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**Contemporary Storytelling Practice: A Look Inside the Portland Art
Museum's *Object Stories***

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**Contemporary Storytelling Practice: A Look Inside the Portland Art
Museum's *Object Stories***

by

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Dedication

For Patricia Lou, Cindy Lou and Sarah Lou, three of the most uplifting and inspiring women I know who have shaped who I am today. I could not have gone through this process without your constant love and support. Thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me to pursue my dreams—love you all to the moon and back.

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Abstract

Contemporary Storytelling Practice: A Look Inside the Portland Art Museum's *Object Stories*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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The purpose of this study is to investigate how the use of contemporary storytelling practice in a museum setting can successfully engage visitor voices with objects. Specifically, this research used an exploratory case study to better understand *Object Stories* at the Portland Art Museum. The unique attributes inherent in *Object Stories* make it an exemplary program to research and through which to gain understandings regarding effective contemporary storytelling techniques within a museum. The use of digital archives, the creation of a safe space, and enabling visitors to share personal stories about museum objects are some of the qualities that set *Object Stories* apart from other contemporary storytelling programs in the United States. Four themes emerged through interviews, observations, and the study of documents forming a rich and detailed understanding of *Object Stories*. These themes are found within and help elucidate the successful characteristics of *Object Stories*. Based on the findings of this study, museum educators can look to this interactive gallery space at the Portland Art Museum to help them develop or enhance storytelling programs, and ultimately to

improve the development of empathetic connections between visitors and museum objects.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Contemporary Storytelling Practice: A Look Inside the Portland Art Museum's *Object Stories*

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Today there are diverse methods implemented within art museums to generate empathetic and interactive connections between visitors and the artworks. Storytelling is an engaging learning tool that has been used within the field of museum education and classrooms for decades (Shaffer, 2011). Science, art, and children's museums hire storytellers to come in and tell stories about objects in the museums in order to develop a more lasting relationship between visitors and the museum. Students in classrooms partake in storytelling through creating fictional stories about life experiences or images they may have encountered. There is also the potential for storytelling in museums to be used as an interactive learning tool to help develop greater connections between visitors and the artwork they encounter. A unique and innovative example of contemporary storytelling practice in an art museum is found in *Object Stories* at the Portland Art Museum (PAM). *Object Stories* employs contemporary storytelling to ignite a lasting relationship between objects and visitors to the site. Traditional storytelling programs may include components such as storytelling in gallery spaces, reading literature next to a work of art, and theatre performances created and carried out next to the artwork. For the purposes of my study, contemporary storytelling involves education programs that take traditional storytelling to another level by incorporating video, the Internet, or digital tools. I believe the Portland Art Museum's *Object Stories* reaches this high level of visitor engaged experience.

I conducted an exploratory case study wherein I closely observed and analyzed Portland Art Museum's *Object Stories* in order to better understand the utilization of contemporary storytelling practice in an art museum. Furthermore, the study looked at the effectiveness of contemporary storytelling practice to connect visitors to the objects housed inside the Portland Art Museum. The goal of this study was to observe a unique and exemplary contemporary storytelling program by looking at *Object Stories* at PAM.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

The following question motivated and directed my investigations: How can contemporary storytelling practice successfully engage visitor voices and objects? What can be gained from object-based storytelling in a museum setting?

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Creative non-fiction, personal narrative, and digital storytelling are all employed through *Object Stories* at the Portland Art Museum. By enabling visitors to share individual stories with personal objects or museum objects, the Portland Art Museum is partaking in a constructivist approach to viewing artwork, which is deriving empathetic and memorable connections for visitors (Barrett, 2008; Bedford, 2001; Shaffer, 2011); *Object Stories* is taking this notion to beyond what is traditionally seen in museums. The dynamic and inviting space within the *Object Stories* gallery space enables PAM's audience to make personal connections through the program that are unique to other contemporary storytelling programs in museums today.

Throughout past observations and research of storytelling programs, I have discovered a need for the implementation of more purposeful storytelling programs in art museums. While many of the programs I have researched and observed in the past have excellent ideas and theories behind them, their execution often falls short of deriving

actual meaning and generating connections between the participating visitors and the objects inside the art museum.

MOTIVATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Personal Motivations

I have no significant memories of museum visits throughout my EC-12 education. This is not because my schools failed to take me on museum field trips. We went to museums. However, none of my experiences made a lasting impression on me. In first semester of graduate school I took a course titled *Foundations of Art Education*. Many authors and educators we studied resonated with me in this course, but Anna Curtis Chandler, an educator from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's early history, held the most lasting impression. Upon learning about the gregarious educator's progressive methods of dressing up as characters in the paintings she was teaching, I became enthralled and impressed with the idea of storytelling in art museums. I began reading many accounts detailing the wide spectrum of storytelling in art museums, ranging from theatre performances in gallery spaces or reading a related book in front of the piece of artwork, to creating a digital story about an artwork in a museum (Barrett, 2008; Bedford, 2001; DiBlasio, 1983; Geahigan, 1999). I believe storytelling in its many facets is an effective and interactive learning tool that can help to make a variety of artwork more connected to audiences and help the works come to life.

Professional Motivations

I hope my research will expand and inspire future storytelling programs in art museums. My findings shed light on effective elements of museum storytelling I have drawn from my own background research and from *Object Stories* in order to help museum visitors create lasting and positive connections with artwork. The information I

uncovered is beneficial for museum educators who hope to implement or incorporate storytelling techniques into their programming. Furthermore, it is intended to encourage meaningful and interactive programming in art museums that combines varying pedagogical methods.

SPECULATION ABOUT THIS INVESTIGATION

I anticipated through my research I would find *Object Stories* is a successful contemporary storytelling program. I suspected the creation of *Object Stories* involved enormous collaboration between the entire PAM staff, particularly the education department. I also speculated there was an immense amount of research conducted on the effectiveness of storytelling in art museums, which the PAM education staff utilized in the creation of *Object Stories*. I suspected I would discover a deeper connection between visitors who participated in *Object Stories* and the objects within the PAM than the connection that existed prior to the implementation of the program.

Furthermore, I anticipated finding at PAM an ongoing conversation surrounding correct and incorrect interpretations of artworks. In *Object Stories* the PAM staff asks visitors to choose an object and create a subjective story about the visitor's connection to that particular object. These interpretations of objects in the PAM may vary from meanings that are supported by the museum professionals. Finally, in my research through interviews with the staff, watching the video clips from *Object Stories*, and discussion with visitors who participated in the program while I was on site at PAM, I hoped to find intriguing and inspiring stories about visitors who participate in the program.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I used qualitative research methods, primarily an exploratory case study to conduct my research. John Creswell (2009) describes case study as a “strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p.13). I conducted my case study on site at the Portland Art Museum over a three-day period. While engaged in the case study, I kept detailed field notes about my observations and later reviewed them through content analysis (Stokrocki, 1997). My observations primarily took place in the *Object Stories* gallery space where watched and documented how visitors interacted and utilized the space. I wanted to observe and chart the number of visitors coming in and out of the gallery, as well as the number of visitors who use the *Object Stories* booth.

I also intended to conduct semi-structured interviews with various members of the Portland Art Museum staff including docents, security staff, curators, education staff, and visitors who were participating in *Object Stories* while I was on site at the Portland Art Museum (Stokrocki, 1997) (See Appendix B). These interviews provided a look inside the development of *Object Stories*. Interviewing docents and security staff was useful in gaining a more full and rich understanding of how visitors feel about *Object Stories* and utilize the space. Curatorial staff provided a valuable insight on the decisions behind how the gallery was currently installed. Interviews with members of the education staff enabled me to gain a clear understanding of the research, origins, and process behind *Object Stories*. Interviews with visitors who were interacting with *Object Stories* provided a more in-depth insight about how it feels to participate in the program and how the experience differs from that found in other art museums. Furthermore, I watched the short video clips that had been created by museum visitors and staff through the *Object*

Stories program, to gain a better understanding of what it is like to participate in *Object Stories*. Also, I participated in the program.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Constructivism – A learning theory based on the idea that each person has unique occurrences in his or her life that contribute to their current knowledge and beliefs. Visitors create different interpretations of works of art based on how they independently process the information given to them about a particular artwork. The steps individuals go through when looking and interpreting artworks are greatly different for various individuals, depending on many factors, including the following: educational background, socio-economic status, past experiences, and even their mood when they are looking at an art object (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011).

Contemporary storytelling—Storytelling techniques used in an art museum that incorporate “contemporary” tools such as digital components, videos, or the Internet into traditional methods of storytelling. Contemporary storytelling also deals with the act of constructing a personal story within a museum space instead of listening to an objective story to gain information.

Personal narrative—A storytelling technique involving a written or oral narrative based on a personal story or experience.

Safe space—A comfortable environment created within a museum that invites visitors to feel welcome to share and discuss their own ideas and interpretations of objects in a collection.

Storytelling—For the purposes of this research, the word storytelling encapsulates many techniques used to pass information from one person to the next. These include poetry, creative writing, personal narrative, fictional writing, digital storytelling, theatre

performance, oral stories, non-fiction writing, art historical/historical engagements, or reading literature in conjunction with a particular work.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This exploratory case study was designed to investigate one art museum's contemporary practice of storytelling. The study focused solely on PAM's *Object Stories* program over a three to four day period. My interviews were conducted with members of the PAM staff and visitors who were participants in *Objects Stories* at the time of my site visit. *Object Stories* is unique compared to other contemporary storytelling programs in the United States. My findings are distinctive to PAM and cannot be generalized for other contemporary storytelling programs. My research can only act as a guideline or inspiration for future contemporary and progressive storytelling programs in a museum setting.

BENEFITS TO THE FIELD OF MUSEUM EDUCATION

This research has the potential to inform practices in a positive way to develop storytelling programs in art museums. I believe it enables art educators to see the benefits and engagement storytelling programs can bring into a museum from surrounding communities, as storytelling is successfully experienced through varying avenues in art museums. I also examined the effective uses of storytelling employed to derive empathetic or personal connections between visitors and art objects. This study also explains the evolution and creation of a contemporary storytelling program within an art museum. Overall, this case study is conducted to aid educators in becoming more receptive to progressive storytelling methods by shedding light onto the effectiveness of contemporary storytelling practice in art museums.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of contemporary storytelling practice in an art museum through observations, interviews, and close looking at documents pertaining to *Object Stories*. My research specifically analyzed the effectiveness of *Object Stories* in deriving connections between visitors and art objects. This thesis is comprised of five separate chapters. The following chapter is a literature review, presenting foundational literature related to this study. Following the literature review, there is a detailed chapter outlining the type of research methodology I chose to use and my justification behind those decisions. Chapter 4 is my data collection chapter, which describes the information I gathered while conducting research with *Object Stories* at the Portland Art Museum. Chapter 5 draws this study to a close as an analysis of the data I collected provides a look at four principle findings that emerged from this study.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

This literature review examines the role and evolution of storytelling in a multitude of contexts. Storytelling is a unique form of communication as it has been used to pass information from one person to the next for centuries. Communication is one of many roles storytelling encapsulates. Storytelling entertains, is a pedagogical tool, and of course spreads knowledge from one person to another. In both school and museums storytelling is used in digital, traditional, and performance based forms as well as creative writing to make material at hand more relatable to students and visitors (Deniston-Trochta, 2003; Ohler, 2006; Robin, 2008; Rooney, 1989). Popular and widely heard radio shows, such as National Public Radio's *This American Life* and *Story Corps*, make it known that storytelling is still viewed as a form of entertainment. The Denver Art Museum, the Delaware Museum of Art, and, of course the Portland Art Museum are all utilizing storytelling techniques to create personal meaning between visitors and art objects the encounter. Schools across the United States are finding diverse forms of storytelling to be an effective pedagogical tool in creating connections between school subjects and students (Robin, 2009; Rooney, 1989). It is evident through historical and contemporary trends that storytelling is viewed as an effective tool of communication, as well as a method that every person can relate to and feel comfortable with.

STORYTELLING AND HUMAN NATURE

Storytelling is the most basic manner of communication. Evolutionarily and individually, oral communication is primary in human nature. Civilizations across the globe have used storytelling methods to pass information from one person to the next. Storytelling was used to tell personal narratives, societal legends, historical information,

and more (Baker & Greene, 1987). Some of the earliest known records of the use of storytelling date back to between 2000 and 1300 B.C. in Egypt when a well-known pyramid builder's family used stories as a form of entertainment (Baker & Greene, 1987). Greek myths were shared by storytellers in the Sumerian culture, and then later by Babylonian civilizations before and after 200 B.C. Despite the invention of the printing press in 1450, oral storytelling was kept alive by folklorists in an attempt to spread tales of the Brothers Grimm and many others. It is no surprise that the inherent communicative features that storytelling embodies are still practiced and utilized today.

In the current fast paced world of technological communication, human connective forms such as emailing, Facebook, and Twitter make it seem that society is moving along a singularly text and imaged based path. The holistically communicative qualities storytelling encompasses make it something that cannot be duplicated. Storytelling is the technique children revert to when engaged in imaginative play. It is how parents and grandparents tell new generations tales of their past; storytelling draws in children around a campfire when nothing else will do so on a cool spring night. Storytelling has a malleable quality, which enables its many facets to be transferrable in a multitude of contexts. The many storytelling techniques available are applicable in educational, home, and professional settings, and beyond.

