

# Recollection and the UK Museum: Object, Image and Word

By  
**Dr Viv Golding**  
Dept of Museum Studies,  
University of Leicester, UK  
[vmg4@le.a.cuk](mailto:vmg4@le.a.cuk)

Paper presented for the conference "Connections, Communities And Collections" in Miami Beach, FL, USA. July 10-12, 2006.

---

## **Introduction: terminology, aims and structure**

My paper concerns the role of the museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It argues that if one of the roles of the museum is to 'remember the past' and additionally if museums are to develop their 'social role' then promoting recollection with elders and younger generations can be regarded as a key task (DCMS 2000). With this basic premise in mind a number of questions arise. How can the local museum expand its boundaries in terms of physical space and social influence to act as a forum for difficult social topics of a global nature? How can the local museum progress more positive notions of identity and raise self-esteem in some of its most vulnerable audiences? How does recollection relate to the concept of lifelong learning?

To address these questions the paper first introduces the work of recollection and contextualizes the special benefits of intergenerational recollecting (IGR) to the local museum and to the wider community. Next the educational and social value of recollection work with museums, which is often realised through interagency outreach in the UK, is considered with reference to specific project work conducted in two contrasting geographical areas of the UK, inner London and rural Oxfordshire. The distinguishing feature of the IGR work considered lies in demonstrating the way in which the power of objects, images and words can work together to aid recall through creative expressive activity. In addition, significant examples show IGR providing an ideal vehicle for museums to work in lifelong learning partnership with other institutions, through a mutually beneficial sharing of power and knowledge.

## **The social value of IGR: knowledge bearers, identity and the sharing of knowledge in the urban landscape**

Research sights grandparents as 'a precious resource for children' (Predazzi et al 2000: 81). The valuable transmissive function and stabilising influences grandparents play in the family has also been recognized in a UK Government Green paper (Home

Office 1998). Yet in Britain, while people are living longer family relationships have changed dramatically as a result of increasing marital breakdowns (1in3) and the demographic movements caused by economic migrations around the world (ibid 2000: 81). These factors contribute to the increasing risk of children becoming estranged from their grandparents and consequentially divorced from their cultural heritage, which highlights a need for IGR transmission in the wider social sphere.

Electing to take on a transmissive function as knowledge bearer is not universally appealing, but the elders who do engage in intergenerational reminiscence outside of the traditional family group find it hugely rewarding. The process is 'positive' and 'life affirming' for the elder participants as this representative selection of voices gathered by Pam Schweitzer demonstrate.

'You are giving them a little bit of your experience. ... You must tell them the absolute truth.' (Lillian Burnett)

'We show them something they cannot get from books. Nobody can get it from a book what we know.' (Bill O'Sullivan)

'They learn that all old people are not idiots. ... and you are capable of passing that experience on and not just sitting in an armchair doing nothing.' (Dorothy Barton)

(Schweitzer 1993: 7)

The main keynotes for elders engaged in IGR in London appear to be: sharing; commitment to truth telling; being a bearer of special information and delivering a unique experience, value and self value; reflexivity; authority and confidence; negating stereotypes and false images. Marwick's research reinforces similar benefits to elders in Edinburgh. She notes children seeing beyond an impaired and frail body to glimpse something of the whole life of a person, which led one 10year old to comment 'See these 2 old ladies over there? - they're great!' (Marwick 1995: 143).

There is clearly a positive impact on the memory bearer, which arise from an emphasis in IGR on the elder knowledge bearer as a whole sentient being, a 'unity' of body and mind, 'thought and feeling' and consequently on remembering as a respectful *process* that benefits the one remembering. This is distinct from the emphasis in oral history where the emphasis is on the *product* and the sharing of knowledge to support historical research and interpretation in the museum, where memory bearers are regarded as a sort of filing cabinet or a crop to be harvested (Kitwood 1990: 205-6).

In my experience of IGR writing hidden histories from below and stressing the importance of recovering subjective experiences in a mutually respectful way crucially involves the elder and younger person 'thinking critically together', initially to challenge stereotypical views of elders, as the evidence of their eyes and their fruitful dialogical exchanges contradict any negative preconceived ideas, then by extension IGR aims to challenge prejudice generally. This is a large claim, which I shall justify.

### **Dialogue Boxes: objects and identities in the urban landscape**

Age Exchange, the reminiscence centre in London, have built on the foundational research, 'Generations Together', carried out at the international research centre for

inter-generational studies at the University of Pittsburgh, adopting a similar 'geropedagogical methodology' and achieving valuable learning outcomes from the 'innovative method of teaching and learning' (Schweitzer 1993).

