Teaching Visual Storytelling: Genre and Storyboards

by Paul Stavast, Allison Inkley, and Heather White

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Creating quality exhibition experiences for visitors is a challenge even for seasoned professionals. To teach and learn the art and science of exhibition design and development is quite an endeavor for both instructor and student. Instructors must distill decades of visitor studies research, design techniques, collection preservation standards, label writing skills, and other competencies into one or more courses that result in well-trained exhibition professionals. Students are challenged to learn the nuanced elements of a new medium and to utilize those elements to communicate complex messages with visitors, all in the condensed time frame of school.

We present, in the form of a student/instructor debriefing, a two-pronged approach for teaching exhibition development: 1) connect students' existing knowledge of the communicative structures and strengths of literary genres with the exhibition medium; 2) teach students to communicate visually by illustrating exhibitions through storyboards that portray the visitor's experience. The result is students who better visualize the visitor experience during exhibition development and therefore are able to craft stronger dialogues between textual elements, objects, physical spaces, and the visitor. (Compare the first two images in this article for pre-visualization and post-installation visitor perspective.) Although we emphasize their use as development tools in this article, genre and storyboard serve equally as well in post-installation analysis. In practice, we find ourselves frequently shifting in discussions from development to analysis and back.

This approach has evolved over several years as we have experimented with how to teach exhibition development and design, particularly how to translate the complexities of exhibitions as a medium into something students can digest in a semester-long introductory course. We focus on helping students grasp the conceptualization side of exhibition development, leaving production details for later courses or internships. We have sought to fill a perceived niche between coming up with the "big idea" and the minutiae of light levels, case hardware, and project management. Although there is extensive literature on exhibition development and design, few texts discuss processes to visually develop exhibitions in their entirety. We have found that students first need to understand the purpose and larger conceptual ideas visually before they can be expected to develop a physical exhibition.

Begin with the Known

Instructor: Because exhibitions are so complex, students struggle to jump straight into development without something familiar to relate to. Most have never communicated complex messages visually, and virtually none has done so in three dimensions. Just as visitors first make meaning through experiences with which they are already familiar, students need similar familiar experiences. (Serrell, Sikora & Adams, 2013). We strive to build a bridge between students' prior experiences visiting museums and their other creative undertakings.

Student: Having visited many museums, we are familiar with their visual nature as well as certain components and visual cues of exhibitions of varying sizes and
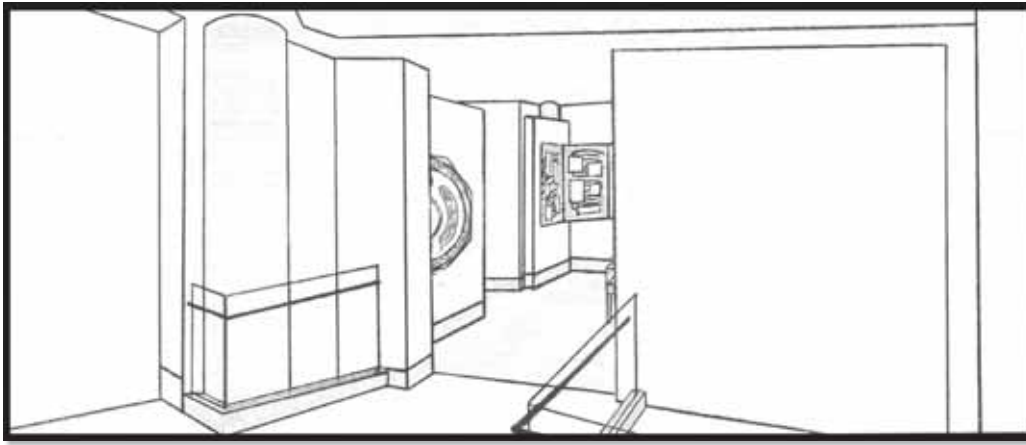
Storyboard frame drawn during concept development for an exhibition in a second floor gallery. The drawing was intended to show the visitors' approach to the entrance from the stairs. Artist: Leslie Evens. Courtesy Museum of Peoples and Cultures, Brigham Young University.

