

Handy Guide for Interpretation

A toolkit inspired by the ITP+ Course: Interpretation



Held at the Nubian Museum, Egypt

23 – 26 October 2018

Toolkit purpose: Based on the sessions and discussions during the *Interpretation* ITP+ Course this document will guide you through interpretation based handy hints and tips to consider when preparing for a new gallery or exhibition, gallery refurbishment or object case redisplay.

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Acknowledgements

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International Training Programme (ITP) and ITP+ Courses

The background

In August 2016 the ITP team asked alumni for feedback on potential ITP+ Courses enabling the team to create an analysis of needs and develop courses that would best help our fellows' career development and support their institutions.

ITP+ Courses are workshops, up to 5-day in length, designed for fellows of the 6 week Summer Programme (276 as of Summer 2018) to apply for and participate in post fellowship. Courses are on selected themes which focus on specific parts of the Summer Programme. The Courses respond to alumni's stated areas of interest and development needs and helping to address identified challenges at their home institutions. Themes will change to reflect the demands and skills gaps of our alumni, contemporary issues and challenges in both the museum and wider cultural heritage sector and will be an opportunity for fellows of varying roles and responsibilities to participate.

ITP+ Courses

The courses offer a series of seminars, creative workshops, hand-on sessions and practical working groups with colleagues from the British Museum and UK Partner museums. ITP+ Courses provide opportunities for further professional development; to reconnect with colleagues in the UK; the chance to meet fellows with similar interests from across different years of the ITP and serve to enhance the potential for future collaborations and the creation of subject specialist networks.



Fellows of ITP+ Courses held at the British Museum in May and December of 2017

ITP+ Aswan: Interpretation

In October 2018 the Nubian Museum in Aswan, Egypt hosted the first ITP+ Course outside of the British Museum.

In May 2016 a two day conference, *Archaeology in Egypt and Sudan: Opportunities for Future Collaboration*, was held in Cairo, Egypt. Over the two days ideas were shared about how Egyptian and Sudanese archaeological institutions might work together in the future. The ITP supported 2 fellows from Sudan and 1 British Museum member of staff to attend the conference. To follow up on outcomes of the conference the ITP+ Course at the Nubian Museums provides an opportunity for Egyptian and Sudanese museum professionals and colleagues from around the world to share skills and knowledge through panel discussions, presentations and project work.

Sessions included:

- A series of case studies from British Museum and partner museum colleagues and ITP fellow facilitators
- Visitor experience tasks
- Interpretation methods project work
- Panel and Label writing exercise
- Panel discussion: audience survey and evaluation methodology

The course and handy-guide was attended and informed by the following ITP network colleagues:

ITP team

Neal Spencer, Keeper, Ancient Egypt and Sudan, British Museum
Claire Messenger, ITP Manager, British Museum
Rebecca Horton, ITP Coordinator, British Museum
Jessica Juckes, ITP Assistant, British Museum

UK Facilitators

Jane Batty, Interpretation Manager, British Museum
Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation and Volunteers, British Museum
Anna Garnett, Curator, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology
Campbell Price, Curator of Egypt and Sudan, Manchester Museum

ITP Fellow Facilitators

Jackline Besigye (ITP 2013) Senior Conservator, Uganda National Museum
Huzoor Choudhry (ITP 2008, India) Proprietor, Huzoor Designs
Vandana Prapanna (ITP 2010, India) Senior Curator, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai

Photographer

John Williams, Head of Photography and Imaging, British Museum

Participants, Egyptian ITP fellows and Ministry of Antiquities colleagues:

Dina Malak Anwar, Aswan Museum
Tamer Hagag Atteya, Aswan Museum
Hadeer Belal (ITP 2013) Curator, Coptic Museum
Mariam Beshara, Luxor Museum
Souad Fayez Ebeid (ITP 2010) Director General, Beni Suef Museum
Ayman Mohamed El- Boughdady, Nubian Museum
Agaiby Iamey ElAbd, Aswan Museum
Fatma Abu ElGud, Luxor Museum
Shaimaa Abd Elhamid Abd Elsamea, Luxor Museum
Sara Hamdy Mohamed Elkomy, The Grand Egyptian Museum
Sayed Ahmed Fadl (ITP 2016) Curator, National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation
Hend Taha Mohamed Hassan, National Museum of Egyptian Civilization
Safaa Abd- Fatah Mekky, Nubian Museum
Moataz Dawy Mohamed, Mummification Museum
Mohammed Mokhtar (ITP 2015) Curator, Abdeen Palace Museum
Shimaa Gomaa Saleh, Nubian Museum
Norhan Hassan Salem (ITP 2017) Registrar & Museum Educator & Cultural Events'
Coordinator, Egyptian Museum

Participants, Sudanese ITP Fellows:

Ghalia Garelnabi Abdelrahman (ITP 2010) Director, Sudan National Museum
Omima Abdelrahman Mohammed Elsanosi (ITP 2015, Sudan)
Nimat Mohamed Elhassan (ITP 2009) Director, Khalifa House Museum
Amani Mohammed (ITP 2013) Senior Curator, Sudan National Museum

Interpretation case studies: a series of case studies from British Museum and partner museum colleagues, and ITP fellow facilitators

Handy hints and tips: examples of approaching different interpretation projects from course facilitators

Interventions and Trails: reinterpreting existing displays

Stuart Frost, British Museum

Updating gallery displays does not need to be expensive, a big undertaking or invasive to objects on display.

If you feel that your institution, a gallery or display case in particular is in need of updating but you do not have the funding or time to carry out a complete refurbishment then the following ideas may help you to get the desired effect within tight constraints.

Before embarking on a reinterpretation project consider the following questions....
(*'exhibit', under the heading structure, can be supplemented for whichever project you undertake*)

Project objectives (6 maximum)

- What are you hoping to achieve as a museum through the project?

Key messages (6 maximum)

- What do you to communicate to visitors?

Visitor outcomes (6 maximum)

- What do you want people to take from the experience (attitudinal; emotional; behavioural etc.)?

Audience

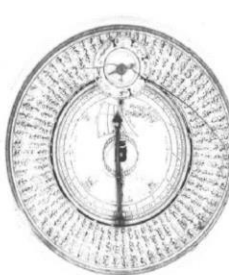
- Who it for? What are their needs? How will you cater for them?

Structure

- How will the exhibit be structured? What are the main elements?

Once you have decided the reason for the refurbishment space and the story you would like to tell, consider how you will make the changes. The interpretation department at the British Museum often work on the following projects....

Self-guided tours of 'highlight objects' added to Museum maps



Map

The British Museum

Find your way around the Museum, discover some of the most famous objects, and explore the unique collection with talks, tours and more.

britishmuseum.org

Don't miss

Go to Room 2a and start with...

- ▲ The Holy Thorn Reliquary, Room 2a
A medieval masterpiece

Go up the South stairs'...

- The Lewis Chessmen, Room 40
The most famous chess set in the world
- Oxus Treasure, Room 52
Fabulous metalwork from ancient Iran
- The Royal Game of Ur, Room 56
A popular pastime in the ancient world
- The Portland Vase, Room 70
The Roman inspiration for Wedgwood

Come down the North stairs...

- Tang dynasty figures, Room 33
From the tomb of a general
- Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance), Room 53
A remarkable bronze sculpture from south India

...and then find out what's on the lower floor

- Brass plaques from Benin, Room 25
Masterpieces of African art

Finally, head back upstairs to...

- Easter Island statue Hoa Hakananai'a, Room 24
A colossal figure from a lost civilisation
- The Rosetta Stone, Room 4
The key to deciphering hieroglyphs
- Assyrian Lion Hunt reliefs, Room 10
An ancient king's triumph over nature
- Parthenon sculptures, Room 18
Iconic sculpture from ancient Greece

Africa
Lower floor
Africa
The Salisbury Galleries
Room 25

Americas
Ground floor
North America
Room 26
Mexico
Room 27

Ancient Egypt
Ground floor
Egyptian sculpture
Room 4

Upper floors
Egyptian life and death
The Michael Cohen Gallery
Room 61
Egyptian death and afterlife: mummies
The Rosie Walker Galleries
Room 62-63
Early Egypt
The Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery
Room 64
Sudan, Egypt and Nubia
The Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery
Room 65
Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt
Room 66

Ancient Greece and Rome
Ground floor
Early Greece
Room 6
Greece: Minoans and Mycenaeans
The Arthur I Fleischman Gallery
Room 12
Greece 1050-520 BC
Room 13
Greek vases
Room 14
Athens and Lycia
Room 15
Greece: Bassai sculptures
Room 16*
Nereid Monument
Room 17
Greece: Parthenon
Room 18
Greece: Athens
Room 19
Greeks and Lycians
400-325 BC
Room 20
Greek vases
Room 20a*
Mausoleum of Halicarnassos
Room 21
The world of Alexander
Room 22
Greek and Roman sculpture
Room 23

New maps created for temporary thematic trails. Temporary panels and labels are added to display cases and galleries to highlight the object in the trail.