For example Age Exchange, London, has developed boxed reminiscence activities around more than 20 themes and each of their boxes contains up to 12 objects, which are excellent examples that demonstrate the value of community collecting. The boxes are a means of structuring dialogue and creative work around the interests of the group, such as the 'Born in the Caribbean' box containing: cane sugar, bay rum, country chocolate, dominoes, carbolic soap herbs and spices, sarsaparilla, paraffin candles, traditional songs and a map of the Caribbean, which proved particularly helpful to antiracist work with Horniman teacher partners in the 1990s. The *Living Memory in Education* programmes involves elders from Age Exchange visiting the classroom with a handling box, demonstrating the use of the objects, sharing their memories and encouraging the pupils to engage in an extended dialogue.

These objects, or 'props' as Burnside calls them, act as 'tangible reminders of the past', which stimulate a remembering process for the elders who originally selected and work with them as 'points of departure, not arrival.' (Burnside 1995: 155). At a basic level the simple act of 'holding' then 'passing' on connects even the shyest pupils in a group and invites a sharing of opinions (Gibson, 1994: 58). It is through their personal knowledge of the objects that permits the elders working in the school group to be seen as 'experts' in the wider multicultural communities and allows pupils to gain imaginative access to the past based on the personal and subjective meanings associated with the object, which relate to notions of identity.

Lois Silverman highlights the group influence on the process of constructing a strong self-identity (Silverman 1995). She states it is the "specific relationship of the members of a visiting group" which "can activate certain roles or aspects of ones self-identity" (ibid: 163). Slide 5 shows IGR drama storytelling about World War 2. Here museum collaboration on IGR recognises the complexity of individual identity in relation to group identity and brings into focus the way individuals occupy more than one subject position - mother; grandmother, sister; daughter, friend of mixed ethnic heritage. IGR permits a fluid movement between all of these subject categories, which help to define identities, and to challenge any fixing or essentialising of any one identity during museum collaboration.

The distinguished elder Beryl Gilroy casts further light on this notion at a Horniman workshop. Identity, she contends not concerned with "strands of effectiveness, group belongingness or economic stability", but rather relates to a "fear of being forgotten, of failing to resist the anguish of indifference, rejection and betrayal" (Gilroy 1998: 31).

**IGR** provides a platform for working together on positive complex identities, for people of all ages and dramatic storytelling is specially suited for visitors of all ages in contributing to the construction of new knowledge and enhanced feelings of self-esteem. The elders who I have worked with at Horniman are skillful storytellers. This storytelling enables pupils to value the diverse histories of 'ordinary' people like themselves, which lie outside of the preferred narratives of British heroes and royalty that dominate the national curriculum for history.

In IGR elder storytellers also importantly encourage young writers to express multiple perspectives such as 'my point of view' and 'my nan's point of view' (Brockley School). The humorous ways in which the elders often tell their tales is extremely motivating and is often reflected in the young peoples compositions. I offer one example as typical. "You may think that Nigeria is just a radiator with sand but you are absolutely wrong, wrong and even more wrong" ([www.brockleyschool](http://www.brockleyschool)).

For pupils, a change in the school routine and the opportunity to meet new people carries them along on an air of anticipation and excitement. This leads them to attend closely to what is being said, to question to assimilate new ideas within the framework of prior knowledge. It is through the engagement with real people and relating their words with objects, newspapers, documents and photos that pupils not only gain new knowledge but also develop skills of comparing, contrasting and evaluating the truth of evidence. Furthermore, good relationships developed between pupils and elders permit the abstract past to be located in reality. This provides a scaffold for an imaginative consideration of how, in some respects, the world has changed and encourages an appreciation of the educational opportunities offered in the modern world.

In London we have seen that objects, not necessarily housed in the museum, certainly appeal to people's multiple intelligences and their tactile senses and coupled with demonstrations of how they were used stimulates dialogue and motivates learning. Now I shall consider the use of museum objects in the rural landscape but first some background to UK 'outreach' provision may be helpful.

### **Outreach: the educational and social value of recollection in rural Oxfordshire**

It was during the 1990s that professional museums organizations and the new labour government bodies asserted the need for museums to adopt a social role, which 'outreach' was a widely adopted means of fulfilling (Martin 1999; DCMS 1999). While there is no widely adopted consensus on the definition of this term museum outreach provision is usually intended to support 'hard to reach' or 'hidden' groups of people, such as elders in residential homes, who I shall now consider in this paper. Basically museum outreach is a process that 'involves going out from a specific organization or centre to work in other locations with sets of people who typically do not or cannot avail themselves of the services of that centre' (McGivney 2000: 16).