Apart from its inherent nature, other qualities draw humans to storytelling as well. Stories have the ability to entice an adult and child audience with the noises and sounds that emerge from tellers (Baker & Greene, 1987). Nursery rhymes have patterned rhythms and meters built in that captivate children, while longer more descriptive stories often have syntax patterns that charm adults. The immensely descriptive nature of stories is another component that connects people of all ages to storytelling (Baker & Greene, 1987). Its ability to depict a picture in someone's mind of a past event, folk tale, or a

piece of history, not unlike literature, is another element that appeals to listeners and tellers of all ages. Storytelling has many natural and practical qualities that appeal to humans. Storytelling practice is something people around the globe have turned to for centuries in hopes of solving problems, sharing histories, passing along information, and more. It is an act so basic to human nature that it has survived the invention and evolution of technological components such as the printing press and social media, and is still utilized today in many formats.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Storytelling has been a form of pedagogy long before the existence of museums. Storytelling is considered by many to be one of the earliest forms of communication that bridges diverse cultures (Baker & Green, 1977). It is argued to be an essential and important part of communication for humans (Baker & Green, 1977). For the purposes of this study, traditional storytelling is used to refer to oral language used to relay information from one person to another.

Traditional storytelling can also be argued to be the first method children use to communicate (Engel, 1995). When questions are asked about a child's day or how their school field trip went, the natural ease of storytelling is something children tend to gravitate towards. Throughout a person's life their stories start to become more descriptive as their ideas develop. Personal experience begins to inform an individual's story as she begins to collect more ideas and stories (Engel, 1995).

Oral storytelling is considered the more traditional form of storytelling. Now, in the 21st century, storytelling has been adapted into many forms such as drama-based methods, poetry, and creative writing, as well as oral and personal narratives. One of the more common approaches today is digital storytelling. Digital storytelling maintains the

basic components of traditional storytelling: passing information on to others through a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end; but the medium in which the information is transferred is different. The main difference between traditional and digital storytelling are the visuals used. Traditional storytelling relies heavily on voice and the narrative told, while digital storytelling aims to incorporate imagery into the story in a seamless manner through computer programming.

Digital Storytelling can be seen as a contemporary version of storytelling. As mentioned earlier, *Object Stories* utilizes a combination of digital and traditional storytelling. In the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook* (2010), Joe Lambert describes the creation process that eventually leads to digitizing a story. The steps are similar to those of traditional storytelling, but tend to be a bit more systemized. For example, Lambert (2010) suggests steps such as scripting and storyboarding. Eventually images are chosen to move along with the story as it is being told. Lambert discusses the utilization of two types of potential imagery throughout a story. The first is “explicit imagery,” literal or direct images employed to parallel the audible component of the story (Lambert, 2010). The second is “implicit imagery,” which is used when a storyteller conveys the narrative through a metaphor or type of symbolism (Lambert, 2010).

RELATING STORYTELLING TO THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

Many researchers believe storytelling is an effective pedagogical tool in a school setting (Deniston-Trochta, 2003; Ohler, 2006; Robin, 2008; Rooney, 1989). Ideas on how to implement storytelling in a classroom vary depending on the educator and researcher. The overarching rationale behind this idea is that storytelling makes material more retainable and relatable in a classroom (Ohler, 2006; Robin, 2008).

The oral and personal narrative can be used as a way to transmit information to students (Deniston-Trochta, 2003). John Dewey's belief of lived experience correlates with perennial learning, which is the theory that people learn best by connecting subject matter to knowledge or skills they have learned in that past. Perennial learning connects to the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool; stories about experiences can fold into lesson plans and inform how a student interprets information (Deniston-Trochta, 2003). As mentioned earlier, stories become part of a person as one experiences the world. Each individual has stories unique to him or her that could relate to curriculum taught in a classroom. Studies show that tapping into these intrinsic stories, and connecting them back to the material makes a lasting impression on the student (Deniston-Trochta, 2003). Not only the students, but also a teacher's lived experience can tie into educational material. Teachers have the ability to create and share stories from their own lives and weave them into actual lesson plans, thereby making educational material more engaging and memorable for the students (Deniston-Trochta, 2003).

Storytelling is argued to be a technique that not only makes information more retainable, but also causes children's interest to peak in both reading and writing as students see the direct connection between the two subjects and storytelling (Rooney, 1989). Storytelling is a form of communication elementary aged students identify with, whether in the form of a picture book, sharing their story about their day, or hearing a story told to them at bedtime (Engel, 1995; Rooney, 1989;). These methods of communication are something that children recognize and enjoy (Rooney, 1989). The familiarity of storytelling causes it to be an effective technique with both classroom reading and writing skills (Rooney, 1989). These skills are integral components of EC - 12 education and ones that individuals use for the rest of their lives (Rooney, 1989).

Taking a step away from the more traditional forms of storytelling, digital storytelling is also a tool that has flourished in the field of education (Robin, 2009). Through the interactive and technological tool of digital storytelling, students were able to fully express themselves by way of personal narrative in a creative and savvy manner, simultaneously demonstrating the effectiveness of computer software (Robin, 2009). Following this theme and because of its success, a considerable amount of curriculum began to be written incorporating digital storytelling into the classroom.

Digital storytelling can enhance learning in various school subjects (Ohler, 2006). The creation of digital stories is a contemporary tool teachers use to give students an innovative method to demonstrate understanding of material learned in classrooms. The subjects in which digital storytelling are utilized vary from science and math to English and literature (Ohler, 2006). As mentioned earlier, methods for the implementation of digital storytelling may vary. Reasons why educators are working with this method of teaching range from easily capturing student engagement to reaching beneficial educational results.

HISTORY OF STORYTELLING AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Libraries and Storytelling

As libraries and museums both aim to educate a wide public through varying techniques and platforms and are similar in many ways, I chose to include information about the history of storytelling as an educational tool in libraries. Prior to World War I storytelling techniques were utilized in the New York Public Library (NYPL) for varying reasons (Spaulding, 2011). Storytelling was the NYPL's solution before WWI to assist immigrant children in assimilating to American culture. One explanation for educational storytelling at this time was to teach children from lower socio-economic backgrounds

and cultures outside the United States how to behave appropriately at concerts and theatre performances. Storytelling was a way to keep children engaged, while also preparing them for the societal manners they were expected to have if attending such social events (Spaulding, 2011).

The NYPL also used storytelling as a tool to embrace the cultural diversity that was emerging at this time in the United States (Spaulding, 2011). Storytelling techniques were employed in hopes of engaging children from varying backgrounds with one another. To meet these goals the NYPL held “library story hour” (Spaulding, 2011, p. 58). Program designers of “Library Story Hour” invited children to come and tell stories to one another about their individual cultures and backgrounds. These programs also made the task of learning English much easier and more comfortable than those who were dominant in another language. Although this is not a direct correlation to storytelling used in art museums, these ideas and tactics assist in uncovering the history of storytelling as an educational tool in a museum setting.

Anna Curtis Chandler

Anna Curtis Chandler was an inspiring educator whose life and activities made up part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s (Met) history. Chandler began her work in the Met as a researcher in the photography section of the museum’s library around 1910, although she was always drawn to a more educational practice (Solli, 2007). In January 1915 the Met began a story hour program geared towards children of museum members for a small-scale audience (Zucker, 2001). Various educational facets throughout New York at this time were also using storytelling techniques in conjunction with studying art, such as the School Art League of New York City (Zucker, 2001). In March 1917, Chandler began telling stories for the Met’s story hour series (Zucker, 2001). Chandler’s

practice eventually went beyond the walls of story hour program and into the gallery spaces to assist visitors who appeared perplexed when engaging with artworks (Solli, 2007).

Chandler's storytelling practice took place on both Saturdays and Sundays and was intended for children with accompanying adults. Chandler truly believed in the power of storytelling, particularly in a museum setting. Chandler's philosophy was based on the notion that every object inside a museum has a very personal and unique story that needs to be told; she felt responsible for sharing these stories with others. A major component of Chandler's storytelling practice was taking on the persona of artists or acting out the lives of artists from the collection. Chandler engaged in over twenty divergent thematic performances encompassing these personas in hopes of entertaining young visitors (Zucker, 2001).

By the 1920s Chandler was known as the "costumed storyteller" (Zucker, 2001). She earned this name from consistently dressing as characters from pieces of artwork or wearing traditional costumes from a particular place and time period. Starting in 1919 Chandler began writing plays for museum members' children who would eventually perform in costumes for a final performance about particular artworks in the Met's collection. Noticeably attracting large numbers of visitors because of her gregarious tactics, Chandler was becoming a true success in the year after World War I (Solli, 2007).

In 1919 Chandler began conducting onsite after school programs utilizing her storytelling techniques. Through these exercises Chandler became interested in teacher training in conjunction with artworks (Zucker, 2001). Simultaneously, Chandler began writing curriculum for schools to incorporate performance storytelling into lesson plans. Chandler also began traveling, writing, and researching more in hopes of spreading awareness and success of storytelling as an educational tool (Zucker, 2001).

As Chandler became increasingly popular in the 1920s, she began giving a Saturday afternoon session in addition to her weekend story hours to accommodate children and adults who were interested in her performances (Zucker, 2001). On behalf of the Met, Chandler also began teaching courses about storytelling and art at local colleges (Zucker, 2001). By the spring of 1926, she conducted training workshops to guide teachers in meeting particular city education requirements and use storytelling techniques to integrate art learning (Zucker, 2001).

Chandler's practice evolved to educating and performing for a wider audience. By the early 1930s, the end of Chandler's career at the Met, she had brought 80,000 visitors into the Met to hear her story hours (Zucker, 2001). In the truest sense, Chandler was both an educator and storyteller. She had an incredible passion for sharing her love of art objects through an exciting and engaging way. Chandler was constantly refining her practice in hopes of engaging new and diverse audience groups. The costumed storyteller said it was "the mission of the storyteller to interpret beauty among all peoples of all ages" (Zucker, 2001, p. 10). Chandler did an exceptional job of upholding that mission.

PROGRESSION OF STORYTELLING PRACTICE

Storytelling practices fall under the category of interactive learning within museums. Interactive or participatory storytelling techniques have been used within museums for decades to enhance visitor experiences and to derive stronger connections between visitors and art objects. Museum educators have been searching for effective, educational, and interactive methods for a long time (Roberts, 1999). While participatory techniques can enhance a visitor's experience, they also at times have the unfortunate potential to create a superficial museum visit. Research within the field calls for

educators to retain a sense of play when teaching, but to simultaneously use effective pedagogical techniques (Roberts, 1999).

In the 1960s, Philip Yenawine, a nationally acclaimed museum educator at the Met, created and implemented interactive programming there (Sternberg, 1989). The goal of developing these innovative programs was to enable inner-city youth of New York City to engage and connect with artwork at the Met (Sternberg, 1989). Out of these more progressive theories and practices, an onslaught of interactive educational techniques began to be employed in museums throughout the United States (Sternberg, 1989).

Jumping into the 1970s, the Cleveland Museum of Art initiated a program called the East Cleveland Project (Newsom & Silver, 1978). The East Cleveland Project's goal was to bring inner-city schools in Cleveland to the museum for an extended period of time. All the visitors with the affiliated school came to the Cleveland Museum of Art for two weeks. Throughout these two weeks, varying educational techniques were utilized. Among these approaches, the East Cleveland Project engaged in "role-playing, dramatizations, dance, and movement, creative writing..." (Newsom & Silver, 1978, p. 270). These methods appeared to be more progressive at the time: "The East Cleveland project may be the most comprehensive example of this approach in any museum program for elementary-aged schoolchildren" (Newsom & Silver, 1978, p. 270).

In 1973 the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute offered a performing arts tour (Newsom & Silver, 1978). On the tour, child visitors used performance based storytelling techniques to connect to artworks housed inside the museum, as well as the architecture of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. Educators encouraged visitors to act out how a piece of artwork made them feel, or to replicate particular portrait poses in galleries. Additionally, docents made costumes for children to wear to assist in performing descriptive scenes of paintings (Newsom & Silver, 1978).

In 1974, the staff of the National Portrait Gallery teamed with a local high school to teach the trial of John Brown, a historical figure from United States (Newsom & Silver, 1978). With the help of educators from the National Portrait Gallery, students performed a reenactment of John Brown's trial in their class. Once this was complete the students went to the National Portrait Gallery to see the portrait of John Brown. When the students were in the museum, educators from the staff came into the galleries and continued the dramatization of John Brown's trial that began in class. A discussion then followed about historical components of the trial of John Brown.

STORYTELLING IN THE 1980S

In the 1980s museum educators embraced the interactive and participatory techniques Philip Yenawine brought to light throughout the 1960s. Educators at the time classified storytelling as a technique that fell into participatory practice (Sternberg, 1989). Other practices among storytelling that were also embraced at the time include creative writing and drama (Sternberg, 1989).

There are diverse reasons about why storytelling was used in the gallery spaces. Educators at the time saw children develop longer attention spans and enhanced cognitive growth through the use of storytelling techniques (Sternberg, 1989). Storytelling methods worked well with bringing groups of visitors together as it created a "communal experience of sounds, rhythms, moods, and images, storytelling" (Sternberg, 1989, p. 161). Furthermore, researchers observed storytelling to elicit more empathetic responses from visitors (Sternberg, 1989).

Margaret and Raymond DiBlasio, two art educators active in the 1980s, used storytelling techniques as an educational tool at the Viking exhibition in 1981 at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (DiBlasio & DiBlasio, 1983). The DiBlasios' decision to use

storytelling for the Viking exhibition was founded in a desire to make an easily overlooked exhibit something visitors would enjoy and could relate to. Through this experience, the DiBlasios developed “Seven Principles of Museum Storytelling” (DiBlasio & DiBlasio, 1983). In discussing the effective characteristics of good storytelling, the DiBlasios expressed the stories must:

- Balance entertainment and factual soundness.
- Be compact and concrete, and personally appealing.
- Employ highly visual language.
- Not only describe artifacts, but tell how some of them are made.
- Dislodge mistaken stereotypes.
- Invite cross-cultural comparisons.