The British Museum

Celebrate the art of winning

Follow the ancient Olympic victory trail

Free

1 June – 9 September 2012



Short of suit?
For victory, the winners made suit you with their own robes.

Discus thrower:
The Discus Thrower, Discus Court
The ancient technique of discus throwing seems to have been perfected from that of today's athletes. There is no evidence for anything more than a four-quarter turn, rather than the two full turns used by modern athletes.

The Miletus Charioteer
Room 10
Chariot racing was a hugely popular sport in antiquity, much like Formula One nowadays. The names of teams of horses were usually engraved on the chariot rather than the driver's name, as the winners were usually anonymous.

Female figure:
Room 20
Chariot racing was the only Olympic sport in which women could compete. As women of the teams of horses, they were not women to win the Olympic crown, but the winners were usually anonymous.

A competitor in the long jump:
Room 71
The long jump was the only type of jumping contest in the ancient Olympics. It differed slightly from the long jump that athletes use in pairs of jumps, as they were jumping forward on take-off and back on landing, probably as a handicap.

Free display in Room 3
Six Argosian Discus Throwers
1 June – 9 September 2012
The most famous of the ancient Olympic Games, the discus throw, was a highly popular sport. This display features contemporary interpretations.

Basics
The ancient Olympic Games
The ancient Olympic Games were held every four years in the city of Olympia in Greece. The games were held in honour of Zeus, the king of the gods.

These and other items about the ancient Olympics are on display in the Museum shop and at Information and Learning.

The British Museum
Great Court
London WC2R 0DU
Tel: 020 7323 3300
www.britishmuseum.org

Related events
Colossus: Sport and competition
In Greece and Rome
The ancient Olympic Games were held every four years in the city of Olympia in Greece. The games were held in honour of Zeus, the king of the gods.


Olympic victory trail
1 June – 9 September 2012
Free

Follow the ancient Olympic victory trail
1 June – 9 September 2012
Free

The ancient Olympic Games – all the world's main sports festival – started over 2500 years ago in ancient Greece. The Games were held every four years as they are now, at Olympia in honour of the god Zeus. Athletes competed as individuals, but a victory would also bring great honour to their home city. In the first 10 Olympics the only event was the foot race. Later, more events were added including the pentathlon, combat sports and chariot racing. Winning the Olympic crown was the greatest achievement possible for an athlete in the ancient world and over the thousands-year history of the ancient Games, vast numbers of athletes were immortalised by statues and songs written in their honour.

Follow this free trail around the Museum to discover objects whose stories will tell you more about the Olympic Games in the ancient world.

You can also visit the Olympic Games exhibition in the Museum shop and at Information and Learning.



Ground floor
Level 0

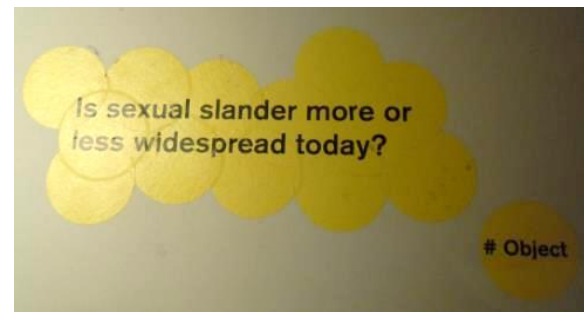
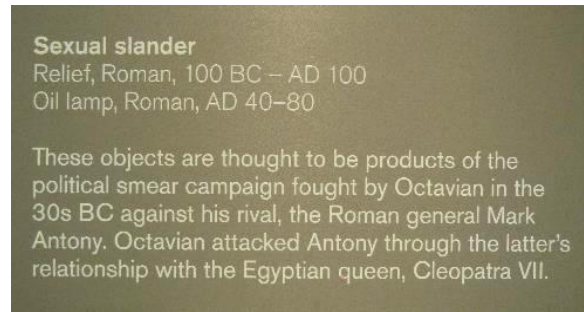
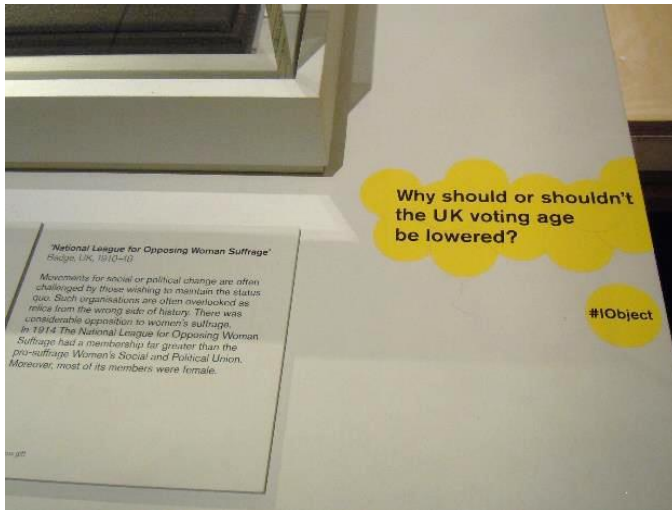
Room numbers
Trail stop number
Shop
Lift

Main entrance
Great Fosses Street

A map of the British Museum is available at the Information Desk, Regulated Station 21.

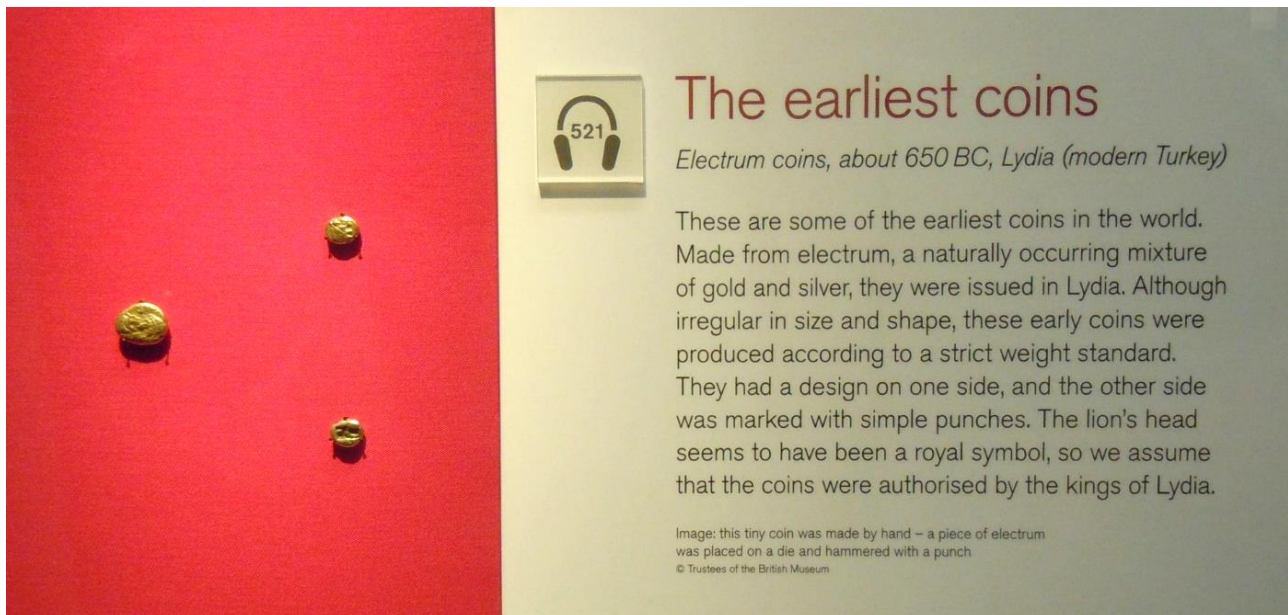
Add 'intergenerational labels' to increase visitor engagement in displays

Notice the bright colour, inviting questions, relevance to audiences in contemporary society, twitter hashtag and non-invasive nature.



Draw attention to particular objects

... which will encourage visitors to see and read more. Add a colourful fabric to make them stand out and look different to other objects on display.



Petrie Museum: presenting contexts in a University Museum Anna Garnett, Petrie Museum

Petrie Museum context and challenges

The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology was founded by Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie in the 20th Century. Petrie discovered a data sequence for determining the typology of pottery. The display of objects at the museum is historical, originally for university teaching purposes, and due to funding and debate over the importance of the style of display, is difficult to make significant changes to.