The next UK museum projects I shall consider are part of 'outreach' provision in Oxfordshire. In the UK outreach instills a fear in some staff that museums might be taken 'beyond their natural physical and philosophical boundaries' (Anderson, D. 1999: 69). The fear relates to museums engaging in areas of social provision unconnected with their traditional work of 'preservation, display, interpretation and education' as well as to their anxiety about public spending and accountability (Sandell 2003: 6). Nevertheless the benefits of outreach activity for both the museums and the participants can be considerable as the evidence from case studies, research publications and evaluation reports demonstrate ([www.dcms.gov.uk](http://www.dcms.gov.uk)). I shall show that the benefits to the Oxfordshire *Drawn from Memory* project participants include enhanced social confidence and improved self-esteem, increased motivation and energy, which are all thought to arise from the opportunities that the project activities offered for self-expression (Sargent 2002).

## **Objects, images and words aiding recall through creative expressive activity: team-working on *A Company of Birds***

Interagency collaboration between community education, arts development, libraries, archives and museums is essential to the success of the range of multifaceted *Drawn from Memory* work. *A Company of Birds* is one of a series of sessions that were first developed by a Musician/singer, a Textile Artist and a Reminiscence Worker for a reminiscence group of seven frail elders living in a residential care home in Oxfordshire, from 2-3pm on Monday afternoons, usually in six-week blocks.

These sessions utilized objects including a barn owl, a magpie, a wren and a robin encased in Perspex boxes, from the museum's natural history collection with the broad aim of inspiring memories, songs, stories and art work in textile. Some magpie feathers enabled close observation and permitted a more tactile multi-sensory experience through handling. The objects were supplemented with dialogue around two poems Edward Lear's *Owl and the Pussy Cat* and J.K Annand's *Houlet*, and material concerning British mythology and traditional customs such as the legend *Aquila the Eagle* story where magpies are kind friends.

Sargent tells us how attention circles, from comparison of the cased birds, to personal recollection. One new member recalls feeding cheese to magpies in her garden, since, "they liked cheese!" Another member recalls seeing seagulls from her window the day before thinking how big their wings were. Sargent's reading of the *Houlet* poem, about a noisy bird stopping folk sleeping, celebrates a Scottish member of ten years standing. Ian the session musician recalls his experiences in the Pyrenees feeding an eagle owl, which prompts other memories and owl stories. One woman, with severe Alzheimer's, remembers her father owned an owl in a glass case, which she 'thought was wonderful' as a child, which inspires Ian to recall and sing an amusing nonsense song about an owl. Then possibly because Ian belongs to a band called *Magpie Lane*, the group looks again at the magpie, which sparks pleasant memories of a joint performance by Ian's band and the reminiscence group at the home in 1994. Next Ian plays the tune *Magpie Lane* on his concertina while the seated group all sway and 'dance' with their arms.

Next the wren and the robin, much smaller birds, are the focus of attention. Ian tells the story behind the *Wren Boy's Song* before singing it, spontaneously accompanied by the group for the chorus. More stories about the wren, from around the world are exchanged. There is some talk about the wren representing 'darkness' and 'winter', since it is known to dwell in caves, before Ian breaks into another wren song.

Group discussion of the type of birds the members of the group might like to be follows, although one man exclaims: "I've got me feet on the ground and I shouldn't want to be a bird!" He then recalls a story long, long ago, when he was digging in his garden and two robins came to eat the worms he dug up, which provokes a fresh memory from the new member who then recalls the different birds that visited her garden to feed at the three birdfeeders she had in her garden.

Ian, playing a farewell tune on his concertina, closes the session. The woman again recalls the owl her father once owned that is so similar to the museum owl as she

leaves and the man who told the robin story leaves for his room singing, which is his trademark exit strategy for every session.

### **Dealing with loss and healing: *On Finding Old Photographs***

It is interesting to note in the *Company of Birds* project earlier how the subject of loss - a lost father, lost friends, lost place, lost childhood - recurs again and again. In the work of recollection, if a warm inclusive atmosphere is established by the group leaders, members can bring the lost times back to life in their imaginations and this has a highly therapeutic affect.

One Oxfordshire elder woman's group deals with loss most positively and members feel empowered to revisit their feelings of sadness during *On Finding Old Photograph*, the third and final session of their *Drawn from Memory* project. At this session the women were asked to bring in some old photographs with them that they were prepared to discuss with the group.

