

# What's An Intangible Museum?

Sometimes you can get so embroiled in your project that you forget it might not be so immediately understandable to everyone else. Intangibility is a difficult concept to grasp, as the name suggests you can't touch it, but you can feel it, experience it and most importantly understand it once it's explained. The answers to the frequently asked questions were prompted by enquiries from museum professionals but I don't think they are clad with too much impenetrable jargon to be obscure to others who'd like to pose the question –

## **“Why is Mythstories an Intangible museum?”**

Mythstories museum of myth and fable collects and houses stories, and stories cannot in their raw oral state be touched. That is what makes Mythstories an intangible museum.

Mythstories museum is a place where stories are told. Not just by the staff to visitors, but by the visitors themselves. The magic of Mythstories is associating tangible objects with stories, triggering the tales to come to life. You won't find any “please do not touch the exhibits” signs within the museum, the objects make up a handling collection which only interaction can animate.

To explain further even though we house the Society for Storytelling's Library we are not a library - our mission is the preservation of oral stories not written ones. We also provide a home for the London Centre for International Storytelling's Archive of Performance Storytelling but we are not an archive - our main cause is to ensure that stories in our collection continue to be told.

## **“How Does It Work?”**

We've wrestled over the years with contextualisation; whether to use the written word for explanations, to rely on people's senses to guide them to their interpretation or to intercede with human contact. Talking one to one is no doubt the most effective; you can seamlessly move from an explanation of what the audience is seeing into a story. If they can't see the join (the point when the story starts) they will become aware that this world and the story world aren't separate or even parallel worlds but are one and the same or at the very least layered.

The human presence allows the dimension of passing time into a display in this kind of intangible collection, the story set in past time or imaginary time twists the linear nature of passing time and allows people to be in the story, to share experiences with the characters, and to fully believe what they in reality know not to be strictly happening and therefore real at that moment.

That seamless transition is maybe the most important lesson that we have learnt and it informs all the design ideas and displays we create. Stories are a safe place to explore all sorts of complicated concepts we wouldn't want to lay bare in real life.

So how do you get into the imagined story space taking all your real life trappings and not merely use the transition as an escape? Doors into a story museum need to be more like friendly questions than certainties. Everyone likes and can benefit from stories but how do you convince them of this truth? The most difficult challenge is to get people over the threshold and let them experience the museum; they somehow need to be enticed into the museum.

Intangibles are well named; you can't touch them, you can't see them; and judging by my attempts here, you can't really illustrate, explain or communicate them. They just are, when you're in their presence you know all about them but you can't picture one in a leaflet, they can't be filmed or podcasted as they immediately lose the real time element of being created in the moment and shaped as much by the listener as the teller.

A storyteller should never lose sight of the goal of passing on or communicating the story they are telling, they should shape their story to the ears that are listening to it rather than attempt to fall into a recitation. They should be alert to the non-verbal signals of their audience ready to change their story to suit each and every reaction.

Having said all this; storyteller's time costs money, they tire quickly in this sort of situation where they are constantly responding to changing needs and this one to one style is also very intense and tiring for the visitor. So a mixed approach is practical and essential. Our displays try to use different senses to communicate the stories, never all the senses but different mixes as you progress around the display areas.

Bearing in mind that a story told by a storyteller creates different pictures in every head to which it is told, due not in short measure to everyone's different life experiences, how do you keep the canvas as clean as possible? Surprisingly, unlike

performance storytelling in a black box theatre, we have found that the familiar everyday background noises such as traffic passing by, dogs barking, birds singing etc., actually aid the transition to the story space, blurring the everyday with the fantastical.

A total acoustic neutral blank space is an alien space. It heightens the audience's awareness and doesn't allow them to literally slip into the space the story creates. Certain objects can help establish a common ground to embark on the journey, pausing in front of a painting of a cow I'll start to tell a story and now the cow in the story is a Friesian with big determined eyes in all my visitors' mind pictures. The painting established it much quicker than I could have done. But not always are the cues so literal, a confined cosy space, like our recreated gypsy wagon can get people ready to slip into other worlds like an African jungle clearing, a rain forest or the middle of a ploughed field in the English Countryside.

### **“Can or should intangibles be confined in a building?”**

My answer is yes and no, having a built environment for their care is very important, yet allowing them to seep out into the world around is very important too.

We do a lot of outreach work, we have to familiarize people with what goes on in the museum before they'll gain the courage and urge to come and visit.