Any changes must therefore be low cost and aim to engage non-academic audiences with the UK's second largest Egypt & Sudan collection.



Solutions:

Add new stories for visitors by providing context



Think of the object history, for example not just where the object was excavated, but can you find out who excavated it? By looking through the archives, staff at the Petrie Museum found the name and a picture of an Egyptian excavation supervisor who dug on a site where some Petrie Museum objects were discovered. His picture has since

been added to the case of objects (see image above). This is appealing to those interested in personal story and archival material.

Highlight particular objects to attract the visitors eye to an entire case of objects



In a display of academic labels and objects which can look very similar to most visitors if not properly explained, using a simple piece of coloured fabric to highlight an object and explain the objects within the case more thoroughly, can make the visitor experience more structured, digestible and rewarding.

Think about what is relevant to people today and bring out hidden stories of the past



In 2017 and 2018 cultural institutions across the UK looked at reinterpreting their collections and properties from two unique perspectives to commemorate the bi-centenary of the Sexual Offences Act and the centenary of the Representation of the People Act.

In 2018 the Petrie Museum completed translation work of papyri with the goal of finding out more about women in the work place in Ancient Egypt. As a result of this new research the Petrie Museum were able to add a new panel to their display, listing the names of the women who contributed to William Petrie's workforce. This new interpretation allowed a museum of ancient objects to

participate in current conversations and spark new discussions about the ancient world.

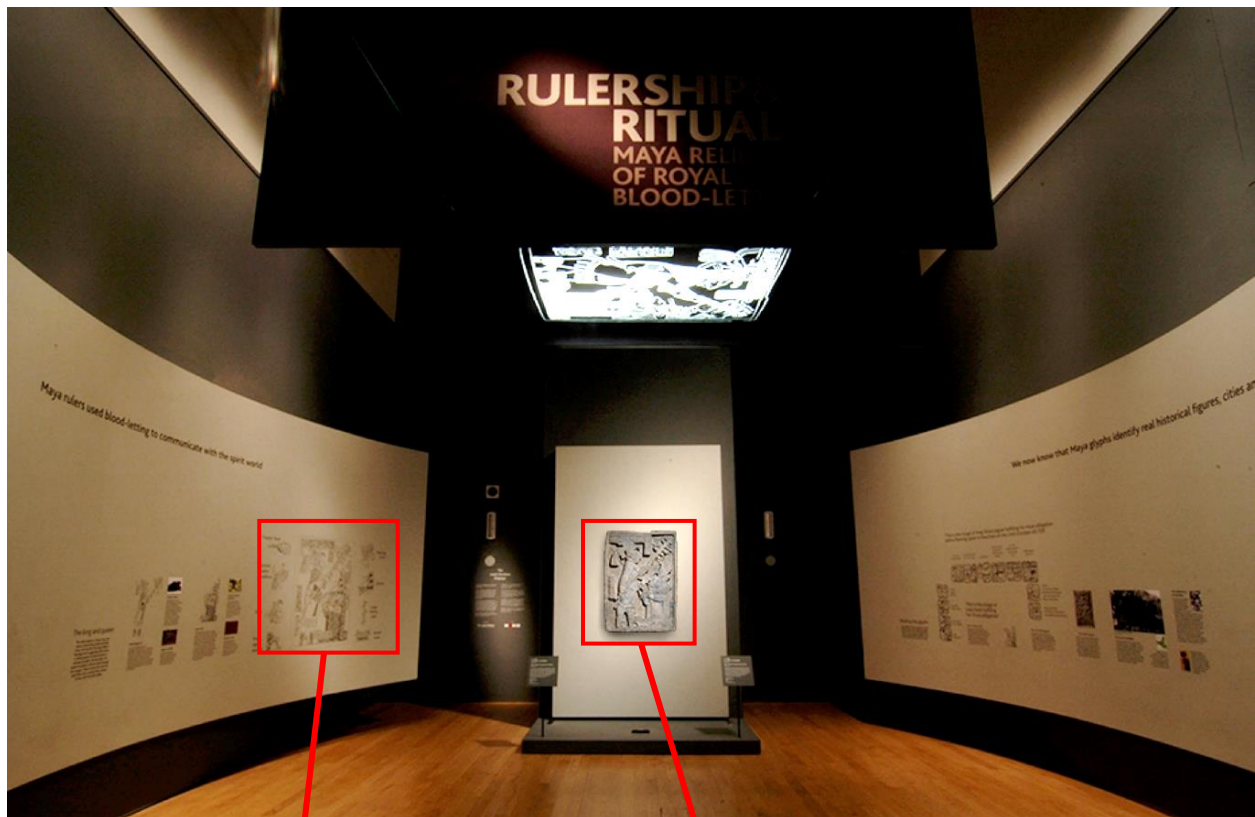
Objects in focus: Room 3 displays at the British Museum

Jane Batty, British Museum

https://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/past_exhibitions/the_asahi_shimbun_displays.aspx

The Asahi Shimbun Displays in Room 3 are a series of free temporary displays that showcase single or small groups of objects from the Museum's collection, ranging from the earliest human artefacts to objects from the present day. Set in a space in which these objects can be the focus of deeper contemplation and understanding, the Asahi Shimbun Displays are also a testing ground for innovation in design and interpretation.

Telling a story about a single object can bring new life to your permanent collection; the object you select could be one which is often overlooked, a well-known object which you tell a new story about or an object which has been recently researched and can bring visitors up to date with museum staff's current projects.



Feedback on previous Asahi Shimbun Displays in Room 3 have been very positive:

'If a person wants to understand an object, it really explains exactly how to look at it, bit by bit.'
Rulership and ritual: Maya relief of royal blood-letting, 2010

'It's nice to know the figure's recent history, where it was and how it came to be here and what you've done to it.'
Divine cat: speaking to the gods in Ancient Egypt, 2007

'Here we learn about a culture that exists among us and that we recognise, but that most of us know little about.'
Sikh fortress turban, 2011

Working with artists

Campbell Price, Manchester Museum

<http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/currentexhibitions/shabtissuspendedtruth/>

Responding to the current political debate on the subject of migration, Manchester Museum commissioned a gallery installation by Syrian-born artist Zahed Taj-Eddin, which reflects on the Museum's world-class Egyptology collection.



Zahed's art was suspended in many permanent gallery spaces including the ancient world gallery and displayed in public spaces in and outside of Manchester Museum. Zahed said *'The display invites visitors to think about ancient and modern human issues such as the beliefs and actions that lead us to venture into the unknown and explore a better life beyond...'*

Campbell Price said *'Our aim in working with Zahed has been to address contentious social questions through the lens of archaeological collections; to use seemingly familiar objects and provoke discussion of big contemporary topics. Zahed's sculptures are both serious political commentary and enthralling objects in their own right.'*

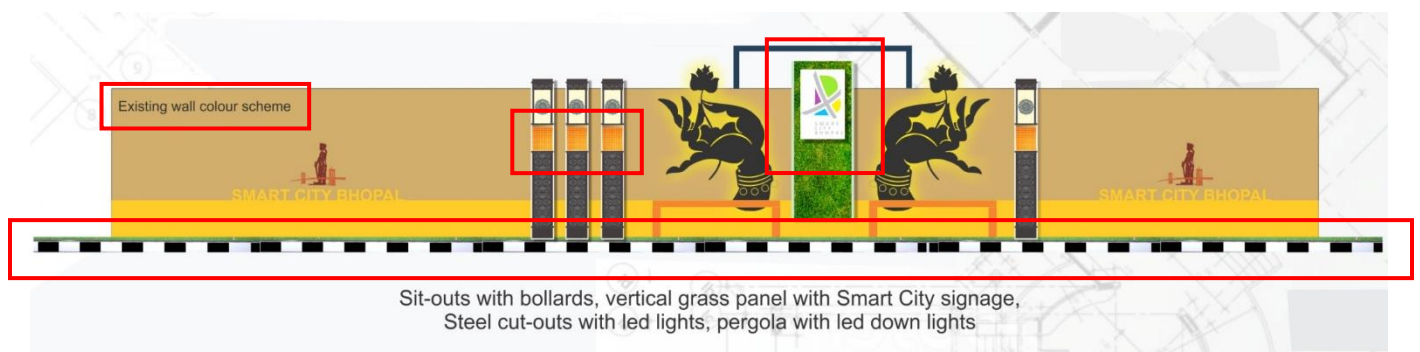
This project also enabled the museum to display objects from a private collection, never seen on public display before. As a result, permanent gallery spaces had new perspectives and attention drawn to them through art, bringing in new audiences and encouraging repeat visitors to see the collection in new ways.