The DiBlasios conducted follow-up research to gauge the effectiveness of their techniques. The storytelling methods utilized during the Viking exhibition received extremely positive reviews (DiBlasio & DiBlasio, 1983). The methods appealed to adult audiences, something the DiBlasios had not anticipated, as well as resonated with a young audience (DiBlasio & DiBlasio, 1983).

STUDIES OF STORYTELLING PROGRAMS WITHIN MUSEUMS

Today and throughout the history of museums, storytelling techniques have been implemented in museums. Educators have written about successful case studies and instances in which these methods have demonstrated effectiveness in facilitating an interactive experience for museum visitors (Barrett, 2008; DiBlasio, 1981; Fischer 2004; Shaffer, 2011). Some of the methods that fall under the umbrella of “storytelling” are writing activities such as creative writing, personal narrative, and poetry; others include oral narrative and acting in a museum. As mentioned earlier, the term storytelling is used

liberally in the field of museum education, and is applied to varied and diverse techniques. One of the overarching explanations for the use of storytelling in a museum setting is the empathy and relevancy it provides visitors while viewing artwork (DiBlasio, 1983; Fischer, 2004; Shaffer, 2011). Various researchers have segmented the methods into the topics of effectiveness with adult visitors, the K-12 audience, and a “general” museum audience.

Storytelling, through writing activities for adult visitors, generates an interactive and personal experience in an art museum (Barrett, 2008). Educators today argue that storytelling falls into the category of constructivist meaning making (Barrett, 2008). Constructivist meaning making is the educational theory that “encourage[s] visitors to build their own understanding of what they see in ways personally relevant to their lives” (Barrett, 2008, p. 76). Some successful storytelling methods with adult visitors have included personal narrative, poetry, and creative writing. An important component to a successful storytelling program for adults is an opportunity for each person in the group to share what they have created, thus fostering an interactive dialogue with the participants (Barrett, 2008).

Separate from adult visitors, the EC-12 audience has also responded positively to the utilization of storytelling in a gallery space (Shaffer, 2011). Storytelling enables children to relate to the artwork, thus potentially creating the desire for future visits (Shaffer, 2011). As opposed to the ten-minute historical excerpts children sometimes receive throughout a tour, storytelling techniques are something children need in order to enjoy and retain meaningful information from their museum visit (Shaffer, 2011).

The multi-sensory aspects of storytelling also have had successful outcomes with teen audiences (Geahigan, 1999). Giving teen visitors the opportunity to write a fictional story based on details from artworks has been effective in museum visits. Utilizing these

writing techniques teen visitors are able to imagine themselves inside an artwork. Through the exercise of imagining oneself within a work of art, one can also incorporate the senses into their writing, which helps them describe the work at hand (Geahigan, 1999). This method is not vastly dissimilar from the effective storytelling techniques discussed earlier for engaging the EC-12 audience. This type of fictional and personal narrative writing incorporates storytelling while simultaneously creating a wider and more thoughtful approach to looking at artwork.

In 2004 the Denver Museum of Art created a poetry project for their exhibit *Frederic Remington: The Color Night*. Notebooks were placed in two seating areas of two separate galleries for the poetry writing activities, thereby inviting visitors to reflect upon prevalent themes in the exhibit (Fischer, 2004). Summative research was conducted once the exhibit was over. Overall, feedback to the project was more positive than negative. Visitors seemed to enjoy the poetry writing activities and felt the poems helped the visitors changed their perspective of the work (Fischer, 2004).

The Delaware Museum of Art (DMA) engages with storytelling through their educational program *The Art of Storytelling*. This program places kiosks throughout the Delaware Museum of Art's permanent collection gallery. The kiosks have various templates visitors can choose from to inspire a written story about the collection. The templates the kiosks offer contain images selected from the DMA's permanent collection. The stories chosen by DMA's staff are placed online, and change sporadically so every story has an opportunity to be heard and seen on the website.

Overall, there is a large amount of research dedicated to supporting the validity of storytelling in art museums. Storytelling inside museums appears to be a natural direction for educators to move towards and utilize as each object housed inside a museum has a unique story. Museum staffs have become especially adept at crafting storytelling

programs to match varied audience needs and interests (Bedford, 2001). There is certainly a connection between storytelling and generating empathetic connections with material: “Stories inspire wonder and awe; they allow a listener to imagine another time and place, to find the universal in the particular, and to feel empathy for others” (Bedford, 2001, p. 33).

TRENDS IN STORYTELLING PROGRAMS TODAY

Today, with popular podcasts and radio shows such as *This American Life* and *StoryCorps*, there seems to be a resurgence in the popularity of storytelling as a form of entertainment. *This American Life* is a radio show and a podcast distributed by National Public Radio (NPR). The producers have broadcasted five hundred radio shows to around 1.8 million listeners (“About Us,” n.d.). The show reports on various topics and themes from stories about everyday Americans to the need for a better education system as shown through stories about Harper High School in Chicago, Illinois.

StoryCorps is a weekly broadcast also distributed by NPR. As described in greater detail in Chapter 4, *StoryCorps* is the program that inspired *Object Stories*. NPR’s *StoryCorps*’ mission is to collect an infinite number of stories told by Americans about their daily lives. Volunteers and staff of the program travel throughout the United States to seek diverse stories representative of American culture today. To date, *StoryCorps* has recorded more than 45,000 interviews (“*StoryCorps*,” n.d.). Every conversation is archived in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Both programs are of equal importance in effectively documenting contemporary American life and events through storytelling.

CONCLUSION

The history of storytelling is rich in content and deep in expression. Its usage dates back to the worlds' earliest ancestors; it is no surprise that storytelling is still utilized today in many diverse forms. Storytelling remains effective in capturing an attentive audience. This characteristic has caused the traditional and pure form of storytelling to transform into a multitude of facets, and captured in a variety of platforms. Storytelling has proved to be a successful pedagogical tool when teaching diverse subjects in a classroom. Most important for this study, storytelling has moved into the confines of museums and is not situated in gallery spaces. Educators use storytelling as a method to empathetically connect visitors and audience members to objects within a museum. The evolution of storytelling as a pedagogical tool in museum settings has lead storytelling to take many forms. Poetry, drama, personal narrative writing, and digital storytelling are some of the aforementioned methods of storytelling. As the world continues to change, the malleable quality of storytelling is shifting along with it. Storytelling is an educational technique that has been utilized for over a century. Although the execution of these tactics vary, and are manipulated over time, their effectiveness in attracting visitors has been consistent. Storytelling continues to evolve as museum educators are utilizing altered versions of the techniques used since long ago.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This study began with an interest in storytelling as an educational tool in a museum setting. Upon my initial research, I discovered a wide array of storytelling techniques utilized in museums. Many museums today interpret storytelling as an educational tool that encompasses varying methods, including both traditional and non-traditional approaches to storytelling (DiBlasio, 1983; Fischer, 2004; Shaffer, 2011). The humanistic qualities inherent within the act of storytelling led me to use a qualitative research methodology, as quantifying data would not yield the results necessary to answer my central research question. Qualitative research lends itself to investigations conducted within cultural and social fields, which are areas that both storytelling and art education fall within (Ezzy & Laimputtong, 2005). Furthermore, qualitative research aims to gather data that is heavily based in experience and generates more textured results. In order to produce more detailed and illustrative outcomes, I chose to pursue an in-depth investigation of a single storytelling program through an exploratory case study rather than survey the broad and dense spectrum of storytelling as a whole (Lapan, Moore, & Quartaroli, 2012).

CASE STUDY METHOD

I chose to conduct my research through an exploratory case study because of *Object Stories*' exemplary attributes. Case study research is utilized when a program or event is seen as exceptional or noteworthy in order to gain data in order to better comprehend the phenomenon and its successes (Lapan, Moore, & Quartaroli, 2012). *Object Stories* at the Portland Art Museum is a rich and unique program, different from

many other museum storytelling programs in that it combines both educational and social engagement methods.

Object Stories is a successful and unconventional case unlike most other storytelling programs in the United States (Stokrocki, 1997). Choosing to conduct a single, exploratory case study of *Object Stories* at PAM made a seemingly impossible feat of researching the broad spectrum of storytelling much more manageable. Furthermore, case study research enabled me to discover the complex intricacies of *Object Stories* that I may have overlooked otherwise, if I had chosen to research multiple and varying storytelling programs (Denscombe, 2003). By choosing to focus on only one program I was able to better see the successful subtleties of *Object Stories*.

SITE SELECTION

I chose to go to the Portland Art Museum to conduct my research because of the exemplary attributes of this program I discussed thoroughly in Chapter 1. I went to Portland, Oregon over a three-day period to conduct my exploratory case study on site at the Portland Art Museum. I contacted the appropriate staff members at PAM to request permission for me to conduct this case study, and they consented to my request (Appendix A). I decided to undertake my research over two week days and a Saturday in order to observe different audiences coming in and out of the museum over both week and weekend days. This made my research fall on Thursday, December 13, 2012 through Saturday December 15, 2012. On the first day of my time in the museum I solely conducted interviews with the Portland Art Museum staff and docents, as well as participated in the *Object Stories* booth and exhibit. The second day, Friday, December 14, I conducted interviews of visitors and observed visitor actions in the *Object Stories* gallery space. My third and final day at the Portland Art Museum was devoted entirely to

observing the *Object Stories* gallery space. I maximized my time in Portland at PAM, arriving when the museum opened and leaving when it closed. In order to attain my overall goal of answering my research question, I created an observation and interview protocol prior to arriving at Portland, which is explained thoroughly below (Lapan & et al., 2012).

DATA COLLECTION

Observations, interviews, and documents, commonly used in case study research, are the three main components of this study. These three types of data create an analysis positions of triangulation. The use of triangulation, or combining multiple analytic methods, adds to the validity of the data collected (Lapan & et al., 2012). Validity through triangulation is especially important in qualitative research because it adds credibility to the results, as qualitative data cannot be quantified (Lapan & et al., 2012).

I had no connection to *Object Stories* before my interest in the program, making my role in the research relatively non-biased. In conducting qualitative research, the researcher hopes to maintain, as much as possible, a non-biased viewpoint. This position of objectivity is often difficult to establish because of the intrinsic qualities possessed by each observer. I brought my own bias into my research prior to arriving in Portland as a graduate student in museum education, and having extensively studied and admired *Object Stories* from afar (Creswell, 2009). Yet, I tried to minimize my bias in this study. The utilization of triangulation throughout my research enabled me to maintain an objective outlook towards the program.

Observations

In order to truly understand the purpose of *Object Stories* it was important to go to PAM, and spend time in the *Object Stories* gallery space to conduct my research onsite.

My observation plan entailed detailed the making of journal entries and field notes about my observations regarding how the visitors interacted and utilized the *Object Stories* exhibit space (Stokrocki, 1997). I kept track of these interactions through diagrams and written observations about the visitors engagement within the space (Creswell, 2009).

I charted visitors' engagement with the space based on certain criteria. The diagrams I drew of the *Object Stories* gallery space mapped out where the kiosks, display cases, and booth were located. I noted the number of single visitors, coupled visitors, group or family visitors, and the length of time each visitor spent with an object within the gallery space. More specifically, I marked where in the exhibit space the visitors had the most engaged interactions. I also kept track of the number of coupled or group visitors who began a conversational dialogue about an object inside the *Object Stories* exhibit. This observational technique enabled me to gather exhaustive data about what appeared to be the successful and unsuccessful components of the exhibit.

One of the first things I did during my on-site research was record an object story of my own, by way of using the booth. I felt it was important to participate in the program myself to gain a more complete sense of what the visitors and staff were discussing in the interviews. There are fundamentally two types of observations: systematic and participation observations (Denscombe, 2010). Systematic observations are often used in qualitative research when the researcher gathers data from a distance and never interacts with the participants he or she is observing. Participation research occurs when the researcher experiences the event or program he or she is observing alongside the participants (Denscombe 2010). My involvement with *Object Stories* made me a participant observer enabling me to better understand the content the museum staff and visitors discussed.

Documents

In anticipation of my visit, I gathered data about *Object Stories* through the *Object Stories'* website and promotional DVDs made by the PAM education staff. I thoroughly sifted through the hundreds of *Object Stories* clips made by visitors and staff members available on the *Object Stories* website in order to gain a more full understanding of the program and prepare me for my arrival to the museum (Creswell, 2009; Denscombe, 2010).

Interview and Interviewee Selections

I conducted audio recorded, face-to-face interviews onsite at the Portland Art Museum with education, volunteer, and security staff as well as visitors who were interacting with the *Object Stories'* space. There are a few different types of interviews a researcher may choose to employ. These include structured interviews, which are rigid in format similar to a questionnaire; semi-structured interviews that use a protocol, but allow interviewees more flexibility to answer questions; and unstructured interviews similar to an organic conversation about a particular topic (Denscombe, 2010). I chose to use a semi-structured interviewing format. I developed an interview protocol in order to conduct constructive semi-structured interviews for each group of interviewees (Stokrocki, 1997). The interview protocol served as guidance to stay on topic, but also allowed freedom for other topics to be discussed if the interviewee felt inclined to go in an unanticipated direction.