We take our stories out for walks in the country picking visual signals from the environment to suggest stories.... That's the house where Jack lived, the elder tree in the triangular field pulled its roots from the ground and walked towards the cows. Natural environments are a great backdrop so our pricing structure for school visits entices teachers to bring pupils out of the classroom. Even an urban storywalk telling tales of the creatures you can encounter on door knobs is much more interesting than a class based storytelling session, and it gets pupils away from learned habits of behaviour allowing them to see things differently.

One of our favourite outreach locations was a cave. Approached by a wooded ridge walk of about a kilometre you came to a break in the trees where temporary steps had been cut into the sandstone escarpment. Down went the audience and disappeared into the cave and made their way to the middle chamber aglow with tiny candles. Once their eyes had adjusted, the stories began with a hundred pairs of eyes gazing intently at the storyteller. When the stories were over the audience made their way back to their cars most expressing marvel at the fact that they had

no idea at all how long they had been in the cave. Back to my earlier point - we had played with the linear nature of time.

**“A lot of traditional storytelling is culturally specific, does that present problems?”**

Culturally specific storytelling is the most difficult area. Should the Ramayana ever be told without the use of Valmiki’s verses? Can anyone tell a shamanic story without being a Shaman and being in trance state? Should Native American stories only be told by Native Americans at the appropriate time of year? Researchers in Canada gave an Inuit story to Inuit children to pass from one to another and also to a group of non-Inuits. After the experiment the Inuit version remained close to the original, but the non-Inuit version had been stripped of all Cultural significance. A storyteller brings his own baggage; his life experience reshapes the story however hard he tries not to let it do so.

As long as we respect the stories and try our utmost to communicate their meaning as clearly as possible to our audience we are doing all that is humanly possible.

**“Shouldn’t museums try to recreate these foreign cultural settings so the stories can be told in their natural habitat?”**

In trying to replicate, what we in fact do is create something completely new.

You can’t create something, for example, like a sweat-lodge in a foreign cultural setting. It can never be viewed in the same way by someone brought up in a different culture. When the Shaman tells his stories to his normal audience they would have an understanding of the environment he introduces them to, and he would have a good idea of the reactions the environment would provoke. Give him an unfamiliar audience from a foreign culture and the whole experience would be a completely different one.

In the same way the setting doesn’t make the storyteller a shaman, nor do the clothes they are wearing. We must always remember the storyteller puts a little of his or her own self in every story and a little bit of his audience too. The actor or re-enactor plays a part and never himself.

**“Could your technique be used in any museum?”**

When we work in other museums, which we do occasionally, we go about things in a different way to most curators. The objects aren't the important things for us, more so the stories they suggest and how we can weave those stories into a narrative that leads around the museum. As far as we're concerned the objects are objects that set a context or backdrop; things that are a trigger for a story.

We are primarily interested in collecting stories and keeping them alive. We don't collect them like an archivist or a curator in the normal sense. We are more like zoo keepers who live alongside and talk to their animals. Stories are living things even though they are intangible and to carry on their existence they have to be told. The changing context of the real world running parallel to the story world means that every time they are told they will change to respect their new environment. The oral tradition and its cannon of traditional stories is a writhing, changing, metamorphosing beast shouting "look at me, I'm relevant to you and your existence". It would be cruel to lock it up in a bell jar away from the oxygen on which it thrives; which is, of course, communication.

### **"Is your way the only way of creating a museum of intangibles?"**

I don't think a story museum (intangible museum) needs to conform to any one or more rules but it needs to be built with a sincere respect for the stories or exhibits and their nature. Also an acknowledgement that the tangible and intangible worlds run parallel, overlaying each other, but can be visited in unison for best effect and enjoyment.

Black box theatre already exists with heightened acoustic properties, stage lighting (more than real in nature) and lack of visual cues to distract the audience. But this is an artificial situation where performances take place, not a real life one. Performance storytelling reduces, and often pulls away the glass curtain between audience and performer. But the audience goes to those spaces expecting to be confronted with unreality. A museum visitor expects to learn about reality. The storytelling museum environment mixes reality and unreality and has them running hand in hand.

### **"Do you use re-enactment and 'Living History' in the museum?"**

As a matter of choice we would not use 'Living History' in our work. We think the words are strong enough on their own to convey the meaning, without the contextualisation of costume.

Living History is very good for conveying practical things – how implements were used, what an Iron Age house looked like. What we need to convey is how people thought and felt about their environment and the situations they found themselves in. Visitors watching actors or animation tend to become passive recipients of the stories acted out, which is fine for most museums because they simply want to get their audiences to understand their artefacts.

We need our visitors to actively think themselves into involvement and empathy with the time period/situation shown; a true imagining.