Lost heritage and reinterpretation of space ***Huzoor Choudhry (ITP 2006, India), Huzoor Designs***

Huzoor Choudhry founded Huzoor Designs in 2006, a consulting and manufacturing company which works on: museum design and planning; heritage interpretation and adaptive reuse; exhibition design and planning projects, to name but a few. Huzoor Designs aims to beautify public spaces both inside and outside through reinterpretation of space by uniting lost heritage inspired design with modern technology.

When reinterpreting a space Huzoor suggests you take into consideration the following:

- Ergonomical design
- Thematic display to complement collection
- Free flowing space
- Effective lighting
- Signage, leading to the space and in the space, which through both the information and aesthetic promotes your concept and purpose
- Resources for the 'information hungry' to be able to access more information



Above is an example of Huzoor Design planning for cultural instillations on the road of Bhopal under the smart city scheme of the Government of India. You can see the reinterpretation of a previously existing wall to bring light, signage and a rejuvenation of lost heritage to the streets of India. The wall is practical (it has to be there) but with Huzoor Design the space has been provided with a new meaning to passers-by.

Interpretation for your museum's audience ***Jackline Besigye, Uganda National Museum***

Uganda National Museum mainly attracts local school children and some international tourists. As a result, when the museum has the opportunity to reinterpret permanent displays, present temporary exhibitions and create programmes it is motivated by young audiences and the community. Uganda National Museums therefore takes into consideration the following when interpreting their collection:

Presenting collections in their natural form

E.g. The remains of Kibuuka of the Kingdom of Buganda are surrounded by items which symbolise status. The human remains and surrounding items continue to be valued by the community therefore the interpretation must give the Kibuuka display the respect expected.



Displaying objects in an archaeological excavation context

To ensure school children understand how the collections on display came to be in the museum, and that the objects are part of their history and their country's history and traditions.



Making the permanent collection and display relevant



Uganda National Museum hosted a temporary exhibition about milk as a culture and business in Uganda and Switzerland. The idea started in 2015, from a co-operation project involving Uganda National Museum, Igongo Cultural Centre and the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich in Switzerland.

The Museum set up a section to showcase dairy farming, processing and consumption patterns in the three cattle-keeping cultures of Ankole, Karamoja and Switzerland, including ways of preserving milk, making cheese and butter. The exhibition also travelled to different parts Uganda.

The exhibition gave insights on history, traditions and milk products, indigenous knowledge systems of the communities and process of making milk products. The exhibition also discussed the status of milk in Uganda today including topics such as industrial change, gender roles, the environment and political economy.

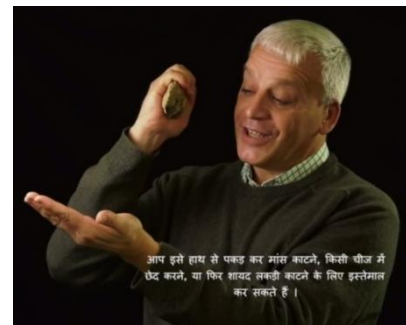
India and the World – a history in nine stories ***Vandana Prapanna, (ITP 2010) CSMVS***

Interpretation in a museum can happen on various levels and by different means, keeping in mind the demographic of the visitors and their interests. There are many strong mediums through which a museum can communicate with its audience. With this thought in mind Vandana presented a case study of one of the 'path-breaking exhibitions' which showcased at CSMVS last year in collaboration with the British Museum and the National Museum, New Delhi: *India and the World – A History in Nine Stories*, an exhibition that celebrated India's cultural connection with the word.

Whilst at CSMVS *India and the World – A History in Nine Stories* was interpreted in the following ways...

Interpretation through display

talking heads, documentary / film, Google art project, flip book, audio guides



Interpretation through text labels

'Since the beginning of Museums exhibition labels have been used as instruments for torture on helpless visitors. Labels can be designed so that they have high probability of being read, meet the educational objectives of an exhibit and create visitor satisfaction'
Stephen Bitgood

Engagement through experts

Gallery talks and lectures



Engagement through Docents and Educators

Specialists in Education who can engage a variety of visitors, special needs programme



Workshops and Activities

Hands on, interactive, integrated curriculum, project work, reading corner



Outreach

Public programmes, 'Museum on wheels'



Outcomes

Through these different methods the museum was able to engage with a variety of audiences both in the exhibition space and across India. See the results of the museum's hard work above...



Visitor Experience Task: a scenario activity carried out by British Museum Interpretation colleagues at the Nubian Museum, Egypt

Handy hints and tips: how to get you and your colleagues thinking like a visitor about your institution

The visitor experience task enables museums workers to better understand their visitors and needs in a particular institution.

TO DO: With your colleagues, take on the persona of the different types of visitors who come to your institution (e.g. school groups, families, international tourists, academics) and set yourself a task to carry out 'in character'. Take a look at the scenarios below, tailor them to your institution's visitor profiles, building infrastructure and programme offerings, and give it a go!

The tasks below were designed for colleagues for Egypt, India, Sudan and Uganda to carry out at the Nubian Museum in Aswan, Egypt.



Scenario 1: Family Visitors (English speaking tourists)

Your group should adopt the point of view of a family of four visiting the Nubian Museum for the first time. Assume that –

- The group have two children, one aged 9 and one aged 3
- English is their first (and only) language
- On arrival the first thing they need to do is find a toilet
- They want to see the Museum's the highlights of the collection, particularly things that will appeal to their children
- They have not done any pre-visit planning

- They have brought a packed lunch with them and they want to know if there is somewhere they can eat it

Your task is to find out what the Museum has to offer this group and their children – what options are available to them. Please make a note of any challenges that you think they would encounter along the way during their visit, or anything that might be particularly helpful.

In addition, think about:

- Is there anything that would help visitors like this pre-plan?
- What is there to help them during their visit?
- Is there anything to help them post-visit?

What could be done to improve their visit?

You have 40 minutes

Scenario 2: International Visitors (American, Sightseers)

Your group should adopt the point of view of two adult visitors to the Museum for the first time.

Assume that –

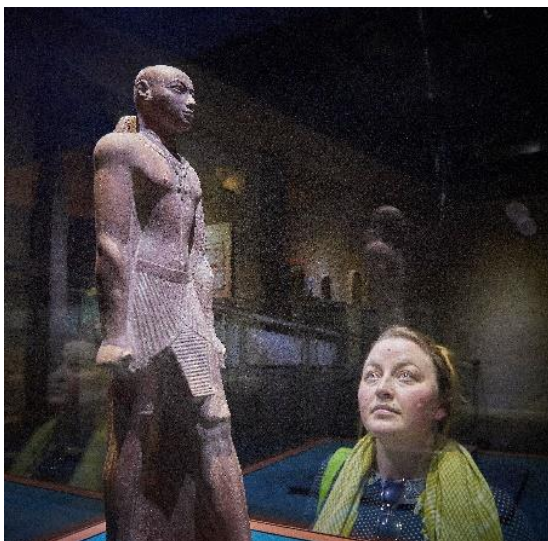
- English is their first language
- They have smartphones with them
- They have an hour and are keen to see the highlights
- They do not know anything about ancient Egyptian history
- One of them is visually impaired and has very little sight

Your task is to establish the experience will be like for these visitors. What problems will they encounter? Please make a note of any challenges or problems, or anything that will help your visitors.

- Is there anything that would help visitors like this pre-plan?
- What is there to help them during their visit?
- Is there anything to help them post-visit?

What could be done to improve their visit?

You have 40 minutes.



Scenario 3: School Teacher (Egyptian)

Your group should adopt the point of a view of a school teacher working with children aged 7-11. Assume that:

- They are visiting the Nubian Museum to plan for a possible class visit.
- They want to bring a class of around 30 students to the Museum for a cross-curricular visit (history, art & design, literacy, numeracy)
- They have not looked at the website for information before visiting (they have smartphone with them).
- They want to find out:
 - o What facilities the Museum has for school groups, where the children can have lunch and so on.
 - o Which galleries and exhibits might be particularly suitable for using with children
 - o Whether there are any Museum resources available to help them plan your visit

Your task is to find answers to the questions above and gather any other information that might be helpful for a school teacher. Please make a note of any challenges that you encounter along the way, or anything that helps you achieve your goal.

- Is there anything that would help teachers like this pre-plan?
- What is there to help them during their visit?
- Is there anything to help them post-visit?

What could be done to improve their visit and the museum's provision for this audience?

You have 40 minutes



Scenario 4: Two adults (Egyptian, self-developers)

Your group should adopt the point of view of two Egyptian adults. Assume they haven't been to the Museum before. Also assume:

- They have had a long journey to get to the Museum
- One of the two adults is a wheelchair user.
- They have an hour for their visit to the Museum.
- They want to see as much of the Museum as possible

Please make a note of any challenges that you encounter along the way, or anything that facilitates your visit. How accessible is the museum for someone in a wheelchair?