I developed separate protocols for the education staff, security guards, docents, and visitors, as their knowledge about particular components of *Object Stories* varied depending on their position at PAM (Appendix B). I chose to interview varied members of the PAM staff in order to obtain diverse viewpoints about the program, and gather information about the different perspectives of the program each person had to offer. To

gain a more rich and broad sense of how visitors feel and their thoughts on *Object Stories*, I interviewed docents and security staff because they frequently work firsthand with the visitors. To learn more about the research origins and evolution of *Object Stories*, I interviewed the education staff who created and executed the program, which I describe more specifically in Chapter 4. Interviews with visitors who were interacting with *Object Stories* enabled a more in-depth insight into participating and interacting with the program and gallery space.

I audio-recorded all the interviews while also taking notes throughout the process (Creswell, 2009). Prior to conducting the interviews, each interviewee signed a consent form enabling me to record and use the interviews in an ethical manner (Appendix C). When observing the gallery space, I chose visitors to interview based on assorted criteria. The interviewees had to be above the age of eighteen, engaging with the *Object Stories* space for an extended period of time, and exploring the interactive components of the *Object Stories* exhibit. These specifications elicited thoughtful interviews with the visitors.

DATA ANALYSIS

As a researcher, while interpreting data found in qualitative research, new reflections and revelations are constantly discovered (Creswell, 2009). After each day was complete, I examined my field and interview notes in search of common themes. I also created mind maps to help organize my thoughts and ideas before the next day of research of research. A mind map is a visual tool researchers create on paper that divides the emergent themes arising throughout the day into categories by drawing diagrams to show where each of those categories intersect. Mind maps assisted me in organizing and reviewing my data after each day of research.

Once all interviews were complete, I began transcribing the recordings of each interview. Transcribing interviews helped me to clarify ideas and themes that emerged from the conversations. The combination of interview notes and transcriptions made common themes much more apparent. Once the transcriptions, field notes, and maps were complete I began to find themes throughout each component; this is also known as content analysis. Content analysis is useful when searching for commonalities throughout collected data (Stokrocki, 1997). Eventually I reduced the total list of categories by grouping topics that related to one another, which is also known as cross-components (Creswell, 2009). Triangulating my data collection methods by transcribing and looking over my field notes, observations, and interviews through content analysis enabled consistent and prevalent concepts to emerge. In the following chapter I thoroughly present the outcomes of my data analysis.

CONCLUSION

Through qualitative research my study sought to analyze how contemporary storytelling practice can successfully engage visitor voices. My research took place over a three-day period, two weekdays and one weekend day, at the Portland Art Museum. I observed and interviewed visitors, interviewed staff members, and reviewed documents throughout my site visit, thus creating a research approach based on triangulation. I chose qualitative research methods because the subject matter at hand, contemporary storytelling practice in art museums, falls under the humanities category and quantitative research would not have produced the results necessary to answer my central research question.

Chapter 4: Data Collection

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in Chapter 3, my observations of the *Object Stories* gallery space, the semi-structured interviews with Portland Art Museum staff and visitors, and my close examination of documents pertaining to *Object Stories* resulted in data informing my response to the central research question. Prior to my travels to Portland I made an appointment to experience the *Object Stories* booth personally to further illuminate my understanding of the program. This chapter reveals the data collected throughout my site visit. My interviews included members of the education staff, docents, a security guard, and visitors. The education staff members who participated in my research included Mike Murawski, Director of Education and Public Programs; Stephanie Parrish, Associate Director of Education; Amy Gray, Manager of Docent and Tour Programs; Danae Hutson, School and Teacher Programs Specialist; and Judy Smith¹, who works with interpretive media. During my research I also interviewed Christian Rogers, a PAM Security Officer, as well as three visitors and two docents.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first gives a brief overview of *Object Stories* and the basic concepts that make up the program. A detailed description of the *Object Stories* exhibit space, booth, and a personal account of my experience with the booth are presented within the first few sections. Following the beginning sections I provide perspectives from varying audience members. These include museum visitors, museum staff, and participants from two school programs, which use variations of the original version of *Object Stories*. The first school program is local and is called *Object Stories from the Middle*, and the second is an international partnership between PAM and

¹ Subject has been given a pseudonym upon request.

Portland neighborhood schools with the Museo Nacional de San Carlos and a private school in Mexico City. The second part of this chapter presents the inner workings of *Object Stories*. While the first half of the chapter describes the overall content of *Object Stories*, Part II introduces the evolution, foundational concepts, and long term as well as incipient goals of the program.

PART I

Part I takes an in-depth look at *Object Stories*, as it details the program's overall goals and purposes. The "Overview of *Object Stories*" is followed by a description of the exhibit space. Altogether Part I can be compared to looking under the hood of a car to see the engine that makes the car run and the many important parts that surround the engine. The overview and description of *Object Stories* and the booth, my personal introduction, visitor and staff perspectives, and finally the explication of the school programs are the parts of *Object Stories* that visibly make it function as it does today.

ORIGINS OF OBJECT STORIES

Object Stories has had a creative and dynamic development. The brainstorming sessions for *Object Stories* began in 2008 with the education staff at that time. Stephanie Parrish was part of the preliminary discussion revolving around *Object Stories*. In the beginning the education team did not know they were creating *Object Stories* in its current form. According to Stephanie Parrish, Associate Director of Education, their goal was to find a way to "create innovative programs around community engagement." In order to fully develop these ideas the PAM education staff needed funding. They applied and were awarded a grant for engaging communities from the MetLife Foundation.

The PAM education team wanted to create programming around the core idea of conversation and participation in a museum setting. Stephanie mentioned that one of

their early objectives was demystifying the museum. In hopes of achieving this, the education team wanted to parallel the ease of gaining information through the Internet and social media, a trend in contemporary society. Museums are often perceived as places where people can learn and gain information through a monolithic voice; the inverse is not as common. The average museum going experience involves using a fifty-minute audio guide to gain understanding regarding pre-selected artworks within a museum's collection as told by a particular art historian or curator's perspective. Visitors leaving subjective information inside the museum for other visitors to learn from is not a general museum practice. The PAM wanted to break this notion, and their eventual solution was the utilization of storytelling.

Stephanie explained that the PAM education team looked to *StoryCorps*, a radio talk show on National Public Radio, for inspiring storytelling models. *StoryCorps* records stories from people across the United States. So far *StoryCorps* has recorded over 45,000 interviews of diverse groups of people in hopes of documenting and preserving stories of contemporary American lives. The program uses volunteers to facilitate the storytelling experience for the participants. At first, the PAM education staff was not certain a volunteer-facilitated storytelling experience was the best for them. They began brainstorming with local design and museum interactive firms to decide what type of storytelling experience they wanted the PAM visitors to have.

Stephanie explained the education staff's deliberation between having a "drop in" storytelling experience versus one that was more facilitated and time intensive, similar to *StoryCorps*. According to Stephanie, the education team knew they wanted a booth to enable storytelling participants to go inside and share their story, but the logistics for doing so were uncertain. Education staff members at the time felt a quick storytelling experience would be too informal, and wanted to make sure they gave the *Object Stories'*

participants the option to delve into richer and deeper storytelling, if they chose to do so. Eventually, the PAM education team decided the best solution was to request that the participants schedule an appointment to use the booth, unless they were already in the museum and spontaneously wanted to create an object story.

Stephanie recalled the education team conducting focus groups to gauge the relevance of their idea to the surrounding community. Questions as basic as, “Would you be interested in this idea?” and “Which design of the booth appeals to you most?” were asked. The focus group responded with answers such as, “I like emotional content added to the museum,” and “I like having an interactive display as long as it is real and not gimmicky.” Overall, *Object Stories* was perceived positively by the focus group participants. Stephanie explained the positive response from the research gave the education team the confidence to move forward with their storytelling project.

The focus group was comprised of ten people, four men and six women. The overall outcome of the focus group was, yes, Portlanders would be interested in participating in *Object Stories* to some degree. Some people stated, however, that they would be more comfortable listening to the stories than leaving one. This follows the current trend of the *Object Stories* space—for every single storyteller, there are a significantly larger number of story listeners. On the day I observed the gallery space, Saturday, December 14, 2012, I closely watched and charted thirty different visitors who interacted with the space in varying ways. Of those thirty visitors not a single person shared a story; they all preferred to look and listen rather than tell.

With these statistics one might conclude stories are not being gathered, but that is not the case. Stephanie explained that since the *Object Stories* inception there have been close to 15,000 stories from various community members archived in just a little over a year. To raise awareness in the Portland area about the opening of *Object Stories*, and to

make the community feel welcome to utilize the space, the PAM staff created a public program called *Objectivity*, which featured a set like a big game show. The game was led by a panel of judges who were local celebrities and centered on true and false stories about objects. The audience had to guess which story was true and which was false. This game was an innovative way to launch *Object Stories* into the area.

Overview of Object Stories

A main goal of *Object Stories* is to bring community voice into the museum through storytelling in order to create a familiar feeling within the space. *Object Stories* invites visitors into the museum to record an “object story” based on either an artwork from PAM’s permanent collection *or* a visitor’s own personal object. The visitors’ personal objects are vastly disparate. To date, there are personal object stories about a violin, a family photograph, a teddy bear, a keychain, a necklace, a cookbook, and so much more. As mentioned previously, there are also stories about artworks within the PAM collection, which are also known as “museum stories” and are captured through the *Object Stories* program. These museum stories range from a memory tied to a Marilyn Levine ceramic sculpture called *Handbag* (1988), to a story about interactions with a *Madonna and Child* (1350) as represented in an Italian altarpiece by Barna da Siena. These two types of stories, museum stories and personal object stories, can be told inside the museum in the *Object Stories* booth. To record a story in the booth a visitor can either make an appointment in advance through the *Object Stories* website or, depending on the booth’s availability, decide to spontaneously share a story on the day he or she comes to the museum.

When a person records a story in the *Object Stories* booth it is instantly uploaded onto the PAM’s Content Management System (CMS). Through the CMS the education

staff and interns edit the footage to make it seamless. Editing usually entails taking out superfluous words such as “like” and “um,” and weaving the participants’ responses to prompted questions into a fluid story. After the recording is edited it is then made accessible online and on kiosks inside of the *Object Stories* gallery space. The stories uploaded onto the *Object Stories* website can be accessed from any computer, as well as in the museum on the *Object Stories* kiosks.

Originally, the main component of *Object Stories* was the booth. As I discuss later and in more depth, the booth is no longer the central feature of *Object Stories*. The booth is now one of many working components within the *Object Stories* program used to record and capture stories. Apart from the booth, the PAM education staff has created numerous programs inspired by *Object Stories*. Some examples include the development of an iPad application that can record stories anywhere, and collaborations with local institutions and organizations to create filmed stories. As *Object Stories* continues to develop, additional programmatic elements are being created.

Description of *Object Stories* Exhibit Space

The *Object Stories* exhibit space is located within the museum and is permanent. The education department curates the space. The gallery is on the first floor of PAM, directly below the visitor services desk. The booth is one of many features in the room. It consists of the recording booth, two interactive kiosks, five display cases, and a placard stating the purpose of *Object Stories*. The placard, which is located directly in front of the stairs, welcomes visitors into the space. The first line of the placard poses an enticing question: “Do you have an object you would never give up? Something that lives on your wall, sits on your mantel, or is buried in the corner of your dresser drawer?” The text describes *Object Stories* as “an open-ended exploration of the meaningful relationships

that exist between people and things, the Museum and the community, the subjective and the objective.”² These questions and thought-provoking statements prepare visitors for the experience they are about to enter into.



Figures 1: The *Object Stories* gallery space.



Figure 2: Close up of an *Object Stories* kiosk.

There are two interactive kiosks in the center of the gallery space. The two kiosks have digital touchscreens with attached headphones. Similar to the *Object Stories*

² See Appendix D for the entire text of the placard.

website, they act as a digital archive for the recorded stories. The stories on the kiosks are not organized in any particular manner. Any visitor is welcome to search by name, theme, school, etc. This makes for intriguing discoveries when flipping through the stories and finding one by a fifth-grader about his favorite toy car juxtaposed to a curator telling a story about her favorite artwork in the collection.

Another equally important component of the gallery space is the five display cases. Four of these cases each feature a different art object from PAM's permanent collection. Adjacent to each of these cases is a photograph of a museum staff member who shared a museum story based on that particular object. The content of these four display cases rotates every four months along with new museum stories. The featured museum stories correlate to whatever special exhibition is open at that time. For example, during my research the special exhibit at the PAM was called *The Body Beautiful*, a collection of Ancient Greek sculptures and artifacts. The four chosen museum stories on display in the *Object Stories* gallery space were about modern interpretations of Greek ideals.



Figure 3: Featured museum story display cases.



Figure 4: Featured museum story display cases.

Mike Murawski, head of education, told a story called *Create, Learn, See through our Bodies* about a David Alfaro Siqueiros print, *Nuestra Imagen Presente* (1947). In addition to Mike, various other museum staff outside the education department also shared museum stories. Julie Petersen's *Echoing Ancient Ideals Making Modern Meaning* was about a sculpture by Manuel Izquierdo, *Moscophoros* (1964). Mary Weaver Chapin told a story called *Psyche on the Cliff. What's Next?* about a Max Klinger print, *Psyche on the Rock*, (1880). Lastly, a story by Aaron Doyle about Auguste Rodin's *Crouching Women*, a bronze sculpture made in 1880-1882 was featured. All these museum stories assisted in creating a metaphoric conversation between the *Object Stories* gallery space and *The Body Beautiful*. Each of the stories are archived digitally and can be accessed through the kiosks or the website. The fifth display case is the largest in the room, taking up an entire wall behind one of the kiosks. This case features forty different personal object stories by various museum visitors. These stories are represented through a photograph taken when the visitors were recording their stories. The featured stories in the case also rotate on a regular basis. The highlighted stories are meant to encourage further investigation of the kiosks.



