

Sensing Sugaropolis

Writing Labels for Museum Objects

Teacher's Guide

Overview and Objectives

In this session students will explore what is involved in writing a display label for an object in a museum collection. They will look at images of objects that relate to Greenock's sugar history which are held in the Watt Institution collections, and think about the different stories that we could tell museum visitors about them.

You will be provided with 10 object images and descriptions, including additional historical and social context. Depending on the age group of pupils, the follow-on activity will either be to write new labels for objects (S1-S3), or to design the object using the existing description or label (P5-P7). You can cut the sheets up in order to provide just the object image, or just the object description, to students.

By the end of the session, students will be able to think more critically about how information regarding the past is presented in museums, and will have expanded their knowledge about the sugar-related objects held in the Watt Institution collections.

The object labels and designs that the students produce will be included in the 'Sensing Sugaropolis' online exhibition.

Skills and Outcomes

This session will lead to experiences and outcomes in the **social studies**. Specifically, it will enable students to:

- Develop their understanding of the history, heritage and culture of Scotland, and an appreciation of their local and national heritage within the world;
- Broaden their understanding of the world by learning about human activities and achievements in the past and present;
- Develop understanding of their own values, beliefs and cultures and those of others;
- Explore and evaluate different types of sources and evidence;
- Learn to locate, explore and link periods, people and events in time and place;
- Learn how to locate, explore and link features and places locally and further afield.

Lesson Objectives

- Students will reflect critically on what a museum is and how history is narrated in museum spaces.

- Students will complete the class activity (see below).
- Students will discuss their work in groups and present it to the class.
- Students will complete a follow-on reflective or creative exercise.

Context

What is a Museum?

A museum is often described as being a keeper of collective memory. It is typically a not-for-profit institution that operates for the public benefit, and should be seen as a community asset. The museum holds collections of objects that connect the present to the past, and preserves local and global heritage for future generations. This heritage can also be 'intangible', in that it relates to more abstract things such as the memories, dreams, joys and struggles of the community. The museum is often committed to presenting history (whether that is local history, national history, or the history of a particular timeframe) to its visitors, and can sometimes place particular emphasis on addressing difficult social or cultural issues. More recently, museums have shifted focus to think of themselves as visitor-centred rather than object or collections-centred. This means that modern museums are primarily now interested in positioning themselves as places that people can come to learn and enjoy themselves in a positive all-round experience, rather than just as spaces where objects are preserved and safeguarded for the future.

Museums have traditionally been seen as 'neutral' spaces which can provide objective, balanced and authoritative accounts of history and subjects presented in their displays. But this is not the case (nor should it be necessarily). Museums are not neutral, they were founded and are staffed by people who have their own interests, beliefs, priorities and curiosities, and the collections and displays will reflect that. Museums should be upfront about their positionality, and open to dialogue about their collections and interpretation. There is also a new drive to involve visitors and communities in museum interpretation in a more active way. Community knowledge and opinions are valuable to museums, and it's important that visitors play an active role in discovering the museum collections and the history on display for themselves.

What is Museum 'Interpretation'?

Museums tell a story through the objects they have on display. But visitors need additional information to make sense of those objects, so museums will usually provide context and background to visitors by means of what is called 'interpretation'. This can take the form of wall panels, object labels, interactables, audio-visual tools, orientation devices, and much more. This interpretation provides the museum with the chance to tell the story they want to through their objects, and to explain more in detail what individual objects are, what their significance is, and how they fit in with the bigger picture of the museum narrative.

Traditionally, object labels will provide a written description for the object – how old it is, what it is made of, where it is from, how big it is, and what it was used for. There may also

be information about how it came into the museum collection (whether it was a gift, or a purchase, for example), and when that happened. It should also include the catalogue number of the object.

But an object label can and should do more than provide this basic information. It is the best opportunity that the museum has to engage the visitor with the object on display, to spark curiosity and excitement. So museum staff often try to be more creative with labels, in order to enhance the visitor experience of the object and tell a more exciting story about the object that the visitor can relate to.

Activity

P5-P7

You will be provided with ten object descriptions taken from the McLean Museum (Watt Institution) online catalogues. These are all objects that have links with Greenock's history of sugar refining and trading.

Students can be divided into groups of two or three. They should be given an object description, with the additional context provided, and asked to discuss in their groups what they think is interesting about the object, what they imagine it looks like, and think creatively about any information that is missing about their object.

Students should then be given the opportunity to design or draw the object that they have been discussing. Once they have finished, they should be given the image of the existing object. They should then discuss any differences between their design and the object in the collection. Perhaps theirs is a better design!

At the end of the class, each group can present their object description and design to the class. A follow-on or homework activity could be for the students to write a short reflective piece on their design, and how it differed from or was similar to the existing object.

S1-S3

You will be provided with ten images of objects and the descriptions provided in the McLean Museum (Watt Institution) online catalogues. These are all objects that have links with Greenock's history of sugar refining and trading.