- Is there anything that would help visitors like this pre-plan?
- What is there to help them during their visit?
- Is there anything to help them post-visit?

What could be done to improve their visit?

You have 40 minutes.

Interpretation methods project work: facilitators and participants work on unique projects to improve permanent displays for visitor experience

Handy hints and tips: how to make small changes to permanent displays which have a big impact to visitor experience

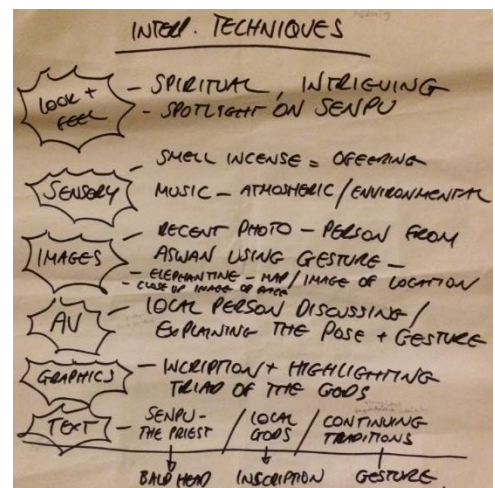
Course facilitators and participations were split into four groups; each group were allocated an interpretation method to apply to the Nubian Museum and were asked to present their work back to the whole group at the end of the day. The nature of the project was very fast paced but the projects feedback had taken great shape over the course of the day. The group work project demonstrates how changes to interpretation on permanent display and creating additional material does not need to be an expensive or long term task.

- Group 1 were asked look at how additional panels can be used to create a new narrative
- Group 2 were asked to create a trail around the museum, along a theme
- Group 3 were asked to create a themed guided tour to tell a new story
- Group 4 were asked to use the British Museum’s Room 3 model to propose a small display that provides a new perspective for museum visitors



Interestingly groups 1, 2 and 3 all decided that through their various modes of interpretation they would like to create a highlights tour at the Nubian Museum.

Group 1 decided added panels would be aimed at families and text would be written in both Arabic and English to engage local people and international tourists. 16 highlight objects would be accompanied by a panel of supporting text and would focus on making connections between the past and present. The objects selected, and extra text, would aim to make visitors feel a personal connection to objects, the museum and Nubia by explaining how societies today are informed by their past and the close community of Nubian culture. Overall the



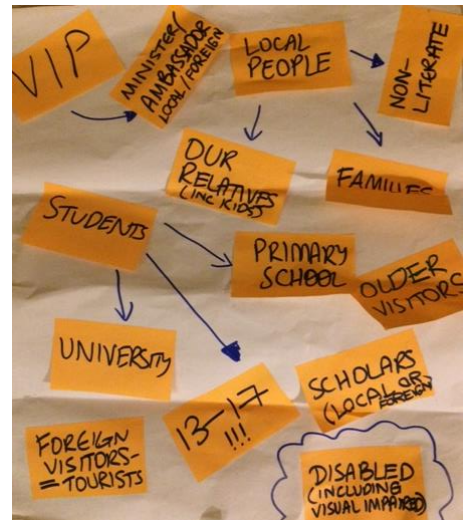
highlight objects and extra panels would bring a story telling element to the museum, to encourage visitors to feel a personal connection.

- ① RIVER NILE MAP
- ② PLATE DECORATED WITH HUNTING SCENE
- ③ WOODEN COFFIN WITH TEXT
- ④ SHABTIS FIGURES
- ⑤ SCARAB STATUE IN SHRINE
- ⑥ COLOSSAL STATUE OF RAMESSES II
- ⑦ STATUETTE OF WOMAN WITH DREADLOCKS
- ⑧ WOODEN MODEL BOAT
- ⑨ JEWELLERY + HORSES
- ⑩ WATER CONTAINER
- ⑪ GLASS MOSQUE LAMP
- ⑫ BASKETRY FOR DATES
- ⑬ REPLICA HOUSES WITH PLATES.

Group 2 decided their trail would move around the whole museum and cover 13 highlight objects. The trail would be aimed at an adult audience with no Egyptological knowledge and would give users an overview of the museum in a 1 hour time period. Red fabric would be used to highlight the objects on the trail.

Group 3 created a tour which would highlight top 10 objects and would be aimed at VIPs to facilitate conversations regarding museum funding. The tour was created using the Smithsonian Institution 'tips for museum docents and tour guides' document which contains 12 bullet

points from 'encourage visitors to ask questions' and 'assess your audience and structure your tour accordingly' to 'have fun!'. The group practiced giving the tour on the day to help them to finalise its structure. Highlight object themes included: Kings and Queens, Death and Burial, and Nubian Culture.



Group 4 worked with the British Museum's Asahi Shimbun Room 3 Display model and selected one object from the permanent collection to redisplay and reinterpret. The group achieved this by each member selecting 5 objects and then compromising through discussion on reducing the selection down to 13 objects. Each member of the group had to research and make a case for one of the



objects before the final selection was put to a vote. A statue of Senpu was selected and would tell the story of worshipping the God's in the local area, in particular the significance of the Elephantine area to the local people and the Gods. As a result, the group decided the display should be atmospheric – low lighting, music playing and scented. Videos of locals explaining the significances of the hand gesture and position of the statue would play. The display would aim to instill a sense of pride in local culture and stories.

Panel and Label writing exercise: select panel and label text from your institution which you like and which you would like to improve

Handy hints and tips: top 10 tips for working on panel and label text including programme examples to learn from

*'Regardless of whether the text is for a special exhibition or a permanent gallery, our aim is to encourage the visitor to **look more closely** at the objects on display and to **reveal something meaningful**.'*

British Museum Interpretation Team

ITP+ participants were split into two groups to work with British Museum Interpretation Manager Jane Batty or Head of Interpretation and Volunteers Stuart Frost for a morning examining, critiquing and improving texts.

THINK:

What makes a good museum text?

The groups began by mindmapping around this question.

It was agreed that any object label should make clear to the visitor:

What is the object?

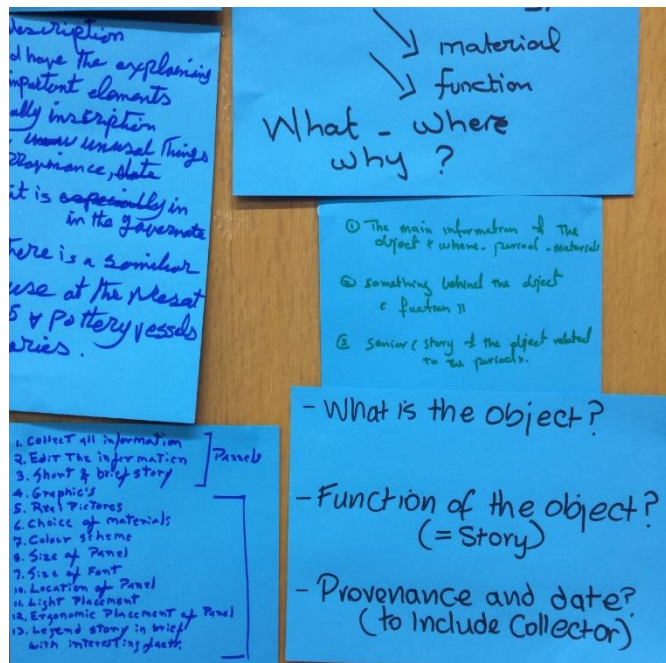
What was / is it for?

Where and when was it produced?

Some more debatable questions were raised:

Should the name of an associated collector always be on the label?

How do we avoid a perceived hierarchy if we are presenting texts in more than one language?



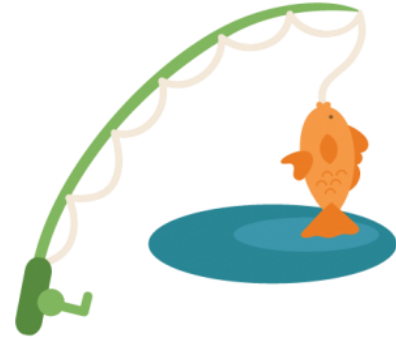
The session leaders then presented the participants with this list of TOP 10 principles for text writing that the British Museum Interpretation team uses:

1. Start with the 'hook'

What is the key point that will get visitors interested – hook them like a fish!