Figure 5: Display of featured personal *Object Stories*.

Description of the *Object Stories* Booth

The *Object Stories* booth is at the heart of the exhibit space. The booth is the quiet space visitors are allowed to go inside to record their stories. It is locked at all times and can only be accessed by a key provided by a staff member or *Object Stories*' volunteer who is periodically stationed outside the booth. Judy explained the reasons why the booth is locked at all times is because of the value of the equipment. It has a giant glass window with the words "Objects have stories. Tell us yours" written on the outside. For better audio quality and to make a more sound-insulated space, the inside of the booth has black padded walls. Two light fixtures and a microphone are poised above a monitor facing a wooden bench where visitors sit to share their stories.

Once inside the booth and ready to share a story, the visitor presses a start button that activates a camera. A series of questions serving as prompts then guide one through the storytelling experience. The prompts, as listed on the website, begin with basic questions such as:

- What is your object?
- When and how did you first receive or encounter your object?

- How did your object gain meaning?
- Has its meaning changed over time?
- Does your object have any special powers?
- Who would you dedicate your object to and why?

Along with the prompts the screen suggests different ways to pose with your object in order to take a series of photographs. The final, digitally archived video consists of the audio-recorded answers to the prompts streamed with the photographs taken inside the booth. Once the visitor is finished telling a story, a screen pops up allowing the visitor to type in an email address to ensure notification once the story is accessible online through the *Object Stories* website.



Figure 6: Exterior side view of *Object Stories* booth.



Figure 7: Exterior front view of *Object Stories* booth.



Figure 8: Interior of *Object Stories* booth.



Figure 9: Interior of *Object Stories* booth.

My Personal Introduction to *Object Stories*

As the anticipated moment to participate in *Object Stories* finally arrived, I could barely contain my excitement. Having made the appointment to use the booth a month in advance, I envisioned a busy day with the booth full of visitors rushing in and out, holding their precious objects while waiting to share their personal story in the confessional-like space. When I arrived at the Portland Art Museum I asked the man sitting at visitor services how early I needed to arrive to my *Object Stories* appointment.

He looked at the list and explained only one other person was sharing an *Object Story* on that day, so I should arrive around the time I scheduled.

Immediately prior to my appointment I held a previously scheduled research interview with a member of the education staff. When the interview came to a close, I ran to the *Object Stories* gallery with my personal object in tow and tried to open the booth I had been so eager to finally see from the inside. As I turned the door handle slowly, so as not to disturb anyone who might be inside, I realized it was locked. Confused, I ran back upstairs only to see a volunteer rushing my way with a key in hand, asking if I was the visitor who scheduled an appointment to tell a story at 11 a.m. on December 13th. Yes, indeed I was! Together we went back into the gallery space. Once I was inside the booth she explained the general rules and how to run the video camera and prompts. It took only three easy steps and signing the photo release form before I was in good shape to be left alone and share my story.

As the volunteer left the booth and the door shut softly behind her, I sat for a second quietly taking in every detail of the tiny, yet comfortable space. The extremely clean, shiny, and red, black, and white interior made me feel happy and surprisingly calm inside. The three steps to get started were printed on the wall in clear, white text with the last step stating, "Relax, this will be fun." Inside the booth I saw a black, backed bench for me to sit on while sharing my story, and to my right there was a window that opened into the gallery space. I had the option of closing the curtain for privacy while sharing my story or keeping it open for other onlookers to observe; I chose to close the curtain. As I situated myself I thought about the object I brought and was quickly running through my mind other *Object Stories* I had seen online in an attempt to remember what others had shared.

Prior to my trip to Portland I deliberated for quite some time over what object to bring. It was a much more difficult decision to make than I had anticipated. After vacillating for weeks I finally chose to bring my Pentax K-1000 camera for a multitude of reasons. I owe my Pentax K-1000 a debt of gratitude for the invaluable moments in my life it has captured, the opportunities it has created for me, and its assistance in the many adventures I have explored. I felt certain this was an excellent choice, and that I would have more than enough to talk about. After reminiscing about these thoughts in my head, I decided to press the “Start” button on the touch screen only a couple feet in front of me, and watched as the prompts began rolling.

The prompts were much quicker and more direct than I had imagined. The first question asked something simple about the origins of my relationship with the object and to describe it in detail. The second prompt featured a few choices. I chose “Does your object have any secrets?” The third prompt also suggested a couple of choices of which I selected, “Who would you dedicate your object to?” During the process, as more prompts ensued, I felt rushed and uncertain that I had given my trusty camera the justice it deserved. I did not have adequate time to ponder the difficult, yet familiar questions posed, leaving me to feel confused. All the stories I had seen on the *Object Stories* website had been so articulate and heartfelt. I questioned whether mine would appear the same. I saw the option to “redo” the video I had just made, but felt uneasy about trying it all over again. I especially did not want to keep the volunteer waiting. The entire storytelling process took no longer than three minutes. Once everything was complete I opened the door to re-enter the gallery space, and saw the volunteer waiting.



Figure 10: Screen shot of My Object Story, *The Magical Camera*.

In previous sections I have described the concept of *Object Stories*, where the booth is physically situated inside the PAM, explained the layout of the gallery space, and my personal experience with the program. I now describe how varied audiences experienced the program. My first question when beginning my research endeavors was, “What group of people defines the community utilizing the *Object Stories* platform to share and archive their personal stories?” The answer is more extensive than I had anticipated. *Object Stories* welcomes essentially *any* museum visitor who comes in with an object ready and makes a reservation to tell their story. In addition to the public visitors, the PAM staff has participated in the program, sharing both museum and personal object stories. *Object Stories* has also extended beyond the museum walls into classrooms in the surrounding Portland area, and has even gone as far as a school and museum in Mexico City. I present the perspectives of these object storytellers next.

Visitor Perspectives

As mentioned earlier, I interviewed three museum visitors during my research trip who were actively engaged in the *Object Stories* space. These visitors gave divergent perspectives on their experience inside the *Object Stories* gallery. I interviewed the first

visitor, Susan³, immediately after she had recorded an object story inside the booth. Susan enjoyed the concept of *Object Stories* and the PAM staff's desire to include visitor voice inside the museum, but had a few qualms with her overall experience. At the time of the interview Susan was enrolled in a college course called "Art Ethics and Transgression." For a course assignment, she was required to use the *Object Stories* booth to share either a personal or museum story. Susan decided to share a story about an object she owned. Throughout the recording Susan felt she was too hurried, explaining her entire recording took less than three minutes. The prompts also left her feeling uneasy, "The prompt doesn't give you enough to be personal about your object, which I think might have been the whole point of the object booth, to have some personal connection. The prompts aren't too inviting." Susan felt she carefully took her time to choose her personal object to bring, and that object held immense meaning for her. She discerned the prompts did not invite her to talk about anything truly personal. The last aspect of *Object Stories* Susan had concerns with was the accessibility of the booth. She thought the booth being locked and monitored by volunteers made it feel uninviting and inhibited sharing a personal story. Overall, Susan felt her experience was shallow and she left feeling confused and a little cheated due to the superficial quality of the prompt questions.

The second visitor I interviewed, Molly, had an entirely different perspective of the booth. Molly is the mom of a younger visitor who had recorded a story in the *Object Stories* booth in the past. One year prior to the interview, Molly's daughter thought leaving an object story was an interesting idea and chose to individually record the story. At the time of our interview the family was visiting the museum from a small town

³ Names of visitor research participants are pseudonyms.

outside of Portland to see the museum's collection and to find out if Molly's daughter's story was on the kiosk. Molly feels the program is a *great* way to bring in community voice from outside the museum's walls. As a mom, Molly said one of her favorite aspects of the exhibit was to see so many children's stories were represented on the kiosks. She also explained the main deterrent for her from recording a personal story was that she had noticed more children than adult stories on the kiosks, and did not feel entirely comfortable recording a story for that very reason.

The last visitor I interviewed, Sally, fell somewhere in-between the first two visitors. Sally had not participated in the booth, and did not know anyone who had. She spent an extensive amount of time in the gallery space exploring the kiosks and listening to the many object stories housed inside. When asked if she would ever want to share a story inside the booth she said she absolutely did, and would most likely choose a personal object to share as she did not feel close connections to any objects in the PAM collection. Sally felt the idea of community voice being represented in the museum was fantastic, but would like to see more of a "global community" present. As a member of the museum's surrounding community, she explained a Portland-centered museum space is very interesting, but Sally would like to see the program expand even larger. Sally had just walked from the Native American galleries and was interested to see if there was an evident connection drawn between object stories and cultures represented inside the museum.

As mentioned earlier, visitors are welcome to make an appointment for *Object Stories* prior to their arrival at PAM to share a story onsite in the booth, or they can be spontaneous and share a story while visiting the museum depending on availability of the booth. The objects about which the visitors choose to share a story vary greatly. Visitors who have used *Object Stories* to leave a story range from elementary-aged students to

teenagers and adults. The object chosen by each visitor captures a particular instance, idea, moral, or story he or she holds close to their heart. Included among the shared stories is one about a married couple whose object was the Portland Art Museum itself because their first date was in the museum. Another story is by a man confessing his love for jazz music and sharing his signed Ornette Coleman vinyl album. And in another story an adult remembers his mother ringing an antique school bell during his childhood growing up in New England to call him, his brothers, and sisters home when they were playing outside. With more than 15,000 stories already archived through *Object Stories*, it is increasingly clear that there are endless possibilities for object-focused stories.

During my observations at PAM two of the featured stories caught my attention. The first was about an envelope and the second was by a veteran of the US Army concerning her love of the American flag. *An Envelope I Don't Open* by Gretchen Icenogle is a story inspired by an old crinkled, brown envelope. The heartfelt story is about the envelope that contains Gretchen's mother's x-rays showing she had brain cancer. Gretchen discovered the envelope after her mother's death. She described the moment she found the envelope and realized what was inside. Gretchen quickly closed the envelope and never looked back into it. Honoring her mother who never shared the x-rays with Gretchen was most important to her. She talked fondly of memories of her mother and expressed gratitude for the time she spent with her and the various ways they connected. Toward the end of Gretchen's personal object story she explains that, out of respect to her mother's memory, she still has not opened that envelope.

The second story that resonated with me was titled *I am American Freedom* and was by Quinn Rand. This story had an entirely different mood than Gretchen's. Quinn began by emphatically describing the members of her family who have served in the US Army. Quinn's object of choice is the American flag. Throughout her recording she is

seen with numerous flags surrounding her. Quinn continually raises her walker adorned with its small American flag, a license plate with an American flag and bald eagle, and a bumper sticker representing her Italian-American heritage. Reminiscing over her time in the army, Quinn explained she would do anything to reenlist, but at age 72 she has been honorably discharged. Towards the end of the recording Quinn broke out singing *You're a Grand Old Flag* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* to even further express her love and pride for the American flag.

As previously stated, stories about objects from the museum's collection almost always are told by staff members, and are also found on the *Object Stories* website and kiosks. Judy Smith is a media specialist at PAM and is in charge of finding staff members to tell museum stories. These stories often relate to the special exhibition happening at the time the story was recorded. Smith "seeks out various people who have already deep relationships with objects in the collection and then those people are the ones who choose the objects." These museum stories aim to create a connection or dialogue between the *Object Stories* gallery space and the special exhibition.

Staff as Audience

Various staff members have participated in *Object Stories* and most choose to share museum stories. As described above, the *Object Stories* gallery space has four display cases each featuring a museum staff member and his or her museum object story. The content of four display cases rotates every four months, and the content of the stories always aims to connect with the special exhibition currently on view.

Mike Murawski, Education Director, was featured as one of the four tellers whose story was displayed during my on-site observations. Mike's story is titled *Create, Learn, See Through our Bodies* and is about a print by David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Nuestra Imagen*

Presente (1947). Mike explained that as a child his first interactions with works of art were at the Laumier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, Missouri. At the park Mike was able to interact with the pieces using his entire body. He described his earliest interactions with artwork as purely kinesthetic.

These early childhood interactions with artworks inspired Mike later in his career when he was invited to give a workshop at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art based on Siqueiros' mural *Portrait of Mexico Today* (1932). To better connect visitors to the mural and the characters represented within the artwork, Mike employed theatre strategies. The Santa Barbara Museum of Art's educators wanted to teach Siqueiros' mural to people outside of the museum who lived in surrounding neighborhoods. In order to teach the mural in the streets to the surrounding public Mike utilized theatre education techniques that got people moving. Mike recalls this teaching experience as being incredibly powerful, and the first time he had taught a piece by Siqueiros.

In Mike's museum object story he described his interactions with the Siqueiros piece at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art as the reason why he sought out the Siqueiros print at the PAM. He then launched into a rich description of *Nuestra Imagen Presente*, describing why he found it so fascinating and representative of Siqueiros' work as a whole. *Nuestra Imagen Presente* is a print of the male body with a bound set of hands at the center of the image. Mike described a connection between the first theatrical hands-on experience he led with Siqueiros' work at Santa Barbara and the dynamic portrayal of the male body in the print.

