

Memory and Identity on Display in a “Family Museum”: A Video Poster

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The things we save of our everyday lives are not always considered “museum pieces,” but these items often find their ways into meaningful displays throughout the home. These objects become expressions of identity and memory. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934), comments on the role of expressive objects as the tangible things of the world which represent meaning and experience. These objects are not simply mementoes or souvenirs of things past, but rather, emotional conduits that integrate and unify the sense of self; things from the past “become co-efficients in new adventures and put on a raiment of fresh meaning” (Dewey, 1934, p. 60). We are surrounded by these objects in all aspects of our lives, but it is not until they are assembled, or collected, in one place that the value and significance of these objects becomes clear.

Vernacular museums, those which are set in “non-museum spaces,” are places that demonstrate a “connectedness between consumption, history, individuality, and place... [and which] allow people to discuss heritage without breaking from daily activities” (Gordon, 2012, p. 76). These settings provide an opportunity for exploration of stories of the past. A particular form of vernacular museum, what is best described as a “family museum,” represents a unique perspective on the meaning of objects as they interconnect with family and community history. The interdisciplinary approach to this study of material culture, experience, and family history encompasses a humanities research approach--posing questions about common assumptions, uncovering new meanings in the artifacts of human life, and finding new ways to understand cultural interactions. For this study in particular, the objects on display in the family museum and the way that they are displayed become a locus for the study of human experience.

The poster presentation uses digital storytelling techniques to examine “The Loft,” a part of the Pierce Homestead in Mount Desert, ME, a family museum representing the collective material history of five generations of an American family. Digital storytelling is an emergent practice that incorporates traditional narratives with digital imagery, text, audio and video. Burgess (2006) suggests that the strategies of digital storytelling are fundamentally community oriented and represent “a field of cultural practice: a dynamic site of relations between textual arrangements and symbolic conventions, technologies for production and conventions for their use; and collaborative social interaction that takes place in local and specific contexts” (p.7). The opportunity to study and document vernacular museums like The Loft provides an important avenue for better understanding the personal connections that museums can build between visitors and objects, as well as ways memory, identity and sense of family. Each of these artifacts in The Loft is a possession of the family as a whole, and “take their value from their association to events that are constitutive of the person or of the family history” (Marcoux, 2001, p. 72). Members of the family can point to and interpret their life events of the time, and connect this to the history and continuity of the family and community context, all through their relationship to the artifacts in The Loft.

References

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