2. Tell stories within the big idea

Think about the information hierarchy and section structure



3. Refer to what you can see

Begin and end with visual details, to prompt the visitor to look back again more closely

4. Appeal to the senses

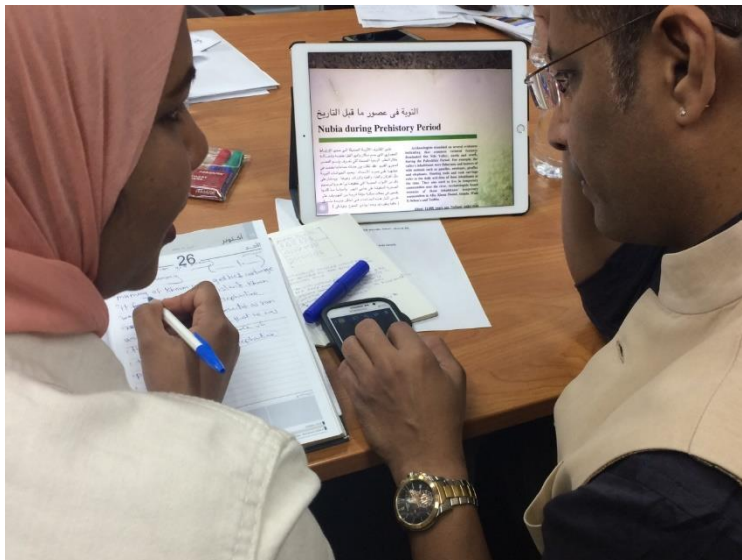
Not just visual but sound, smell, taste, what it is like to hold or touch...

5. Make it about people

6. Keep it short

Panel: around 100 words, label: around 60 words

7. Make it active



8. No jargon

Use language that everyone can understand, not specialised/technical/academic language

9. Write as you would speak

Read it aloud to be sure

10. Admit uncertainty

Participants had been asked in advance to bring with them to Aswan examples of label texts from their museums that they could rework during this session.



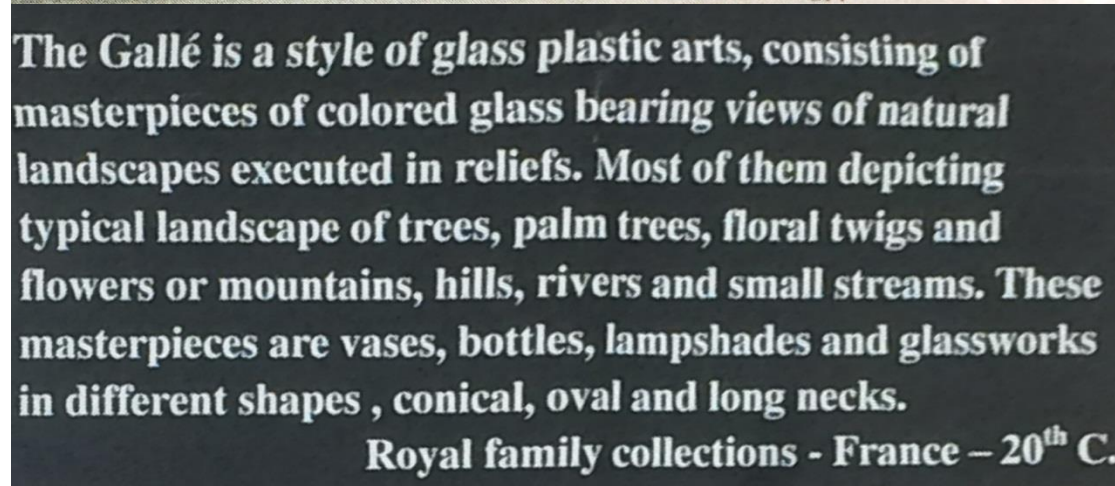
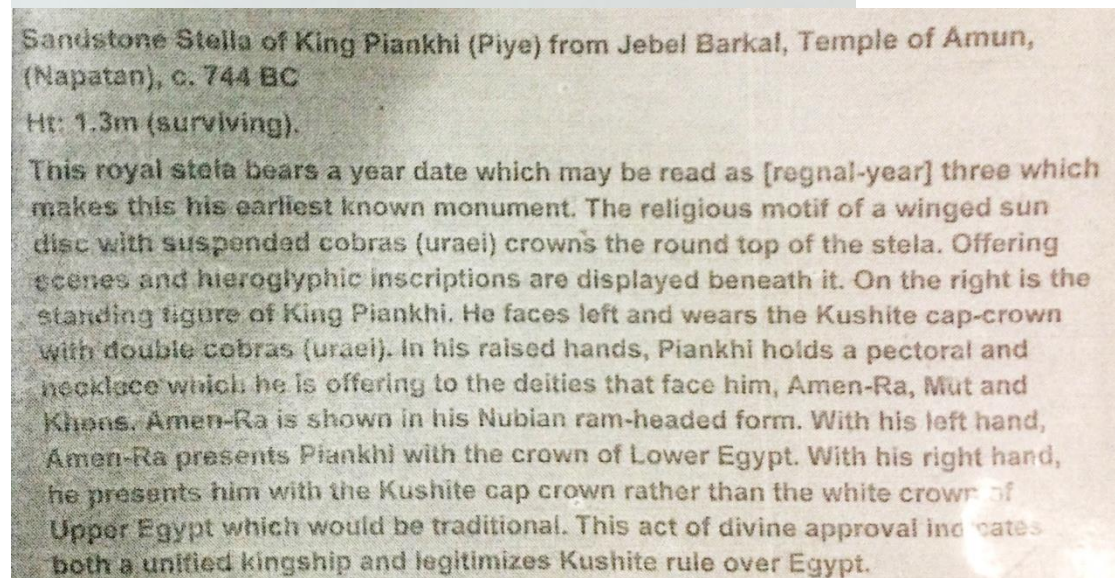
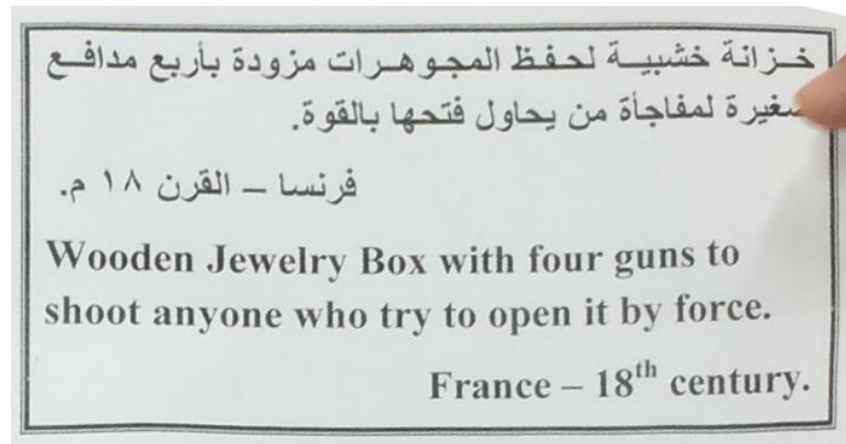
They did this as partner work, with feedback from the UK facilitators. The multiple edits reflect the reality of the interpretation processes, as texts should be looked at and reworked by a number of people (usually four).

Look at the three texts below that were brought to the workshop by ITP+ participants.

THINK:

What are the 'hooks'?

What stories can we tell?

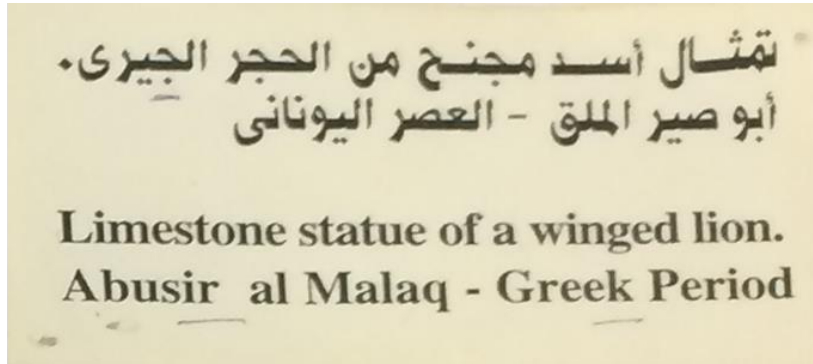


Below are two examples of texts that ITP+ participants worked on in pairs.

THINK:

What differences can you see in the new texts they have created?
Have they followed all 10 of the British Museum Interpretation team's tips?
What would you do to further improve the texts?

Example 1



What's the hook? The connection of two civilisations

New draft label created:

No.656
Limestone
Greco-Roman
Abusir al Malaq

Winged lion with a human head, summoning the power of a lion, the freedom of birds and the human mind – a concept inspired by the Egyptian sphinx.
The lion stands on its front legs to be ready to pounce at any time. In the past, lions lived in this desert but now very few remain. This statue reflects the strong Greek influence on the Egyptian civilisation.