Christian Rogers is another museum staff member who recorded an object story. When I interviewed Christian, a security guard at the Portland Art Museum and a working artist, he discussed his decision to record a museum object story instead of a personal object story. Christian explained that as a security guard his connection to the

artwork is attributed to his daily and regular interactions with the pieces in the PAM collection. *Look at that Backside!* is the title of Christian's story, and is about *La Defense*, a bronze sculpture by Auguste Rodin made in 1879.

Christian centers the story on the inspiration and knowledge he has gained from looking closely and regularly at the back of sculpture. *La Defense* was not a sculpture that originally caught Christian's attention, but upon seeing it frequently as a security guard, Christian began to admire its back. The bronze sculpture by Rodin depicts the image of an angel trying to help a fallen warrior get up from the ground. The textured bronze reminds Christian of many contemporary artists' work, and is similar to techniques he aims to execute in his own pieces. He mentioned gaining "endless inspiration from the sculpture." The evolution of his feelings towards the sculpture has taught Christian to look at artworks longer, even if they do not originally appeal to him.

Object Stories has evolved into something much larger than originally anticipated. Judy Smith explained it well in her interview: "The practical way [*Object Stories*] functions here in the education department is it is kind of like a platform, sort of like our backbone for the entire department." *Object Stories* has come to serve as inspiration for a majority of educational programming at PAM. Two of the bigger programs that have developed alongside *Object Stories* are *Object Stories from the Middle* and an international partnership between PAM and the Museo Nacional de San Carlos. *Object Stories from the Middle* is a multi-visit program for middle school students, which started two years ago and directly correlates with *Object Stories* and the gallery space. The partnership between PAM and the Museo Nacional de San Carlos links students abroad to personal or museum stories and *Object Stories*.

Object Stories from the Middle

Object Stories from the Middle is a two-visit program at PAM geared towards middle school students to enhance visual literacy and writing skills through diverse forms of storytelling. It has been running for two years. The program works with middle school students, docents, participating teachers, and working artists in the Portland community.

There are many steps within the program to ensure the participating students are comfortable with the notion of storytelling in a museum setting. Prior to the first museum visit the participating teachers introduce *Object Stories* to the students. The students then select a personal object and a photographer comes to the classroom to help take pictures and document the students' selected personal objects. A local Portland writer also visits the classroom to assist students in developing written stories. Once these stories are fleshed out and ready to be read aloud, the classroom teacher aids the students in turning their written personal narratives into an oral speech. After all these steps are complete, the students are then ready for their first museum visit.

The first visit is comprised of the students going on a personal stories tour. Such a tour involves each student telling their personal story in the *Object Stories* booth, listening to other stories on the kiosks, and then they are encouraged to investigate museum objects in the museum's galleries. When students from *Object Stories from the Middle* record their stories, the booth goes into a different mode, one in which no prompts are offered. This mode records the students' stories as they wrote them and allows for more creative freedom and a relaxed environment in which students who are nervous or intimidated can share their stories. For the second visit the students write fictional stories about museum objects. When describing the students' stories from the second visit Danae Hutson, School and Tour Programs Specialist, explained the diverse

and equally important stories the students create using the museum's objects as inspiration:

This storytelling is kind of an investigation into these different layers of meaning. Different types of objects are good for characters and dialogue, others themselves are parts of a story. What happened before this? What happened after this? Some are really good for developing empathy. Some have known stories—they depict scenes from a myth or common stories. Others have historical stories, and some are completely out there and ambiguous.

As mentioned previously, a significant goal of the program is to enhance writing and close looking skills for the students, but also to link personal object stories and museum object stories. A consistent outcome the PAM education staff hoped for was to enable the students to bridge the gap between personal and museum objects, and to understand that *both* possess rich and important stories that are interesting and worth telling. Amy Gray, Manager of Docent and Tour Programs, explained her objectives and process on the second visit with the *Object Stories from the Middle* students in the following manner:

I go to one of the sculptures by Picasso, and tell a story about Picasso. I tell the story at Picasso's piece, as the story has elements of story. It has a beginning, middle, and end, a conflict, and a resolution. And, then they go find a work of art and write a story about it, or from the point of view of someone who is in the painting, or as the artist. We try to give them as much freedom to write fiction, but we are also trying to make sure they leave knowing that museum objects have rich stories intrinsically that aren't just made up.

At the close of the first year of *Object Stories from the Middle* the culminating activity of the project was *An Evening with Object Stories*. The staff invited the participating schools, parents, and community members to come to the museum free of charge, and to see the *Object Stories* gallery. *An Evening with Object Stories* enabled participating students to share their story and reflections from the *Object Stories from the Middle*

program in front of an audience of family members and PAM education staff in an auditorium near the *Object Stories* space. *Object Stories from the Middle* not only invites various community members into the museum, but also collects and archives stories from a diverse group of middle school students from Portland and surrounding areas, as Danae explains:

It's a different type of community. It's like the school community, but when you listen it's interesting because the types of objects and stories the students are telling are so revealing about the communities and their identity and where they come from, and what they value.

Mentioned earlier, *Object Stories from the Middle* is one of two larger initiatives that have come to fruition since the original *Object Stories* program began. The second is a partnership between the PAM and the Museo Nacional de San Carlos. This partnership enables students in Portland and Mexico City to connect and educate each other about their surrounding communities through object-based storytelling techniques.

Partnership with Museo Nacional de San Carlos

The partnership between Museo Nacional de San Carlos and PAM is a new education program and another facet of *Object Stories*. The program partners the two museums with a school in Portland and a school in Mexico City. The purpose of the program is to develop cross-cultural understanding using storytelling focused on personal objects from the schools' respective communities. Middle school students in participating schools are exposed to *Object Stories*' lesson plans. The lesson plans are similar to those previously described for *Object Stories from the Middle*. The preliminary lesson aims to develop writing skills through storytelling centered on culture and community. The middle school students act as penpals to one another through blogging and other forms of communication. As the booth is inaccessible from Mexico City, the PAM staff mailed

iPads with preloaded applications specifically designed for the recording of object stories from a distance. The recorded stories by students in Mexico City will be uploaded onto the Portland Art Museum's content management system (CMS). This enables the stories to be archived and accessed from Portland through the museum's digital archives.

One of the most unique components of this exchange program is the Portland site visit that will be afforded to six students from the school in Mexico City once the program is complete. These students will be invited to travel to Portland and visit the participating school and students in Portland, as well as come to the museum. This exchange program connects communities that are foreign to one another inside and outside the museum's walls. This opportunity expands the *Object Stories* archived collection further than it has gone before.

The international partnership began in December 2012. At the time of my site visit the PAM staff had just mailed the iPads to the participating schools in Mexico City. This developing international partnership is something many of the PAM staff members see as having potential for bigger projects in the future. As seen throughout this chapter, *Object Stories* is something that is continuing to evolve. Since its inception *Object Stories* has been a malleable and multi-faceted program that continues to grow.

PART II

Now that an overall description of the program along with examples of stories by both staff and visitors have been explicated, I discuss the more conceptual importance of *Object Stories*. This section begins with the origins of *Object Stories*, explaining aspects such as how the idea came to fruition and the steps the education team took to execute their plan. This is followed by a more in-depth description of the local initiatives that partner with the PAM education team to create a well-rounded experience for the *Object*

Stories' participants. The conversational component that is evident in the program is discussed along with *Smart History* and *Conversations about Art*, two programs that served as inspiration to the education team while developing *Object Stories*. As Part I explains the inner workings of *Object Stories*, Part II explores the conceptual and less obvious aspects of the program that make it effective.

Local Initiatives with *Object Stories*

Another way community voices and involvement can be seen with the use of *Object Stories* programming is through collaborations with local initiatives, organizations, and institutions. When describing the origins of *Object Stories*, Stephanie explained that the PAM worked with local design firms for something as basic as the design of the *Object Stories* booth and technological aspects of the program. Throughout the development and constant evolution of *Object Stories* PAM staff have partnered with various outside sources within the Portland community, such as *The Right Brain Initiative*, *Teatro Milagro*, the Northwest Film Center, and *Write Around Portland*. *Write Around Portland* is an organization that facilitates writing workshops in places such as hospitals, homeless shelters, and low-income housing in Portland for both the youth and adult community. The *Right Brain Initiative* is another organization that aims to enhance art education curriculum in Portland schools by partnering school teachers and working artists within the community in order to design lesson plans. *Teatro Milagro* is a theatre group in Portland whose members' goal is to generate cross-cultural understanding through performance.

Mike explained that apart from inviting the public and visitors to come in and share stories and utilizing local initiatives present in Portland, *Object Stories* staff have created a number of school tours centered on *Object Stories*. When I asked Mike about

the development of much school-focused programming inspired by *Object Stories* his answer was this:

Understanding that [*Object Stories*] is a really powerful project; why have just adults and people popping into the museum. Why not also do school tours? Maybe a middle school student comes up with a story around why their skateboard or why their favorite toys are important to them, then eventually when they visit the museum they would be able to make a different relationship between the objects here.

The education team has developed many different avenues to collect community stories using the *Object Stories* platform. Since the inception of the project there has been an effort to work locally and bring in skills from surrounding community members to assist in building the program even further. The many offshoots *Object Stories* already has is not the end for the program, as it is constantly evolving. Throughout my interviews Mike and Stephanie used the metaphor of a tree to describe *Object Stories*. Stephanie explained the school component of *Object Stories* to be “one branch of the tree that was been really well-developed.” Mike described the “offshoots” of *Object Stories* to be like tree branches or the roots of a tree that are growing up out of the original program.

Conversational Components

As presented earlier, Stephanie talked about how the conversational components of interpretation in a museum setting are significant to PAM. The conversational component favors informal discussion around artworks rather than objective, non-participatory lectures when viewing art objects. At the time of *Object Stories*' development, the PAM education team was also working with a project called *Smart History*. This program was started by two art historians/professors in New York City, Beth Harris and Steven Zucker. Harris and Zucker began recording the conversations they were having at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in

New York City for the students in the college art history courses they were teaching at the time. Harris and Zucker recorded their conversations on iPods and uploaded them online for the students to listen to before exams and lectures. This conversational approach became much more interesting to the students than the traditional art history textbook. Stephanie explained that Harris and Zucker's recordings became so popular that people outside of their art history courses began listening to them online before going to museums.

The recorded conversations by Zucker and Harris are now uploaded onto their website, *Smart History*. The *Smart History* recordings began to be employed by staff at art museums in place of the traditional audio guide. Stephanie explained the trend in *Smart History*'s popularity caused some museum staff to decipher that visitors were more interested in listening to well versed art historians grapple back and forth about an art object than a five minute dialogue based on a single art historian's perspective. This also gave visitors more confidence to decipher their own, subjective interpretation of the artwork. Stephanie explained that PAM education staff worked with *Smart History* about two years ago to make content for the museum in the form of conversational audio guides. The *Smart History* project inspired much of *Object Stories*' programming as the *Smart History* project was being brought to fruition at the time of *Object Stories*' inception. Through PAM's partnership with *Smart History*, the education department developed a program called *Conversations about Art*. This program is similar to the concept behind *Smart History*. The education department at PAM chose objects upon which to focus recorded organic conversations staff members had with one another regarding the works. These conversations were made accessible as podcasts using a smart mobile device. This notion of creating a dialogue involving multiple perspectives

presented within a couple of minutes was something the education team wanted to mirror in *Object Stories*.

***Object Stories* Location in the PAM**

The issue of the location where *Object Stories* would exist inside the museum was another challenge the education team had to overcome. Originally, the education staff thought the *Object Stories* booth should be near the visitor services area where the entrance to PAM is located. As the project continued to evolve, the education team realized it would involve not only a booth, but also the kiosks and a space in which visitors could comfortably interact with the kiosks. With the support of their director, and conversations with the curatorial staff, the education department was able to secure the space where the *Object Stories*' booth and exhibit live currently.

Before being occupied by *Object Stories* the space was used for rotating exhibitions from the collection. Stephanie expressed pride in the area focusing on *Object Stories* as it is “not ghettoized or marginalized as education spaces often are.” The *Object Stories* exhibit space is located just downstairs from the entrance. It is extremely accessible as it is situated next to the auditorium and the art making classroom, and is directly in-between the Modern and Contemporary sections of the museum.

The only downside expressed by Stephanie regarding the space is that the display casework was originally designed for an exhibit different than *Object Stories*. This means the museum stories that aim to highlight personal stories told about museum objects must fit inside the case; little flexibility exists in this regard. To explain the challenge this causes Stephanie speculated that if a staff member or visitor wanted to share a story about Claude Monet's *WaterLily* paintings, the artworks size would pose a problem. An object as big as Monet's painting cannot be displayed because it will not fit inside the case. The

current solution to this problem is that museum staff who are chosen to share a highlighted museum story are asked to choose an object of an appropriate size from the museum's storage. Judy Smith explained this solution in greater depth when describing the situation with the current museum stories on display in the *Object Stories* gallery and related *The Body Beautiful* exhibition. She said,

In this rotation, [the education staff] got one work off the wall, but aside from it being a logistical nightmare, which is not that big of a deal, conceptually to think about what that means as well, you don't want to be ruining other exhibitions. Those are objects chosen specifically to tell a very specific story. We don't want to diminish the integrity of those exhibitions. We have around 50,000 objects in our collection. That's not how many are on display. There are all these objects that no one gets to see, so for me, I also view that as an opportunity to finally show new things that people do not even know about.

To elaborate on Judy's comment, the larger number of personal object stories has presented a challenge for the education staff. When discussing the difficulties involved in getting museum visitors to share museum object stories instead of personal object stories, Stephanie Parrish explained: "We thought that was going to naturally happen. We thought that was going to be the easy part, and it has actually been *really* hard." There is still an overarching question of how to enable visitors to develop personal connections with museum objects, and then also share stories surrounding those personal connections while visiting the museum.

