit the Enlightenment Gallery (Room 1), and make note of five things that might come alive once all the visitors have gone. How might they move? (The stuffed birds might fly off their perches, statues might walk around, the figures on the urns might fight, etc.)

Visit the Citi Money Gallery (Room 68) to look at the heads on the coins. What sort of conversations might all these kings and queens have with each other when the Museum closes? Write their conversations into a script. Discuss and perform.

Posy rings Posy rings were tokens of love and affection given in 16th-century England. There are several in the British Museum's collection, and all are engraved with sentimental verses. Sam's favourite goes something along the lines of: 'My love is fixed/ I will not change/ I like my choice too well to change'

Visit the posy rings in Room 46 or explore examples on the Museum's website. Then think of famous contemporary couples. What posy rings might they give to each other, if posy rings once again became fashionable? What might the inscriptions be?

Extensions: Link to Philip Larkin's poem *An Arundel Tomb*, and discuss how the posy ring relates to the last line: 'What will survive of us is love.' Alternatively, use the posy ring as stimulus to write a series of drabbles (100-word stories) detailing one of the following scenarios: the making of the ring; the giving of the ring; the last time it was worn; or the moment it entered the British Museum's collection. As a counterpoint to these activities, you could look at mourning rings in the British Museum's collection or online.

Characterisation activity Who are the various characters represented across the museum? For example: the Lewis Chessmen with their idiosyncratic expressions and individual details form a natural cast of characters around which to spin a drama.

Replicas of the Lewis Chessmen allow participants to touch the object and examine them closely. Sit in a circle and pass a replica or colour image of one of these characters (king, queen, bishop etc.) around the circle. When a participant receives the replica they must name one positive character trait and one negative trait that they would associate with this character. No participant can say a trait that has been mentioned before. Continue the activity until several characters have been discussed.

The Medieval Europe Gallery (Room 40) is divided into sections that correspond with the pieces in a chess set (there is a case on kings and queens, a case on knights, etc.). Ask each person to select another object from the case to represent the character you discussed above. This is an opportunity to explore the narrative device of metonymy whereby one concept represents another, such as how a king can be represented by the crown. Next, select another character from the chessmen, and find another object in the gallery that this character might own (for example: a sword, ring, or chalice).

The Franks Casket This magnificent box is in Room 41. Carved from whalebone, each panel features a different mythic or religious story. Some – like the story of Romulus and Remus, or the Arrival of the Three Wise Men – are well known, others are more obscure. Take a look at the partially broken panel, depicting a mysterious mythic hero on a mountain of skulls.

Research medieval Germanic epic heroes like Siegmund or Weland, then imagine your own version of the skulltop-hero, and the myth that might be told of him. Ask young people to create a contemporary Franks Casket using some well-known stories from today that might become myths in the future (these can be celebrity stories, blockbuster films, or current events). What symbols would you use to present that story in a single, concentrated image, in the way the makers of the Franks Casket have done?

Cradle to grave Explore the installation in Room 24 with young people. This work consists of ‘a lifetime supply of prescribed drugs knitted into two lengths of fabric, illustrating the medical stories of one woman and one man.’ It is an interesting way to show how objects, rather than words, can tell powerful stories.

The piece is part of the Living and Dying permanent display, which aims to show how different cultures around the world confront challenging issues. Task young people with being the curators of a new exhibition, and get them to choose five objects they would place in an exhibition that tells the story of a given topic (for example: beauty, the 2011 London riots, or the internet).

Extension: Decide on a way to document your life’s story without words (for example, keep the wrapper of every sweet you eat, a note of every time you yawn, or write down whatever makes you laugh). Keep this going for an entire week, then find a space in your studio or classroom to exhibit your stories.

Narrative arc storytelling circle Introduce the concept of a narrative arc to the group in the form of a plot diagram, such as Freytag’s pyramid.

Think about a story having:

- a beginning that sets the scene and introduces the characters
- a middle where a problem arises
- a climax where the complications of the problem come to a head
- a resolution in which a solution to the problem is produced

Give the group one figure from the Lewis Chessmen (or an image of any selected character, from a contemporary celebrities to an important figure from another era), and as they pass the replica around, each person must contribute one line to the story. The first time it is passed around the circle the story should set out the scene. The second time, participants should outline the problem. The third time, bring this problem to a crisis. Each time it travels around the circle, add a new character into the mix that acts as the driver of that particular part of the story.

Divide the group into smaller groups and ask them to write the end to the story. Each member of the group could take on the role of one of the characters and turn this into a mini performance.

‘As an interpretation officer, the storytelling sessions with young people helped me reflect on my own practice of how objects are used to tell stories and the kinds of stories we use objects to tell. Text in museums can often be focussed on delivering facts and, as a result, the rich folklore surrounding objects can be ignored. Frequently, I found that it was the myths associated with objects that acted as the hooks to get the young people interested in the object. As a result of this process I now try to include the legends surrounding objects as part of the whole interpretative package.’

David Francis

Practical tips

Start your session with a few **drama or word games** – games, like stories, are all about learning to think creatively within certain rules. They help people relax, have fun, and gain confidence – all very important for good storytelling.

Don't be afraid of **letting young people write**. Oral storytelling can be difficult in the Museum due to acoustics and crowds. The page provides a quiet place for young people to develop their ideas. Activities prior to writing fill them with possibilities.

Focus on one or two particular objects – rooms or collections can become overwhelming. Maybe take some of the wording from the art and design resource here too.

Stay flexible – access to a particular object or space is not guaranteed as displays themselves are constantly changing.

For example, Sam came to lead a storytelling session on the Great Nef, and found it had been removed. How do you tell a story of an object that isn't there? The empty glass cabinet became in itself an inspiration for storytelling, and we could investigate the disappearance of this object in several scenarios. What if it was stolen? What if the ship's tiny mechanical figures came alive and decided to leave the Museum?

The architectural space of the British Museum is designed to dramatically frame objects, and makes an **excellent backdrop for performances**. Find a gallery with architectural features or open spaces suited to performance, not one crowded with objects and cases. For example, Room 17, with its large architectural features, or the Museum Forecourt proved easier for storytelling activities.

Try to make connections to make objects **relevant to young people's lives**. For example, if using the Lewis Chessmen flag up the role the medieval period plays in popular culture like *Game of Thrones* or HBO's *Vikings* series.

Storytelling doesn't necessarily need words. You can create stories with pictures, comics, or even hieroglyphs.