Note the similarities between the drawing above and this post-opening photograph taken from the imagined vantage point of the sketch. Courtesy Museum of Peoples and Cultures, Brigham Young University.

content. However, almost nothing in our educational background has prepared us to relate these observations to the development process. When beginning exhibition development, we lack the skills and knowledge to connect the complexity involved in conceptualizing and visualizing an entire exhibition with a clear purpose. Further, we lack the ability to then manifest this in three-dimensional space.

Connect Existing Knowledge with Literary Genres

Instructor: In looking for common ground, the length of training in story and literature in schools stands out as a singular strength of college students. Since elementary school, students are taught to read, write, and dissect literature. As students learn to project elements and structures from literary genres (e.g. allusion, alliteration, rhythm, length, voice) onto exhibitions, they also are able to project the associated tools and skills from the genre and begin to understand visual meaning making.

Student: Although literature and museum exhibitions seem at first to be significantly different, they become relatable as we discuss and think about elements of each. We begin questioning exhibitions
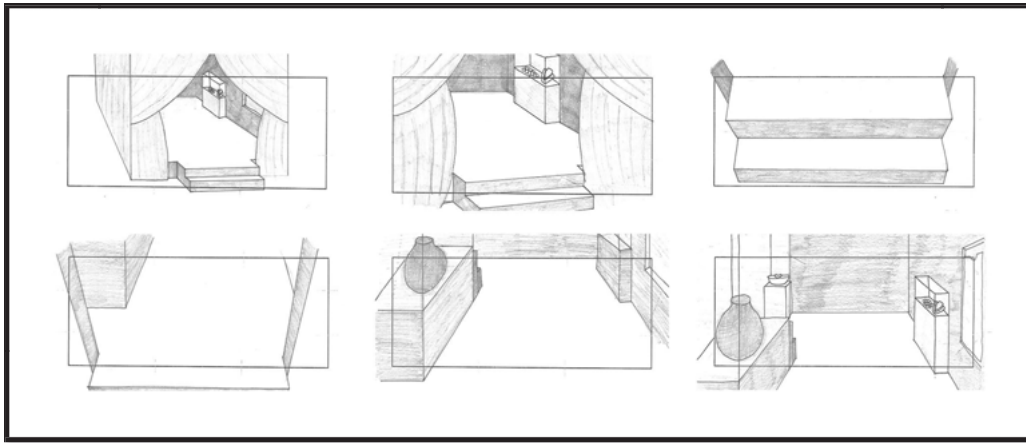
Even approaching a small set of stairs takes on importance as you consider where visitors must look to enter a room. Sequence showing non-traditional views; a visitor looking toward his feet as he approaches and goes up a short set of stairs. Artist: Allison Inkley. Courtesy Museum of Peoples and Cultures, Brigham Young University.

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using terms from our literary training. Can a portrait exhibition be narrative and detailed, with sub-stories and plot twists? Can a modern art display be information dense and not aesthetic, like a textbook? How can exhibitions of fluid collections at a natural history rhyme and have complex rhythmic patterns? We compare multi-artist shows with anthologies; historic houses with biographies; and mineral displays with poetry.

Next, we apply those similarities to conceptualizing a new exhibition's purpose. This helps us to contemplate how exhibition genres cross traditional museum categories (art, history, natural history, etc.) and to notice and appreciate the range of elements that make each exhibition genre unique. We must think creatively and expand our perception of what an exhibition consists of, pushing beyond the usual boundaries based on the museum type.