Future Plans

Throughout my interviews with the education staff at PAM, all staff members mentioned plans for the future of *Object Stories*. While interviewing Mike, I saw gigantic pieces of paper behind him depicting diagrams with *Object Stories* at the center. Various ideas that could expand the program came out of the center of *Object Stories*. The partnerships between PAM and local schools, as well as Museo Nacional de San Carlos

and the school in Mexico City is an exciting new component of *Object Stories*. The purchase of iPads and the development of applications to enable people to record *Object Stories* from a distance expands the types of communities the museum will be able to reach. An example was mentioned in my interview with Danae in which the PAM staff is doing a project about objects or an exhibition representative of a distant community. To carry out the program the education staff could partner with those communities from afar, mail the iPads with the *Object Stories*' recording applications intact, and have community members share personal stories based on their community that relate to the exhibit in Portland. This concept could be applied to many communities around the world.

In my interview with Mike he discussed two large projects the staff was working towards in conjunction with *Object Stories*. The first concerned the Carrie Mae Weems exhibit coming to the PAM from February 2 – May 19, 2013. To partner with local Portland organizations and to honor Carrie Mae Weems' local roots, the PAM staff created many storytelling components in conjunction with the exhibit. The education team's goal was to incorporate youth, teen, and adult perspectives into varying programs. For example, at-risk teens in the Portland area worked with Carrie Mae Weems herself and the Northwest Film Center to create stories through film. One of the overall themes of the Weems' exhibit is storytelling. The PAM education team wanted a diverse group of visitors from all ages to connect with Carrie Mae Weems' stories through their own storytelling.

Collaboration between Native American community members and the PAM is another goal the education team was working towards through the use of personal storytelling. According to Mike, the Native American collection at the PAM is very regional, and the aspiration of the project is to collect Native American voices throughout

the community and connect them back to objects in the collection. This project would also be a fusion of adult, youth, and teen voices and perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The concepts and ideas behind *Object Stories* are filtering into many of the educational programs at PAM. The conversational tone that *Object Stories* elicits is an extremely important notion for inclusion by the PAM education staff. At the time of my site visit, the education team was in the middle of evaluating the conversational success of programs such as *Object Stories* and *Conversations about Art*, and through that what actually defines a visitor's experience in a gallery space. To measure these notions the education team outfitted visitors with bluetooth cameras to capture at eye-level the objects visitors were viewing and discussing, as well as the content of their conversations and how they chose to navigate through the PAM galleries. The outcomes of this research will enable the education staff to better gauge linguistic usage and generally how visitors connect with both *Object Stories* and *Conversations about Art*.

The conversational and subjective nature of *Object Stories* is an element that is thoughtfully embraced by the education department when developing programs. Different parts and concepts of *Object Stories* are mirrored in programming that occurs department-wide. The evolution of *Object Stories* continues as the program grows and reaches wider audiences. In the next and final chapter I discuss the principle findings from my research, followed by concluding thoughts.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate my two central research questions: How can contemporary storytelling practice successfully engage visitor voices and objects? Also, what can be gained from object-based storytelling in a museum setting? To examine these questions and the use of contemporary storytelling in a museum setting I conducted an exploratory case study of *Object Stories*, an education program at the Portland Art Museum. When analyzing whether or not *Object Stories* successfully engages visitor voices and objects, I observed the type and amount of interactions divergent museum audiences had with *Object Stories*.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS

My motivation in conducting this research is derived out of my interest in storytelling techniques used within art museums. The unique and exemplary characteristics *Object Stories* embodies are reasons for why I chose to conduct an exploratory case study of the program. Two of these unconventional attributes include inviting visitors to share stories about their own personal objects, and digitally archiving those stories. Equating meanings of both personal and museum objects through stories created in *Object Stories* is one of the final and most critical steps of the education staff in developing this program.

I found the most effective way to answer my central research question was by gathering data through interviews with PAM staff and visitors, making observations of the program, and reviewing documents. The interviewee selections were made based upon the level of involvement each person had with *Object Stories*. To provide internal knowledge and perspectives, six of the nine interviews conducted were with PAM staff

members. I interviewed five education staff members and one security guard. The other three interviews were completed with museum visitors who were participating in the *Object Stories* gallery space at the time of my research. Over the three-day period of my site visit, I conducted observations in the *Object Stories* exhibit space.

As my research process began to unfold, it became clear the answer to my central research question was multi-faceted. Through the utilization of the aforementioned research methods I uncovered four principle findings in my data. In the following sections I reveal those findings as I also elaborate on the significance of each.

PRINCIPLE FINDINGS

Through analyzing and researching *Object Stories* at PAM and its success in engaging visitor voice with objects, I found varied levels of effectiveness of contemporary storytelling practice. Overall, *Object Stories* is immensely successful in capturing a diverse group of museum audience voices and making them known to an even wider public. As stated in the previous chapter, *Object Stories* acts as the backbone or tree of the education department at PAM. Similar to the many branches connected to the trunk of a tree, new programs and ideas grow out of the core concept of *Object Stories*. The central idea of the program deals with the exploration or relationships between visitors and museum and/or personal objects. The four principle findings link to various components of the program.

The first finding deals with the accessibility of *Object Stories*. The next concerns the differences between *Object Stories* school programming, such as *Object Stories from the Middle* and PAM's education department's partnership with the Museo Nacional de San Carlos, and programming for the general public. Another finding centers on the challenge to enable connections between visitors and museum objects. The final finding

explores the success the PAM staff has had, as Stephanie discussed earlier, with breaking down the monolithic voice of a museum. *Object Stories* is utilizing community members from outside PAM's walls to create a dynamic and engaging experience for all museum visitors.

ACCESSIBILITY

One of the most successful characteristics of *Object Stories* is its accessibility. *Object Stories* as a whole can be accessed in many ways. When pairing the word accessible with *Object Stories*, I am referring to the ease with which visitors can interact with the program. The program continues to evolve towards an even more progressive model than the one that currently exists. Because the education department has plans to produce more program components through which visitors share stories, *Object Stories* will continue to become further accessible.

The most prominent method of interacting with the recorded stories is through the digital archives. These archives are available on the kiosks inside the *Object Stories* gallery space and on the *Object Stories* website. Every recorded story can be watched and listened to while visiting the museum. The stories can also be accessed from any computer or smart device with an Internet connection. This enables visitors to have an intimate and dynamic experience with recorded stories both in the gallery space and then they can continue that interaction once they are home. The ability to access the digital archives through the Internet also means visitors can have an experience connected to PAM while at home. The experience may not be as all-encompassing as being inside the actual gallery space, but it still gives visitors who are interested in the program a chance to explore *Object Stories* from afar. As described in Chapter 4, the PAM education staff has developed an application for iPads to be used in recording object stories from a

distance. This creates an immense opportunity for visitors who may never travel to Portland to engage with the *Object Stories* gallery space, and have a similar experience as those who are able to spend time inside the actual exhibit.

Another important feature of the *Object Stories* website is the option to search for stories in Spanish *or* English stories. The choice to look up stories in either language creates a more diverse audience. These two language options contribute to making *Object Stories* a successful contemporary storytelling program that engages both visitor voice and objects.

While comparable programs exist at the Delaware Art Museum and the Denver Art Museum, none are as all-encompassing as *Object Stories* in terms of accessibility. Although commonalities exist *Object Stories* is a singularly unique case with the incorporation of different languages, school programming, and community outreach initiatives. Finally, the ease with which visitors can experience and interact with *Object Stories* is a key component that other museums should explore.

DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL AND PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Chapter 4 gave an in-depth description of both *Object Stories from the Middle* and the partnership between PAM and the Museo Nacional de San Carlos in Mexico City. *Object Stories from the Middle* is a dual visit program for middle school students in Portland and surrounding areas. Prior to the participating schools' first visit, the teachers go through multiple lesson plans to ensure the students are aware of *Object Stories* and are prepared to knowledgably tour the space and create their own stories with both personal and museum objects.

These initial lesson plans not only inform students of the fundamental concepts surrounding *Object Stories*, but also enable the students to have a more in-depth and rich

experience in storytelling while visiting *Object Stories*. All these preliminary steps give the participating students a much more comprehensive understanding of the program than public visitors obtain. The students' first tour is a personal stories tour in which they explore the *Object Stories* gallery space by spending time listening to recorded stories, and then recording their own story inside the booth. For the second visit, the students write fictional or personal narrative stories about museum objects. Through these two visits, the goal is to develop students' understanding that both personal and museum objects have rich and intriguing stories to be shared.

The partnership between Museo Nacional de San Carlos and PAM with middle school students has similar introductory steps as *Object Stories from the Middle*. The participating students work with teachers and PAM staff to develop personal stories and have the opportunity to record their stories via the *Object Stories* iPad application. The concluding and one of the most critical components of the international partnership is inviting six students from Mexico City to come to PAM to explore museum objects and develop a greater understanding them.

The preliminary lesson plans are comprehensive and assist in creating a meaningful experience with museum objects through contemporary storytelling. These lesson plans or introductory steps to *Object Stories* are components of the program that the general public is not exposed to. There is no educational programming similar to what the schools receive that knowledgeably prepares the general public for *Object Stories*. Many museum visitors only interact with the space through listening to the stories recorded on the kiosks, reading the placard describing the concepts behind *Object Stories*, or admiring the featured museum stories. While all these components present in the exhibit space are critical in developing a greater understanding of the program, they still fall short in comparison to the school programming.

Some of the authors I reported on in Chapter 2 support the value of collaboration between the museum and schools in creating programming through the avenue of storytelling. As a form of communication, storytelling is innate to human experience and one which an EC-12 audience recognizes and is comfortable using to express themselves (Rooney, 1989). Digital storytelling is a tool utilized in schools nationwide to enable students to fully express themselves (Robin, 2009). *Object Stories* utilizes techniques the EC-12 audience likely already knows. The usage of these familiar storytelling methods creates a dialogue between the classroom and the PAM educators before the students arrive at the museum. These essential steps present in *Object Stories from the Middle* and the international partnership with the Museo Nacional de San Carlos assist in fostering an experience where deep connections with museum objects can develop through the use of contemporary storytelling practice.

These preparatory steps are integral in assisting visitors to create personal connections with art objects. The informative elements surrounding storytelling and objects that emerge through the school-focused programs enable the participating students to develop an understanding about the importance of storytelling in a museum setting. These progressive steps are missing for the general public. A solution the education team has devised is the creation of museum stories told by staff as models for encouraging more non-school visitors to also share and record stories about art objects from the PAM collection. The development of more hands-on educational and informative programming to assist the general visitors in developing personal connections between themselves and museum objects would be extremely beneficial. Overall, the more explanatory and deep experience involved with school-focused programming makes *Object Stories* more impactful for the participating school visitors than for public visitors.

DIFFICULTY IN CREATING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VISITORS AND MUSEUM OBJECTS

One of the overall goals of *Object Stories* is to enable visitors to create more meaningful interactions with museum objects. At the inception of the program the education team believed the bridge linking museum stories and personal stories would be natural for visitors to cross. The idea was that through the creation of narratives surrounding personal and museum objects visitors would see that both types of objects have dynamic and intriguing stories worth sharing.

As presented in Chapter 4, Stephanie explained that originally the education staff believed visitors sharing museum stories would be an easy component to develop. Over the past two years, however, it has become evident that museum stories are the most difficult part of the program to implement. Through my observations and interviews with visitors and staff, it became evident the connection between museum objects and visitors is not natural after all and still a challenge the staff needs to address.

Visitors are more willing to share personal object stories than museum stories. I believe this is in direct correlation to a need for more informative programming for the general public. Sally, the third visitor I interviewed during my research trip, explained to me that she would love to participate in *Object Stories*, but would be more inclined to share a story about a personal object as she “did not feel any close connections to any objects in the PAM collection.” Comments such as this and Stephanie’s, as well as the majority of the archived object stories focused on personal object stories, leads one to question how to best engage visitors with the program so the end result is a visitor’s more lasting connection with museum objects. The interview with Sally reinforces the challenge of enabling visitors to first and foremost make a personal connection with museum objects. Once this challenge is overcome, visitors may then be more inclined to leave a museum story.

I believe the solution is a more informative and exploratory process for the public. Visitors are actively engaging in *Object Stories*, but normally in the form of personal object stories and the featured components in the exhibit space. Literature supports the use of storytelling in deriving personal connections between all types of visitors and museum objects (Barrett, 2008). For adult visitors, storytelling in the form of written narratives, creative writing, and poetry sparks an interactive and personal experience. Storytelling has been argued to be a constructivist form of meaning making, enabling visitors to create subjective interpretations and connections to objects based on intrinsic values (Barrett, 2008). As mentioned earlier, the familiar nature of storytelling is a way many museums have connected objects to children through creative writing or drama-based techniques (Shaffer, 2011). Implementing structured support in informal learning for adult visitors is challenging, but is an aspect the PAM staff should consider in deriving more personal connections between adults visitors and museum objects.

The issue of enabling more empathetic connections between visitors and art objects is common within the field of museum education (DiBlasio, 1981; Geahigan, 1999). PAM staff members created a majority of the museum stories recorded through *Object Stories*. These museum stories were often related to career moments which each individual had and that reminded them of an object or artist represented in PAM's permanent collection. Asking staff members to share museum stories was a positive solution to the ever-growing problem of the meager number of museum stories. This solution has lead a majority of staff members to share stories based on objects they have interacted with through their career or in prior museum visits. The career-oriented museum stories told by PAM staff perpetuate an insider versus outsider mentality regarding the art museum. Visitors who have not yet developed meaningful connections between themselves and art objects are generally the visitors who have less experience

engaging in art related activities. For these reasons a majority of the museum stories told by staff members still are difficult for museum visitors to relate to their own lives and personal meaning making.