THINK:

What differences can you see in the new texts they have created?
Have they followed all 10 of the British Museum Interpretation team's tips?
What would you do to further improve the texts?

Example 2



What's the hook? We can all relate to this object from 1000 years ago – milk remains vital for life

New draft label created:

Milk pot

This pot was used for drinking milk by people who lived in Ntuusi 1000 years ago, called the Bachwezi. It was excavated by Andrew Reid in 1991. Milk is still important today for raising children, as it was for the Bachwezi.

Panel discussion on audience survey and evaluation

methodology: a time in the programme for participants and facilitators to ask each other questions and discuss possible answers

Handy hints and tips: common and recurring questions asked in the museum sector answered!

Before concluding the ITP+ Aswan course with an evaluation and study day trip the group met one last time at the Nubia Museum, to participate in a panel discussion. Petrie and Manchester Museum curator's, Anna Garnett and Campbell Price, and British Museum Interpretation team members, Stuart Frost and Jane Batty each gave a brief overview of their institutions use of audience surveys and evaluation methods before taking questions from and facilitating discussion between workshop participants.



Stuart Frost began by explaining the British Museum's **annual visitor survey**: interviewing over 2000 visitors a year to find out why they visited and what they thought. As a result of these findings the British Museum was able to work on increasing family visitor figures. Stuart described 3 points at which visitors should be asked for their opinion:

1. Front End: 'walk through' the exhibition plan, whilst it is still on paper, with a focus group at a point when changes can still be made. Listen to their opinions and make adjustments where appropriate.
2. Formative: at an early stage of a gallery refurbishment or new gallery project, talk to the public about what they would like to see.
3. Summative: once a gallery or exhibition has opened consider what works in the space and what does not to identify learning for future projects.

Jane Batty explained **3 audience survey techniques** she like to apply, as each technique is adaptable to the scale of a particular project:

1. Tracking and observation: following a visitor's route around a museum or gallery before redesigning a space to find out which objects are popular and which require help to draw visitor attention to them.
2. Short interviews: asking visitors 1 – 2 questions e.g. do you like family labels in exhibitions? ... In order to decide what interpretation methods are liked and are of use to visitors, and therefore which methods to use in future.
3. Visitor Survey: Ask visitors to temporary exhibitions the same set of questions to compare the successes of each exhibition and identify lessons learnt for future exhibitions.

Anna Garnett spoke about the importance of consistency when surveying museum visitors. **Keeping an accurate record of visitor numbers and types of visitor** (e.g. children) can be beneficial when proposing future projects to colleagues and applying for funding. Knowing when your museum is more or less busy at different times of the year is invaluable to help plan visitor programmes to meet demand or to boost visitor numbers. Anna added that a comments board within your museum is a useful tool for getting qualitative visitor feedback. The comments board can be as simple as eye catching coloured card and post it notes with pens!

Campbell Price supported Anna's comments on qualitative data and talked about the importance of getting **qualitative results** from museum event evaluations – results which contain detail and personal thoughts rather than results which contribute toward statistics. This is particularly useful when your museum is experimenting with new types of events, to discover what your target audience took from their experience.



The group then led a panel discussion on audience surveys and evaluation methods. Below are the questions asked by participants and answers presented by the panel, ITP Fellow facilitators and workshop participants.

How can we attract 20 – 40 year old audiences who are not families?

- Create a focus group of your target audience and conduct a group interview, asking them what your institution is / is not currently attracting them with. Based on their responses create a programme of events which will appeal to them.
- In the UK younger audiences like evening events including guest lectures, creative events, and receptions.
- If you can create a programme of events, or activities your focus group has requested, hold them on a regular basis (e.g. once a month on the same night each month) to encourage repeat visiting.
- Advertise your institution and any special programmes on social media.

How can we attract teenagers?

- Start a youth forum where groups of teenagers can meet with museum staff. In the youth forum give teenagers the authority to say what they would like to see your museum. Act on what members of the youth forum say and give them responsibilities which will help shape future museum activities.
- Think of your museum as a social space in order to get teenagers into the building. Museums are beautiful social settings as they contain at least one of the following: meeting rooms, cafes, garden / outdoor space, large indoor spaces. In the first instance be creative and think about what would attract teenagers to the museum, if the museum did not contain objects. An example, not specifically for teen audiences but to demonstrate the scope for using your museum as a social space came from Anna Garnett at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology; upon request the museum was used as a space for an evening of 'speed dating'. At the event museum flyers were handed out in the hope that attendees to the event would visit the museum again, to see the collection.
- Create partnerships with colleges in the local area.



How do you survey audiences about a museum that does not currently exist?

- Ask people what museums and galleries they go and why, to help shape the design and content of your future museum.
- Create a list of potential themes which could be included in your museum and ask people to rate their interest in them.
- When surveying people, create an 'opt in' element whereby if survey participants choose to opt in you can follow up from the survey with a phone call to discuss their answers with them further, or ask them to join a focus group.
- Create a twitter account for your museum and a hashtag so that you can easily track people's opinions as your museum develops.
- Survey people at the airport where you will receive feedback from a wide demographic.

How long is Manchester Museum closed for and how will you maintain the profile of this museum in the meantime?

Manchester Museum is closed for 3 years and the staff are carrying out the following work to ensure the museum maintains a presence in the sector during this time:

- Touring exhibitions and the collection
- Improving the museum's online catalogue
- Taking objects out to local communities and schools

How do you use visitor research?

- Find a middle ground between what your audience say they want and what your organisation's strengths and ambitions are. Answer the questions: what do we want to say? What do audiences want to hear? Put the answers into a Venn Diagram and find the overlap.
- Visitor research is a tool to understand what different groups think and can be used to decide how your museum's goals and meet your audiences' goals.

How can you work with people who are not passionate about working in museums?

- Attempt to find common ground, are they passionate about something which they can focus their energy on? Can you find a shared goal?
- Meet for coffee to discuss ideas about your museum. In the UK colleagues go on day trips or attend social events together to bond and motivate each other.
- Campbell Price describes the role of a curator as being an 'enthusiastic performer' – be passionate, be confident in what your museum has to offer and show it off... this passion can be infectious.
- Conduct visitor research, the data from this research cannot be denied and can be a very useful tool to convince people to take action.

When is the right time to refurbish a gallery?

- Each gallery is different – some age well and some do not – often you have to act as you see the situation.
- Ultimately it will always come down to funding. If you think a gallery needs refurbishing but do not have the funds you can make 'light touches': insert new panels for a fresh look and improved text; find new stories within the permanent display and insert

temporary supporting material e.g. archival; create gateway objects and change the colour of the fabric beneath them so that they stand out.

How can you survey audiences?

- Put a comments book at the end of a gallery or at the exit of your museum for visitors to write in. Create an excel spreadsheet and consistently type out the comments made each day. Makes changes based on the comments made and your expert knowledge.
- Create a ballot box where visitors can write a comment on a piece of paper, or fill in a survey anonymously, fold it up and put it in a box. Often anonymity leads to more honest answers.
- Use survey monkey – a cheap online platform for creating your own surveys for participants to complete online. Survey monkey helps you to interpret the answers to your questions.
- Collecting data from visitors can be time consuming for museum staff who often have many responsibilities and tight deadlines but is a fulfilling and rewarding activity. Ask volunteers to gather data from visitors in the galleries (asking 1-2 questions in person or asking them to fill out a survey) and work with them to interpret it together.

Appendix 1

British Museum timeline for object-centred interpretation

The British Museum approach is heavily influenced by the work of Beverly Serrell (see reading list for further information)

Evaluation is key!

We need to understand how visitors interact with the display, and what their interests and motivations, are in order to find the point of connection that will be the 'hook'.

1. Curator proposes initial idea for exhibition

2. Interpretive plan (scope paper) produced

Collaborative effort of Heads of Interpretation and Exhibitions departments along with the curatorial team.

-Project objectives

-Roughly 6 key messages we want to communicate to visitors

-Roughly 6 outcomes we are hoping for

-Narrative outline

-Proposed structure

-Audiences

The team writes the key messages in the type of relaxed language visitors might use if asked to summarise a display's big ideas post-visit.

The interpretive plan is critical to fixing the big ideas and arguments, and ensures that all key stakeholders are in agreement before mapping concepts onto the physical space.

3. Information hierarchy produced

Created by an assigned Interpretation Officer for the project, who works with the curatorial and design teams on the continued planning.

See case study example for the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries, refreshed in 2018.

4. Section plans

This more detailed framework directs the work of the curators and design teams. It enables them to add, remove or group objects, while ensuring the narrative remains cohesive, focused and consistent with the interpretive plan.

Section plans identify the fundamental points that each object is contributing to the overall narrative.

They capture the requirements for all text and interpretation, including section texts, object labels, wall quotes, contextual images, and any digital or other interpretive media.