Finding their individual voices and bring their feelings to healing speech the work of recollection here has certain similarities with 'narrative therapy', which is a technique that allow therapists and clients 'to be lighthearted, humorous, and creative - and yet surprisingly effective in resolving many of the problems that we face today' (White & Epston 1990). Therapeutic 'conversations can shape new realities' by building 'bridges of meaning' together with clients, which helps 'healing developments flourish instead of wither and be forgotten' (Ibid). In short, White & Epston note the power of 'language' to 'shape events into narratives of hope.' For example, while the grief of a lost loved one remains, one group member seemed to find the dialogue during the third session affected some healing of the pain she felt over her father's death and brought a photograph of her dad and mother after her dad had died into the fourth session. The dialogue around these artifacts led to a rich recollection of more positive and amusing experiences relating to past times and of her working life. She muses.

"... and this is my mum when my dad died. ... and this is me when I was a Guard on the railways, best job I ever had!" [Despite the fact that she was] "petrified of trains!"

Other members of the group recall the harshness of their working lives. One woman speaks of her time in the packaging Dept of Elliston & Cavell's. She recalls. "Working in the Trim Shop in the war 3/9d for a frame. ... It took me three days to make the first one and I got the sack for singing! ... Other members recall the hard times when they were 'laid off' work for three months of the year, and in order to qualify for 'dole' money, had to take any job offered.

In Oxfordshire so many memories are seen to arise from photographic images. It will be valuable to look at one more project.

### ***Putting Ourselves in the Picture***

*Putting Ourselves in the Picture* utilises old photographs from the 1930s and 1940s to encourage creative responses from participants. Firstly, this project aims for dialogue on the images to permit recollection of the past at a simple reminiscence level as we saw in *Looking at Old Photographs*, and secondly the project aims to engage

participants in a deeper, more critical analysis of their personal life in the wider social context of historical times.

The project begins with a group discussion of the collection of old photographs, which the group leaders have brought in. The photographs come from the Oxfordshire Photographic Archive and cover a wide variety of images. Photographs from World War 2, photographs of a milk delivery to people's homes and queuing outside shops prompt much comment of past times that were both frightening and happy:

"It brings back lots of memories – those gas masks round their neck. ... I can't stand the smell of rubber, even now. ..."

"We had a whole family [of evacuees] at one point."

"My mother spoiled them. ..."

Local Knowledge of the local area is clear in one woman's comment on the photo of 'soldiers' walking in the High street carrying big packs. "No look they're going to the station because they're coming up the High street." For the group this casts a completely different light on the possible stories of these soldiers, who are probably returning to active service, although they are smiling for the camera.

Following group discussion the participants work in pairs for 20 minutes with some blank pieces of white paper cut out into speech bubble shapes, on which they are asked to write a caption for one of the characters in the photograph, 'just for fun' (2002: 39). A photo of a street party in the 1940s prompts the following captions.

"She hasn't eaten all her crusts she won't have curly hair!"

"It's not fair, they're eating all the cakes and leaving all the sandwiches."

"I want my mum!"

In this project work a voice is given to the silenced people trapped within the frames of the photographs and perhaps in this amusing activity the elders whose own voices are silenced in the wider society have, to a certain extent, the power to speak returned to them. In addition, it is worth noting that posing 'what if?' questions and taking time to reflect permits members of any group to consider what it may be like, just for a moment, to walk in another's shoes and through this activity we surely become richer more empathetic human beings.

### **Concluding remarks: lifelong learning and the museum**

How does recollection relate to the concept of 'lifelong learning'? I offer a definition.

'Learning is a process of active engagement with experience; it is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.'

([www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk))

This view of learning, in the context of the museum, vitally places the learner at the heart of provision. It recognizes that since different people have preferred styles of learning they can be engaged in the learning process in diverse ways with a variety of

stimuli throughout their lives. Literally from the cradle to the grave ([www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk))!

To summarise building on learning theory and adopting alternative creative approaches to recollection with elders includes:

- Emphasising intuition, feeling, sensing, and imagination.
- Connecting with elder's diverse learning styles.
- Appealing to the elder's multiple intelligences by including music, visuals, movement, experience and dialogical exchange
- Relating new work to each elder's every day prior experiences
- Involving different people in developing recollection projects.

Most importantly Sargent highlights the necessity of engaging enthusiasm and a desire for learning by showing an honest interest in the elders and the individual stories of their lives. She illustrates this idea with reference to a Native American myth that traces the origins of all living creatures to life underground, when one day below the surface of the earth the badger worked to dig a hole big enough for everyone to pass through. This explains why people now live their lives, and have 'big adventures' in the light above ground, until they die and return to the darkness below (Sargent 2002: 10). Individual life stories, the personal big adventures not only mark each person's uniqueness, but also provide a vehicle for individuals to connect with and involve the wider social group in the recollecting and the telling of these adventures.