While *Object Stories* is a progressive program, museum stories often get lost within the thousands of personal object stories. As it would be difficult to engage every museum visitor in lesson plans similar to the school programming, new and different programming needs to be created for the public audience. To reach a deeper level of engagement between the walk-in audience and museum objects, a potential solution is a more integrated programming model. *Object Stories* as a whole is pervasive in a majority of PAM's educational programming. However, there is a need to create multiple avenues for non-school visitors to feel empowered in making meaningful connections with art objects, and then record a museum story.

CREATING A MULTI-FACETED VOICE FOR PAM

During my interview with Stephanie she mentioned an original goal of *Object Stories* was to break down the “monolithic voice” museums so often have. The PAM staff has been extremely successful at this endeavor. Apart from the evident need for more museum stories told by visitors, *Object Stories* is still creating a dynamic museum experience.

Object Stories brings in visitors who are curious and interested about the program. The second visitor I interviewed, Molly, the mother of the young girl who had recorded an object story, explained their purpose for coming to the PAM that day was to further explore the *Object Stories* gallery space. Molly believed the program was a great way to engage youth audiences from Portland and the surrounding area. Sally, the last visitor I interviewed spent over fifteen minutes interacting with the exhibit space before I

approached her for an interview. Once I began the interview Sally mentioned how intrigued she was by the space, and told of her desire to record a personal object story.

Altogether the program creates a space within PAM that enables a multi-faceted museum experience through hearing many visitors' voices. Over 1,500 object stories have been recorded and digitally archived. The number alone makes it clear visitors are successfully participating in the program. Through the virtue of *Object Stories*, visitors are able to hear other non-official voices represented in the exhibit space. Furthermore, the *Object Stories* gallery creates a safe space within PAM where visitors may go and feel comfortable expressing their own ideas and opinions about works in the collection. Many of the stories recorded are by museum visitors, which enables other visitors to hear stories from non-official voices. Although the museum story component of *Object Stories* still needs to be developed further, the program as a whole is creating a connection with visitors that is more pervasive than before.

Asking the general public to record stories creates a personalized experience between visitors and the museum. *Object Stories* invites visitors to see themselves in the museum as it constructs a shared space where a diverse group of visitors are welcome to leave unique stories for others to listen to and from which they can learn. These personal connections, which are made through individualized storytelling, create a more informal and comfortable environment inside the museum's walls. *Object Stories* could eventually lead to a greater connection to art objects as visitors begin to feel more at ease in the gallery spaces through the program's playful, inviting, and unique components.

Museum stories recorded by both staff and visitors combat the issue of museums having a "monolithic voice," which Stephanie addressed in Chapter 4. This technique is beginning to break the stereotype so many museums fall within; encompassing a singular voice when educating the public. Archiving the stories told about museum and personal

objects within a museum enables connections to be made with a wide public. The stories created and shared within the museum facilitate an opportunity for diverse audiences to connect with art objects in the museum. As *Object Stories* continues to evolve and produce more avenues within the program for visitors to share stories through, they are simultaneously developing solutions to generate empathetic connections to art objects and through doing so make the museum a more comfortable space where meaning making can be experienced.

FUTURE RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

My research with *Object Stories* created unanswered questions for me that could not be addressed through this study. There is the question of the long-term impact of *Object Stories* as it has been active for only two years. In order to gain a better understanding of the long-term impact of *Object Stories*, one could replicate my research study five years from now to gauge the effectiveness of the program as it is continuing to develop.

A component of *Object Stories* that I had not fully considered prior to my research was its school-focused programming. As my research began to unfold I discovered the richness and multitude of layers that are part of the school programs, such as *Object Stories from the Middle* and the international partnership with Museo Nacional de San Carlos in Mexico City. I did not have the capability to focus only on the school programming during my research at PAM. There is a need for a study directed solely on the beneficial characteristics and development of *Object Stories* school programming. This study would be the most informative if it were to include interviews with participating students and teachers from *Object Stories from the Middle* and the international partnership.

Another question that arose during my research was the effectiveness of comparable contemporary storytelling programs. A comparative case study including *Object Stories* and programs such as *The Art of Storytelling* at the Delaware Art Museum and techniques the Denver Art Museums utilizes would be advantageous in deciphering both effective and ineffective contemporary storytelling techniques used in art museums today. The outcome of a comparative case study such as this would include beneficial examples for art museum educators who are interested in developing contemporary storytelling programs to better connect with visitors.

Finally, an extensive historical study uncovering storytelling techniques beginning around World War II to today would help track the type and amount of storytelling methods and approaches that have been used in art museums. From my knowledge, a study such as this has not been conducted and would be informative for both good practice and addressing an overlooked historical aspect of the field of museum education.

CONCLUSION

The term “storytelling” encompasses an immensely wide spectrum of communication. The Portland Art Museum’s education team combined many different storytelling techniques to create *Object Stories*. Through the unique and contemporary practices of *Object Stories* visitors are empowered to have an individualized and educational experience within the museum. This interaction inside PAM is unlike any other type of engagement a visitor may have in an art museum.

Object Stories offers visitors choice in a way many museums do not. The exhibit space gives visitors the freedom to pick which stories they want to listen to and when to do so. The program offers visitors the option to bring in an object and then share a story that is important to them, which the museum will ultimately archive for others to hear. It also invites and encourages visitors to share a subjective story surrounding an art object within the museum collection. This freedom is hard to come by within many museums.

The successful and still evolving elements of *Object Stories* are components other institutions can benefit from. *Object Stories* not only provides visitors a wide array of options when coming to the museum, but also gives them a voice. In many ways *Object Stories* expresses a desire to hear what visitors have to say and then uses those stories to educate other visitors.

Storytelling is an innate form of human communication. Thousands of years ago storytelling was the method ancient civilizations used to pass information from one person to the next. In this day of social media, people have the option to communicate through a multitude of platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Blogs, etc. Yet, today, humans are still constantly choosing storytelling to express themselves and connect with one another. Whether a person is asked about their day, to describe the way a particular song or movie makes them feel, or are trying to get a grandchild to fall asleep at night storytelling is the avenue to which humans innately turn. From Ancient Grecian civilizations to a teenager telling her parents about a moment she had in school to the continuous influx of the new and most popular form of social media, storytelling continues to show its effectiveness in connecting humans to one another. In this same vein, and looking forward within the field of museum education, there appears to be a great deal of promise for both storytelling in art museums and *Object Stories* as a means to create meaningful connections between visitors and art objects.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM PAM



The University of Texas at Austin
Office of Research Support
P.O. Box 7426
Austin, TX 78713

Dear Members of the UT Austin IRB,

I am writing to confirm that the Portland Art Museum authorizes the research protocol outlined in the IRB application proposal of Sophie Stuart's MA thesis. In return, the Museum would like a final copy of her report.

I oversee the submission and completion of IRBs at the Portland Art Museum and therefore am well aware of the methods and procedures in use for this type of study. I will supervise Ms. Stuart's onsite data collection to ensure that the informed consent process is upheld in accordance with the procedures of Human Subjects Research. Should you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Jess Park
Interpretive Media Specialist
Portland Art Museum
503.226.4328
jess.park@pam.org

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Visitor Interview Protocol

Main Research Question: How can contemporary storytelling practice successfully engage visitor voices and objects? What can be learned from object-based storytelling?

- Was that your first experience with *Object Stories*?
- Did you choose a personal object or an object from the museum collection to share a story about?
- How did you hear about *Object Stories*?
- Could you describe your experience inside the booth?
- Would you like to share why you chose the object you did?
- Do you feel *Object Stories* helped generate a more lasting connection between you and PAM?
- How was this experience different than coming to only view the artwork?

Security Staff Interview Protocol

Main Research Question: How can contemporary storytelling practice successfully engage visitor voices and objects? What can be learned from object-based storytelling?

Sample Questions:

- How do you feel *Object Stories* has impacted the Portland Art Museum?
- How often do you see visitors engaging or interacting with *Object Stories*?
- From what you have observed, do you believe *Object Stories* to be an overall attraction for visitors? In what ways do museum visitors enjoy or not enjoy engaging in the gallery space?
- Have you ever participated in *Object Stories*? Are you comfortable sharing your story?

Volunteer Staff Interview Protocol

Main Research Question: How can contemporary storytelling practice successfully engage visitor voices and objects? What can be learned from object-based storytelling?

Sample Questions:

- How do you feel *Object Stories* has impacted the Portland Art Museum?
- How did the creation of *Object Stories* impact planning for your tours?
- How do you feel the greater Portland community has received *Object Stories*?
- How do you feel visitors on your tours have received *Object Stories*?
- Are you required to incorporate *Object Stories* into your tour? If no, why do you choose to include the *Object Stories* gallery on your tour?
- Furthermore, if you are not required to include *Object Stories* on your tour, do visitors request you to do so?
- Have you seen visitors engage in the booth inside the *Object Stories* gallery?
- Have you participated in the *Object Stories* program?

Education Staff Interview Protocol

Main Research Question: How can contemporary storytelling practice successfully engage visitor voices and objects? What can be learned from object-based storytelling?

Sample Questions:

- What was the original premise behind *Object Stories*?
- What research led to the idea of *Object Stories*?
- What research went into creating this project?
- What goals did the education staff hope to reach through *Object Stories*?
- In what ways do you feel your goals or aims for the program were achieved?
- What type of funding was allocated for the creation of the program?
- What are some of the obstacles the education staff has overcome through developing and implementing this project?
- Could you please describe the general set up of *Object Stories*.
- What has the education staff done in order to bring the permanent collection at the Portland Art Museum into visitors' stories?
- In what ways do you feel personal narrative is bringing a more diverse audience into the Portland Art Museum?
- Do you feel the booth in any way allows visitors to open up or engage themselves more in a museum setting than they normally would?
- How do you edit the material visitors are creating in the *Object Stories* booth before the stories go onto the website?
- Have you had many repeat visitors through this program? In what ways has it widened your audience?
- How has *Object Stories* been received throughout the Portland community?
- In what ways do you see *Object Stories* as being multi-generational?

- Do you feel this program derives more empathetic connections between visitors and the Portland Art Museum? Furthermore, do you believe the program derives more empathetic connections between the permanent collection and visitors?
- In some of your DVDs, the Portland Art Museum has labeled *Object Stories* as a “community storytelling program” could you speak to that?
- Do visitors come to the Portland Art Museum for the purpose to participate in *Object Stories*?
- In what ways has this program spread out into the greater community of Portland, past the gallery in which the program was originally housed?
- How do you feel *Object Stories* has impacted the Portland Art Museum?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORMS

Consent for Participation in Research

Title: Contemporary Storytelling: A Look Inside the Portland Art Museum's Object Stories

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research study about contemporary storytelling practice inside an art museum. The purpose of this study is to better understand the effective and ineffective elements of storytelling techniques in art museums today.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Verbally answer 5-10 questions in a short interview.

This study will take 10-15 minutes and will include approximately 30 study participants.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, the answers to the interview questions will aide art educators in better perfecting storytelling practice in museums to make one's experience more interactive.

Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) in anyway.

If you would like to participate please sign and return the informed consent forms to the researcher. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?

You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

What are my confidentiality or privacy protections when participating in this research study?

This study is anonymous and pseudo-names will be provided for any participants who wish to remain anonymous throughout the research.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for the duration of the research and then erased. The data resulting from your participation may be used for future research or be made available to other researchers for research purposes not detailed within this consent form.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Sophie Stuart at 918.378.1320 or send an email to sophiesstuart@gmail.com

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2012-10-0088.

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Office of Research Support by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation

If you agree to participate please sign the informed consent form and return to the researcher.

Signature

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Printed Name

Signature

Date

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

Print Name of Person obtaining consent

Signature of Person obtaining consent

APPENDIX D: TEXT FROM *OBJECT STORIES* PLACARD

The Meaning of Things

Do you have an object you would never give up? Something that lives on your wall, sits on your mantel, or is buried in the corner of your dresser drawer? An object that evokes a time in your life, a place you miss, or something you hope for? These personal connections we have to certain items are at the heart of *Object Stories*.

Object Stories is an open-ended exploration of the meaningful relationships that exist between people and things, the Museum and the community, the subjective and the objective. The project invites members of the public to bring their object into a special recording booth and tell stories about things that matter to them—whether a postcard, a military medal, a childhood toy, or an iPhone. These stories are displayed on the tabletop screens in this room and in an online digital archive at objectstories.pam.org.

Art objects, too, carry stories that are distinct, personal, and deeply felt. This gallery centers on four such stories, about four different objects in the Museum's collection, chosen by people with close connections to them. These stories and objects will rotate every four months and will be available as well in the digital archive.

By putting ordinary but highly treasured things at the center of its investigation, and calling attention to the things we treasure but sometimes overlook in our lives, *Object Stories* ruminates on the ways in which objects *make us* as fully as *we make them*. Objects acquire meaning and value in our lives, speaking to our ideas, emotions, values, relationships, and aesthetics and shaping who we are. With this project the Museum is turned into an organic, ever-growing repository composed collectively of our individual narratives and objects.

Objects have stories. Tell us yours.

To schedule a time to record your object story, go to objectstories.pam.org.

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