5. Writing and editing text

This is done by the Interpretation Officer using the section plan, text guidelines and British Museum style guide, continuing the object-based and visitor-centred focus.

The text is reviewed and amended by both internal and external colleagues before proofs are created.

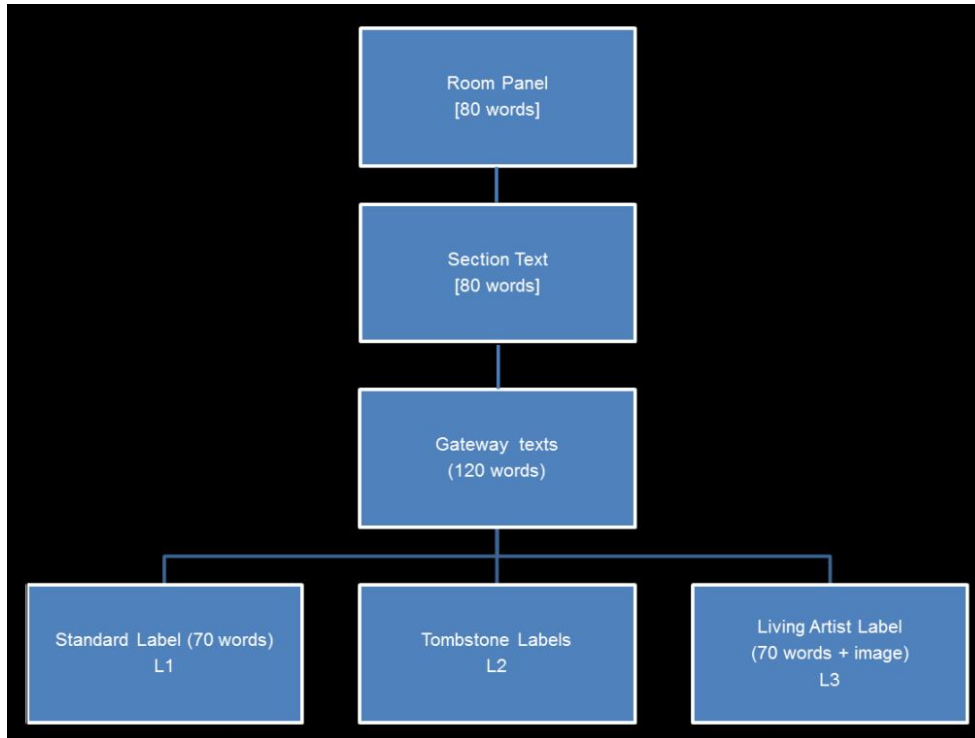
6. Evaluation!

As can be seen above, text writing only begins after a long period of planning and thinking. This could be six months of intensive work refining the thinking and establishing a clear structure before any labels are written.

Appendix 2

Case study: information hierarchy

Below is a simplified version of the information hierarchy developed for the British Museum Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (Rooms 92-94), refreshed in 2018.



Room panel



The room panel explains what the whole room is about, and is accompanied by a gateway object.

Section text

中世日本—信仰の広がり

Medieval Japan

religious traditions

1200 to 1600

The first Buddhist texts and statues were brought to Japan in the AD 500s from Korea. Buddhism remains a vital part of Japanese life today.

This section looks at the role of Buddhism and other forms of religion in Japanese society during the medieval period.

These introduce the main divisions of the space (in the case of the Japanese Galleries: Ancient, Medieval, Edo and Modern). They should be short, focused and easy to take in.

Gateway text

茶道

Tea

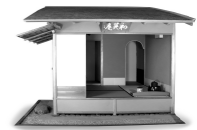
Tea-drinking came to Japan from China. At first monks drank strong green tea to keep themselves awake while they meditated. Gradually the preparation of tea and how it was served to guests became an important ritual in its own right. Separate schools have developed different styles. Most follow the great tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591).

Many art forms have been influenced by tea traditions, including ceramics, garden design and architecture.

茶室

Teahouse

A teahouse (*chashitsu*) is a place where people gather to enjoy tea. It can be a small separate building or, as here, a room within a building. This teahouse is named 'Wa'ei-an', meaning 'Humble House of Japan and Britain'. The Urasenke Tea Foundation of Kyoto presented it in 1990. Craftspeople came from Kyoto to build it from natural materials. The alcove (*tokonoma*), woven straw mats (*tatami*) and paper sliding doors (*shōji*) are features of traditional interior design that appear in Japanese architecture today.



Standard single object label (70 words)

翳 秋山庄太郎撮影

Shade, 1943

By Akiyama Shōtarō (1920–2003)

Fearing he would not survive the Asia-Pacific War (1937–45), Akiyama published this book to serve as his legacy. In fact he did survive and went on to become a major photographer. The book takes its title from this photograph of a woman standing in a bamboo grove. In Akiyama's lyrical words, sunlight here 'pierces the shade like moonbeams piercing the night'.

Photobook

Purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund
JA 2012,3029.1

Living artist label

Within the Japanese Galleries, there is a selection of these to highlight contemporary works to visitors, also presenting images of Japanese people

碑林玄英 須田賢司作

Stela Forest in Winter (Hirin gen'eî), 2013

By Suda Kenji (born 1954)

Suda Kenji created this interlocking chest (*sashimono*) without nails or glue. He crafted every detail including the lock and fittings. The chest embodies his belief that a drawer opens a view into another world. Suda is the fifth generation in his family to follow ancient Japanese woodworking traditions. He was named a 'Living National Treasure' in 2014.

Maple wood finished in lacquer (*urushi*)
with mother-of-pearl inlay and metal lock and key
Purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund
2015,3056.1



Appendix 3

Interpretation of special exhibitions vs permanent display

Special exhibitions

Visitors usually:

1. *stop at most objects*
2. *read a large proportion of the texts*
3. *follow the intended sequence closely*

SO...

1. manage the word count carefully (ensure the exhibition isn't too tiring or demanding)
2. create a linear narrative to shape the intellectual and emotional journey

Permanent display

Visitors usually:

1. begin with an individual object, looking for the closest written information
2. ignore panel or wall texts completely

SO...

1. make sure labels are close! Otherwise the visitor can quickly stop looking
2. design galleries around a manageable number of key, gateway objects, carefully chosen to focus visitors' attention and convey key messages
3. create an open, nonlinear narrative

Appendix 4

Case study: Ashurbanipal's library

*Objects should be used to tell a **compelling, big story!***



The British Museum's Mesopotamia 1500-549 BC display (Room 55) was refreshed in 2014. In early 2014, the team completed tracking and observation study of this permanent gallery to inform refurbishment.

Evaluation data showed that visitors were not engaging with the old display of cuneiform tablets. There was little to indicate to browsing visitors that this collection of clay cuneiform tablets belonged to the world's first library, assembled by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, nor that it was one of the most significant assemblages in the whole museum.

It was decided that the idea of the world's first library would be a strong 'hook' – something that would draw visitors to the display and give them a reason to care. The display was rearranged to communicate the idea of the library much more strongly. The new display replicated the ancient shelving system used by Ashurbanipal.

The team decided to abandon the previous approach of conventional labels for each tablet (which was an intimidating amount of quite academic text, more like a catalogue entry). Instead, they identified a short quotation from each tablet and added this to the shelf. This gave a flavour of the library's contents and gave a voice to a broad range of people from ancient Mesopotamian society. Images of Assyrians from sculptures of the time were used to help visitors make emotional connections to the stories revealed by the tablets.

Strong colours and lighting were also used to increase the attracting power of the case.

This transformed the whole case into a single gateway object telling a more cohesive, coherent and relevant story.

Reading list

Visitor experience (general)

Falk, J.H. and Dierking, L.D., 2011, *The Museum Experience*, California: Left Coast Press

Audience segmentation and visitor motivation

Falk, J.H., 2009, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, California: Left Coast Press

Interpretive planning

US National Association for Interpretation: www.interpnet.com

Label writing

Serrell, B., 2015, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* 2nd ed., Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

British Museum case studies

Francis, D., Slack, S., Edwards, C., 'An Evaluation of Object-Centred Approaches to Interpretation at the British Museum' in Fritsch, J. ed.. 2009, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*, New York: Routledge, pp153-164

Available in the ITP library

Batty, J. et al, 'Object-Focused Text at the British Museum' in [exhibition, Vol. 35, Issue 1](#), Spring 2016, Virginia: American Alliance of Museums, pp70-80

Francis, D., 'An Arena Where Meaning and Identity are Debated and Contested on a Global Scale: Narrative Discourses in British Museum Exhibitions, 1972-2013' in [Curator, Vol. 58, Issue 1](#), January 2015, pp41-58