In conclusion perhaps ICME members might continue this project internationally. Examining the differences and similarities between different generations and cultural groups, humanities changing relationship to the earth, the passing and regeneration of the seasons around the globe, perhaps we may develop our traditional audiences and learn more about ourselves in the process. Thank you.

## **Bibliography**

Anderson, D., 1999, The Commonwealth, The Stationary Office, London

Annand, J.A., 1998, *Bairn Rhymes*, Mercat Press, Edinburgh

Burnside, I., 1995 'Themes and Props: Adjuncts for Reminiscence Therapy Groups', in Haight, B. and Webster, J., (eds) *The Art and Science of Reminiscing, Theory, Research, Methods and Applications*, Talyor Francis, London, pp153-163

Kitwood, T., 1990, *Concern for Others: A Psychology of Conscience and Morality*, Routledge, London

Martin 1999, 'Museums for the Many' *Museum Practice* 4 (2)

- Marwick, S., 1995, 'Learning from each other: museums and older members of the community – the People's Story' in Hooper-Greenhill, E., (ed.), *Museums, Media, Message*, Routledge, London
- McGivney, V., 2000, *Recovering Outreach: Concepts, issues and practices*, Leicester: NIACE
- Gibson, F., 1994, *Reminiscence and Recall, A Guide to Good Practice*, Age Concern, London
- Gilroy, B., 1998, *Leaves in the Wind. Collected Writings*, Mango Publishing, London.
- Museums for the Many* DCMS 1999, London
- Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*, DCMS 2000, London
- Home Office, 1998, *Supporting Families: A Consultation Document*. The Stationary Office, London
- Predazzi, M., Vercauteren, R., and Loriaux, M., 2000, 'The culture of the meeting of generations to overcome social and ethnic discrimination' in *Towards a society for all ages: the time of all possibilities*, Vol II, European Union
- Sandell, R., 2003, 'Social inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change' *Museum and Society*, 1 (1) (2003), 45-62 (p.48) - online
- Sargent, L., 2002, *Words and Wings: Still Learning after all these years*, Oxfordshire County Council Publications, UK.
- Schweitzer, P., 1993, *Age Exchanges, Reminiscence Projects for Children and Older People*, Age Exchange, London
- Silverman, L., 'Visitor meaning-making in museums for a new age', *Curator*, 38
- White, M., and Epston, D., 1990, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, Norton, New York

### **Websites**

- Age Concern England, <http://www.ace.org.uk>, 12/04/06
- Age Exchange. <http://www.age-exchange.org.uk>, 16.04.2006
- [www.brockleyschool](http://www.brockleyschool), 16.04.2006
- [www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk), 02.0.20.2006
- [http://white&epston/narrative\\_therapy](http://white&epston/narrative_therapy), 02.02.2006

The 100 British Museum objects. See all the objects from the Radio 4 series A History of the World in 100 Objects . Click on any link to find out more about an object, zoom in on the image and listen again or download the programme. Series 1 (January - February 2010). Making Us Human (2,000,000 - 9000 BC). After the Ice Age: Food and Sex (9000 - 3500 BC). 1: Mummy of Hornedjitef. 6: Bird-shaped pestle. 2: Olduvai stone chopping tool. Museums in the United Kingdom - Virtual Tour. The "United Kingdom" (UK), commonly known as Britain, consists of four countries: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom has many great cities with some fabulous museums. A Virtual Tour of Museums in the United Kingdom. The British Museum. The British Museum is one of the oldest public museums in the world. It was established in 1753, the English Parliament founded it and set the model for all other public museums that followed. Before the introduction of the British Museum as an open museum, museums were private collections of kings, wealthy people, the church, or universities. Incorporate text and images For individual objects Incorporate text, images, video, audio and interactivity Photographs, maps, drawings and diagrams Spoken word, oral testimony, music, foreign languages Film, interviews, archive film, moving image effects Sequenced presentations with audio, film and lighting Sequenced presentations Incorporate text, film, flipbooks, audio Programmed and computerized Incorporate text and images Scale models, dioramas, props, reconstructions Staff or actors in. Where Braille is found in Glasgow Museums we use Braille Grade I, which is suitable for single words and short signs; and Braille Grade 2 for interpretive text. 7.5 Identity, Branding and Partnerships. Supporters and funding bodies may require acknowledgement on specific design elements. The British Museum, in the Bloomsbury area of London, England, is a public institution dedicated to human history, art and culture. Its permanent collection of some eight million works is among the largest and most comprehensive in existence, having been widely collected during the era of the British Empire. It documents the story of human culture from its beginnings to the present. It was the first public national museum in the world.