Instructor: As students begin to see that exhibitions have their own genre structure and content, the decision of which genre to use for an exhibition becomes more important. Faced with developing a historical exhibition about a school, we discussed how a narrative structure versus another genre would affect visitors. Numerous detailed personal stories and objects related to the importance of the school in the community were easily accessible and would fit the longer structure of a narrative. However, it was determined that recent events that changed the school's

primary mission were the focus of the exhibition. The school's history needed to be traced quickly and point to the recent events. A fractured, montage/timeline style would better demonstrate the school's development and mitigate the impact of any single historical event from overshadowing the recent events. We replaced detailed personal stories with short anecdotes allowing us to cover a broad historical range while still focusing on recent key events.

Visualize the Visitor Experience

Instructor: We prefer to use a narrative genre for teaching a storyboarding approach to exhibition development. Narratives work well for storyboarding because the storyline can be simple, freeing students to focus on visual aspects. Exhibitions are a visual-spatial medium, and students need to translate the elements and structures they are familiar with into visual space. As MacMahon found in her research on exhibit icons, "we know little about exhibit design's potential to visually convey concepts" (MacMahon, 2013). We can connect with visual storytelling in other media to help bridge this gap. Today's students are exposed to a near constant stream of visual stories through film, TV, and the Internet. Their literature courses also include discussion of film adaptations. They are primed with basic tools for building and understanding a visual story. These include character development, story progression, and literary devices, among others.
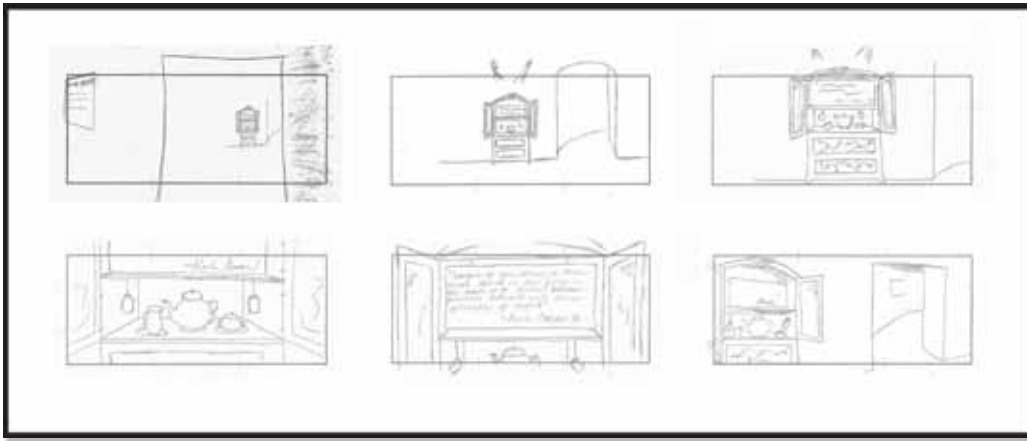
Sequence showing the progression of a visitor towards a case displaying a historic tea set. Using animatics allows us to understand better how a visitor's body moves and reacts. Artist: Heather White. Courtesy Museum of Peoples and Cultures, Brigham Young University.

After helping students relate museum exhibitions to a narrative genre, the next step is to focus on how to draft, edit, and preview visual stories. While conceptual drawings are not unfamiliar in exhibition development, we use storyboards, inspired by the animation industry, to portray what a visitor physically sees. Students visualize and draw the exhibition not from the perception of curators telling a story but from the vantage point of visitors in the gallery. They better understand what the visitor sees, while still having the opportunity to analyze the artistic techniques and design principles of their exhibition drawings.

Student: It is difficult to train our eyes to see through a specific viewing frame. We were assigned to hold a sheet of paper up to our nose and look through a 9.5 in. x 3.5 in. cutout frame (representing a 2.7:1 aspect ratio), drawing only what our eyes would actually see at a given moment. While disconcerting at first, the frame allowed us to see how shapes and angles change as we move through an exhibition space, ensuring drawings were from the visitor's actual perspective. The frame aided us in seeing the breadth of human vision. We spent a week using the cutouts and learning to translate the physical world we interact with into a visual experience. Our initial sketches were often drawn from a physically impossible higher vantage point, as if we were floating several feet off the floor. As we continued to practice drawing, we learned to draw at

eye level rather than "floating above" the room.

