

Thoughts on Interpretive Approaches to Marjorie Merriweather Post's Biography 2019 Garden Docent Training Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

Telling a biographical story is tricky business! There are many choices to make, and some choices can prove more useful than others. Here is some advice on tactics for approaching Marjorie Post's biography as you develop your tour.

Consider tone

- Go for respectful...her accomplishments and qualities are still used as the museum's guiding principles (eg. graciousness).
- Her times are not our times, and she, like us, is a product of her times
- Benefit of the doubt...life-stories are complex, people are complex....consider how you would like your life decisions to be viewed.

Importance of facts and sources

- Beware of analyzing psychology (her thoughts, intentions, emotions, rationales), and crossing into speculation. In many cases, we do not have evidence of her mindset or feelings, and, more importantly, that work is not ours to do on a 60 minute guided tour!
- Go back to your sources to verify, dig deeper. The readings for this training are an excellent resource to go back to again and again. If you hear a new story from volunteers, visitors, or staff, feel free to ask them where it came from. If it can't be verified, choose one of two options: either do not use it until you can find a verifiable source, or use the story stating that you haven't been able to verify it.
- "I don't know the answer" is a perfectly acceptable answer. Following up with what you **do** know can make a connection that is just as satisfying to the visitor. "While I do not know how many bedrooms were here, I can tell you that she was not hosting large groups of people overnight at Hillwood. That meant that the bedrooms were for a conservative number of guests, herself, and her staff." If the visitor is very interested in the specific answer to their question, comment cards in the visitor center are available and all will be responded to.
- Our understanding of Post changes over time: for example, the 2013 publication and exhibition of *Living Artfully: At Home with Marjorie Merriweather Post* has added to our understanding of our founder, as will the 2019 biography. Incorporate new understandings into your tour.
- Ask for help--for a second opinion, or when running into a sticky spot--from the education or volunteer staff, fellow docents.

Frequently asked questions about her biography

- **Her name: What is the correct way to refer to her?**
 - It changes over time! You may see it many different ways. It's messy!
 - Use: Marjorie Merriweather Post, Marjorie Post, and Post. ("Marjorie" is used only if it is in a quotation from someone who knew her.)
 - Avoid using Mrs. Post (popular in the past, confusing for visitors) or Marjorie.
- **Her marriages: How many times did she marry and why so many?**
 - Do not have to shy from the facts--- visitors will ask
 - She was married for significant lengths of time with each relationship (shortest 7 years; bulk of the other 3 each lasted about 15 years; all years spent married is 50+).
 - To paraphrase Estella Chung: She did not have a perfect life, but she tried her best to make it so.
 - Remember marriages are complicated relationships and we have only 1 hour together on a tour!
- **Her wealth: Was she charitable?**
 - Lived a luxurious lifestyle and enjoyed her life
 - Left Hillwood and its collections to the public. She could have made a different choice.
 - Ardent philanthropist....ranged from supporting arts organizations like the symphony and ballet, to bringing Vietnam veterans and college students to Hillwood.
 - Her intentionality with her homes---turn them into government or educational institutions (Hillwood DC: museum; Hillwood NY: college; Mar-a-Lago: wanted to be southern Camp David).