

Minds in Motion

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Giving Objects Their Voice

Sandy Osborne

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by Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd

We've all taken them. Those historic house museum tours led by a pointing finger identifying one thing after another in a room. "And, over here is a beautiful Duncan Phyfe table." (You are thinking. "What is a dunkinfife?") "Next," the tour leader continues, "please notice the exquisite acanthus-carved legs." (You are wondering, "What is a canthis?")

Imagine the voice, the intonation, the repetitive incantation identifying one thing after another ending with "that about does it for here, let's move into the next room." Visitors stand there obediently, listening, watching, and then moving as directed until gradually they are numbed into mental and physical passivity. Once the last room is seen and its objects identified, the visitors move outside where they turn to their companions and comment, "Wasn't that a lovely house?" probably without remembering much of what they heard.

As tour guides, we want to tell others what we find interesting about our museum's collection. We also want to demonstrate our knowledge of artifacts. After all, we had to learn about each object, memorizing the artists, dates of fabrication, and materials. No doubt we were even tested on this knowledge before we could work with the public. Naturally, we want to share our enthusiasm for, and our mastery of, these objects with visitors. Most often, however, that leads to the "thing identification" tour described above.

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It doesn't have to be that way, though. Museum objects can sing a richer song than mere identification. They can become the visual cues that trigger interesting stories. They can stimulate interaction between the guide and the visitor. They can contribute to what people remember about a museum.

This is especially true at historic house museums where visitors are afforded the opportunity to examine objects in context, as both art and as material culture (that is, as products of particular people at a particular time). Such objects can be "read" as historical documents, much like one reads a diary or a letter.

Looking at objects as material culture requires knowledge of what the objects are, but more is asked. What did these objects mean to the people who used them or made them? What, if anything, would they mean to people who didn't own them? How do these objects tell us something about the past? How do these objects connect with experiences we have today?

To illustrate further, let's consider several artifacts that are part of the collection at Cliveden, an eighteenth century house located in Philadelphia and owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Cliveden was the primary site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Germantown and it retains many of the decorative arts objects accumulated by several generations of the Chew family who lived there.

The entrance hall at Cliveden contains several significant paintings. One is a mid- 18th century portrait attributed to John Wollaston and another depicts the Battle of Germantown. We use both of these paintings to introduce the people and the events that shaped Cliveden. In so doing, we read them as material culture "documents."

When visitors enter Cliveden they hear a brief discourse about its architectural history and the history of the Chew family. We then invite them to look at the portrait of Margaret Oswald, (left) sister of Elizabeth Oswald Chew — the first mistress of Cliveden. We illuminate the entire portrait — frame, background, and sitter.

After giving visitors a moment to see the work, we pin-light the lustrous fabric the sitter wears. "Imagine holding this fabric between your fingers. How does it feel?" Invariably visitors respond with words like soft, smooth, and cool.

Then we ask, "What type of fabric do you think this is?" Because they have felt it before, most visitors of about age seven and up will respond either

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silk or satin.

"Look at the lady's cuffs. How are they trimmed?" With the light directing their eyes, visitors focus on the delicate lace bordering the silk sleeves. Usually, a child pipes up with the right answer. "Does anybody know how people made lace a long time ago?" Sometimes, there are visitors who know. Many times there aren't. But through a series of questions, such as "Do you think it was made by machine or by hand?" visitors uniformly draw the conclusion that lace was handmade and took a long time to produce. "Would you imagine, then, that lace was an expensive or cheap addition to her clothing?" Kids are the ones who generally respond most enthusiastically, "REALLY expensive."

A flurry of questions follow. "Look at this lady again. Consider her dress. Do you think it was her best one? How would you dress if you were having your portrait painted? Do you think everyone dressed like this? What do her clothes tell you about her status and economic class?"

Next we look at the background. With the assistance of light, visitors can see trees. "Where was this lady painted?" The answer is obvious, outdoors. "What does the basket of flowers the sitter holds tell about her?" Together, they and the background lead visitors to deduce that the lady may have enjoyed gardening.

"So, what does this portrait tell you about Margaret Oswald?" The answers come tumbling out — she was rich, she had beautiful clothes, she enjoyed gardening.

"What does Margaret's portrait tell us about the people who lived at Cliveden?" The visitors conclude that they were wealthy; leisured; that they enjoyed demonstrating their social status to visitors with large portraits set in elaborately carved and gilded frames; that subsequent generations of the family took pride in their colonial roots.

Then, the final series of questions come. "Do you think that most people lived like this? Would we have lived like this?" It is a rare time when somebody answers yes.

Such questions shift the portrait of Margaret Oswald from a painting to a document of social history. Rather than simply hearing "Here is an important portrait attributed to John Wollaston ..." visitors feel personally introduced and acquainted with Cliveden's people. They also have gained the skills that should help them read other portraits as products of material culture.

Edward Lamson Henry's painting of the Battle of Germantown (above) was commissioned by the Chew family about 100 years after the actual event took place. Henry dramatically evokes the American attack on the British-occupied house, illustrating key events that occurred during the course of the battle.

Again, light is used to focus attention. The painting serves as illustration for the story of the battle. Here, though, the story is best relayed directly rather than through questioning. By moving the light from one vignette to another, the guide creates a veritable *son et lumiere* show. ("See the British soldiers pointing their rifles out of the second story windows? Here come the Americans charging the front door.") Dramatic storytelling draws visitors in, while showing them the battle damage still visible in the room, the place where a British soldier is thought to have been shot, and two American rifles picked up on the grounds after Washington's army retreated.

The Battle story gets its power and cohesiveness by utilizing an illustrative painting that, remarkably, is set within its authentic site. In the age of Disney-created fantasy, visitors are visibly taken when the guide says "this is really and truly where the battle you see in this painting occurred." Here, the painting and the site serve as key visual aids for a compellingly told story.

Research is necessary for museums that want to make the leap from touring objects as "things" to objects as documents of material culture. Only by researching the architectural history of the site, its landscape, the variety of people who crossed paths there, and the objects that shaped their environment will themes and stories emerge.

Toward this goal, Cliveden has just completed a Historic Structures Report, a detailed site history, and an institutional self-study funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The self-study has reshaped our thinking, and Cliveden has begun a reinstallation of the house to better illustrate the people and events that shaped it.

The overall interpretation of Cliveden focuses on how, and why, the Chew family preserved the house's colonial history in the 19th century. Themes to be explored are: the creation of national symbols and myths, late 19th century entertaining, the relationship of owners and their servants, and the role of women in historic preservation. Within particular rooms, we will cluster objects so that they can help tell particular stories.

For example, one bedroom will feature memorabilia illustrating Mary Chew's membership in the Colonial Dames, her preservation efforts at

Independence Hall, and her personal correspondence with owners of such historic houses as Stratford and Stenton. Rather than describe the room's magnificent 18th century furniture, the new tour will use the setting as a whole to illustrate how and why the Chews elected to preserve, and live surrounded by, their colonial roots at a time when most Americans focused on the future.

We plan to rely on objects and their related stories to carry much of the weight of communicating ideas. Like illustrations in a book, Mary's Colonial Dames membership certificate, her photo wearing a pseudo-eighteenth century mob cap, and bedroom filled with spectacular Philadelphia Chippendale furniture will visually tell a story we wish to share with the public.

Similar strategies will be employed throughout the house. While we will still be able to address the interests of connoisseurs and historians, the house, its collection, and its history will present the general public with a three-dimensional view of history, where objects are critical, but they will not BE the tour. They will be the illustrators and vehicles through which American social history will be interpreted.

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