Instructor: Even if their view does not have objects or cases as the focal point, students are required to draw what they naturally see. This exercise coaches students in seeing and understanding how progression and changing views of everything in the exhibition space affects visitors. This results in students understanding that these dynamic features are of equal, if not greater, value than static front-on case views. Linking several of these drawings together allows students to visualize how focus areas shift as visitors move through the exhibition space. With only one intended focal point in each drawing frame, we are able to quickly deduce the focal point flow and whether it is what we originally intended. Even approaching a small set of stairs takes on importance as you consider where visitors must look to enter a room.

Student: Many of us are familiar with the basic concept of storyboards from watching movie and DVD bonus features. The purpose of storyboards in cinema is to clearly and succinctly lead a creative team through the experience they want to create for the viewer. Storyboards allow creators to visualize their product, see potential problems, and experiment with ideas up until the project is solidified in film. Because the storyboards are rough sketches with limited detail, edits for problems that arise are easily handled by

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The embodied experience of exhibitions is challenging to teach and learn.

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Bitgood, S. (2014). Exhibition design that provides high value and engages visitor attention. *Exhibitionist,* 33(1), 6-11.

Glebas, F. (2009). *Directing the story: Professional storytelling and storyboarding techniques for live action and animation.* Burlington, MA: Focal Press.

MacMahon, D. (2013). Entrance icons: Visual meaning-making in museum entrance galleries. *Exhibitionist,* 32(1), 36-40.

Serrell, B., Sikora, M., Adams, M. (2013). What do visitors mean by "meaning"?. *Exhibitionist,* 32(1), 8-15.

erasing a section or inserting a new sketch or series of sketches. The sketches allow for visual editing of exhibitions. With a few strokes of a pencil or rubs of an eraser, sight lines can be changed, objects moved to highlight them better, and pathways/physical barriers can be relocated. Even entire sequences can be removed or reordered to better fit the exhibition's intent.

Instructor: A deeper level of editing happens when multiple storyboard frames are linked into a short video clip called an animatic. We time the frames to be on screen for approximately as long as a visitor would view the scene. The timed images model the physical movement of visitors through exhibition space. Watching the video allows us to adjust holding power, pacing, and other features that are generally only examined post-installation.

Student: A museum visit is an embodied experience and using animatics allows us to understand better how a visitor's body moves and reacts. By showing the animatic to representatives of the target audience, we are able to test the amount of time a visitor stays engaged and experiment with how to continue to move the visitor through the storyline. With a few mouse clicks, we can move a single frame or an entire sequence to experiment with layout, order, and pacing.

Summary

The embodied experience of exhibitions is challenging to teach and learn. Some challenges can be approached by looking to other related fields and then adapting and utilizing their tools to create connections between students, instructors, and future visitors. Applying concepts from literary genres provides a familiar context for teachers and students to connect when conceiving exhibition themes, motifs, style, etc. Visualizing exhibition development through storyboards and animatics helps students translate ideas into physical drawings representing visitor experiences. For a recent exhibition containing a creation story of a native community, we reflected on how the progression of the literary story from just deities to the earth covered with people should be told visually. The story is neither long nor complex. Our first storyboards attempted to lengthen the story by filling the room with large graphics of important local mountains and lakes. After seeing the drawings, it became clear that the visual story was not in harmony with the story we were trying to tell, and we removed the visual fill; fewer words pack in more power. The final product conveys the short story genre visually in the now simplified room. In the third of three story panels, the people are created. Only after reading the text does a visitor notice the first photographs of the community. The visual and textual genre come together to communicate with the visitor.

Using this approach has led to more informed classroom discussions, resulting in improved understanding of how exhibition elements shape meaning making. As we continue to refine these tools, we anticipate additional avenues that connect the familiar and accessible media used by students with developing and designing exhibitions that better visualize visitor experiences. ✸