Students should be divided into small groups of two or three. They should be given an object image and description, with additional historical and/or social context provided. In their groups, the students should write a label of between 50 and 150 words for their object as it goes on display in the Museum's new exhibit on sugar.

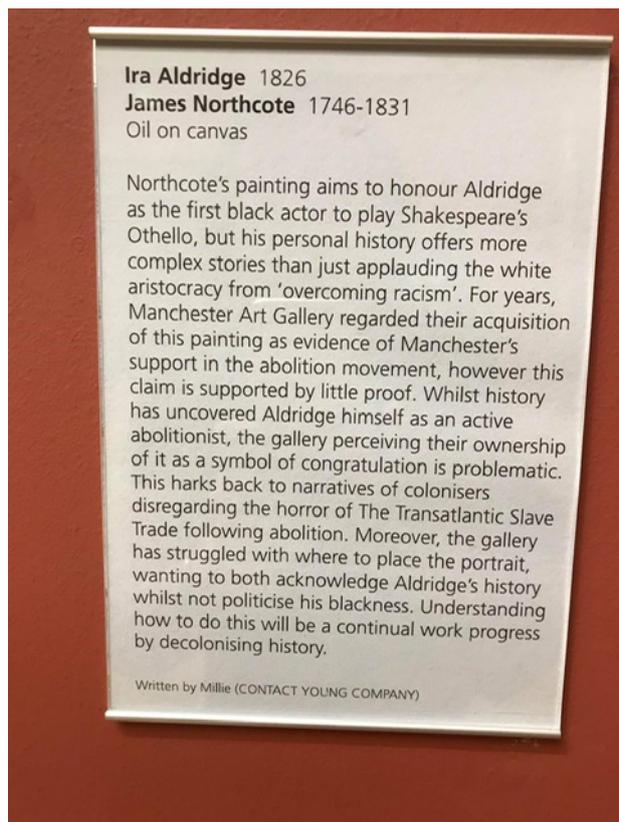
At the end of the class, each group can present their object image and the label they have written to the rest of the class. A follow-on or homework activity could be for the students to write a reflective piece on the experience of writing an object label. Or, they could write a

creative piece from the perspective of a historical figure who might have made, used or bought the object they have labelled.

How to write a good label – Some tips!

- Think who you are writing the label for – who is your target audience? Are they school children, retired people, families with young children, tourists?
- Think about what you want your visitor to learn about – how does this object fit in with others on display, and how does it fit into the bigger story you are telling?
- Use an accessible font (serif), and make sure your label is big enough for people to read (18 point is usually the minimum).
- Your label should be between 50 and 150 words long.
- Write as you would speak! Use short sentences. Use the active not the passive voice (“People ate sugar on bread” rather than “Sugar was eaten on bread by people”). Avoid unnecessary adverbs.
- Think about how to make the object ‘relatable’ to things your target audience will already know about. Are there contemporary references you can bring in?
- Sketch in the cultural or historical background of the object.
- You can include quotes – either from historical figures or community members with living memories of the object’s context – if you have access to them.
- Include questions as a way to invite the visitor in to reflect for themselves about what they think of the object and the story you’re telling.
- Admit uncertainty if there are details missing and make this part of the story. “We don’t know how this object came to be in Greenock” can be quite a revealing or an interesting thing to share with visitors, for example!

Example label to discuss:



(Manchester Art Gallery)

An example of recent change at the V&A Dundee:



Napkin, 1762, Probably Dunfermline or Edinburgh, Woven linen damask, V&A: T.112-1932

Original version:

Linen weaving became one of Scotland's main industries following the Acts of Union of 1707. It was promoted by the government to complement, rather than compete with, England's woollen industry. Although much of Scotland's production was of coarse linen, Edinburgh, and later Dunfermline, became two major centres for the weaving of fine linen damask goods. These included napkins and tablecloths, and often featured geometric, floral or figurative designs.

New version:

Linen weaving became one of Scotland's main industries following the Acts of Union of 1707. It was promoted by the government to complement, rather than compete with, England's woollen industry. Scotland mostly produced coarse linen, which was sold in huge quantities to American plantations for clothing enslaved people. Edinburgh and Dunfermline later became centres for fine linen damask goods including napkins and tablecloths with geometric, floral or figurative designs.

Additional Resources

Gallery Text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide:

https://www.vam.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/238077/Gallery-Text-at-the-V-and-A-Ten-Point-Guide-Aug-2013.pdf

J. Paul Getty Museum Complete Guide to Adult Audience Interpretative Materials:

https://www.getty.edu/education/museum_educators/downloads/aaim_compleateguide.pdf

Museums Association Canada: How to Write Effective Labels:

<http://museumsassn.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/BCMA-Exhibit-Dev-Effective-Labels-100.pdf>

Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine (eds.), *Museum Basics: The International Handbook*, London: Routledge, 2018.

If you have any questions and/or feedback, please feel free to contact me on:
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Emma Bond, November 2020