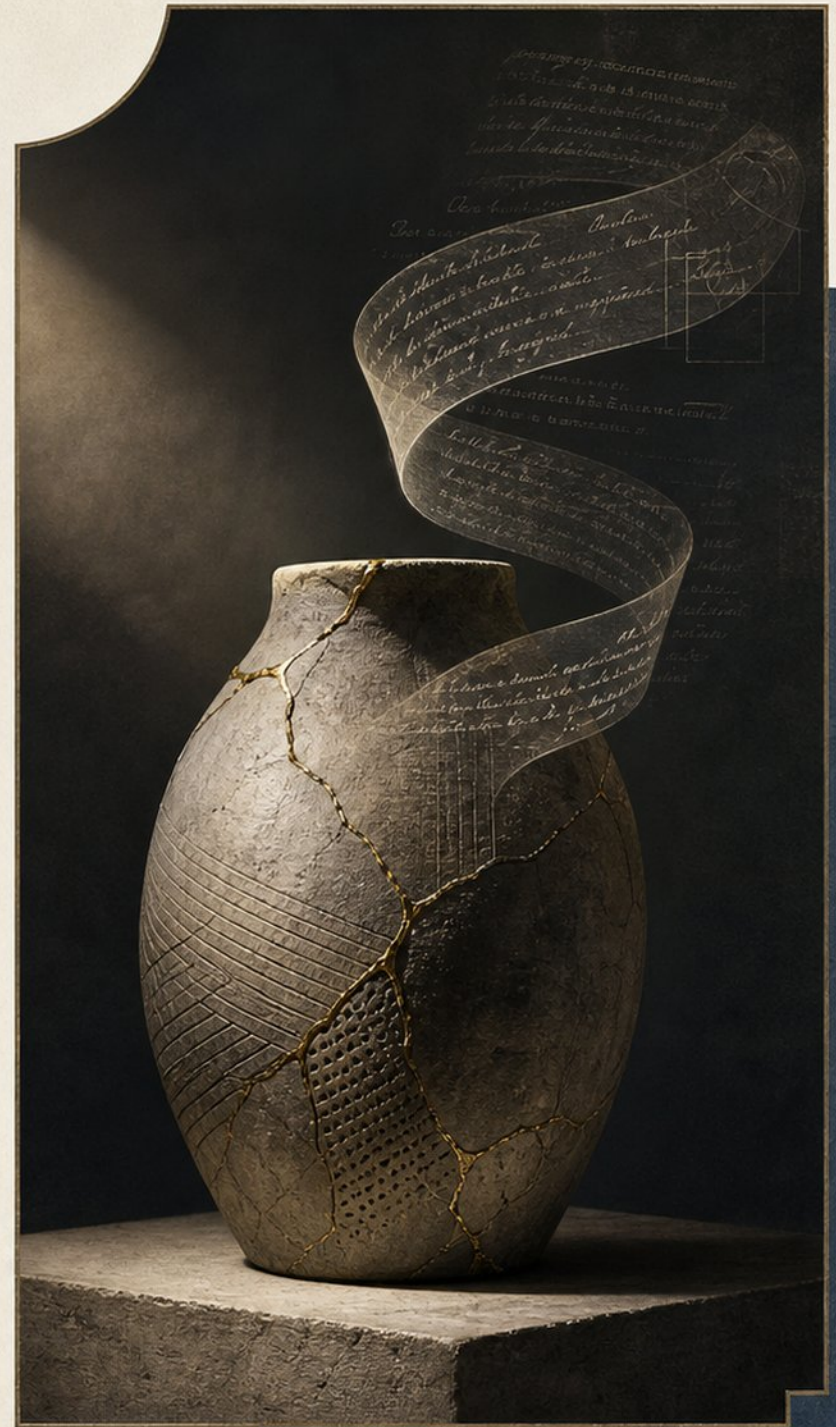


Introduction to How Museums Tell Stories with Objects

- How physical objects become carriers of public historical narratives
- Three storytelling layers: the object, the label, and the setting
- Journey from single artifact interpretation to complete exhibition
- Narratives shape public understanding, as seen at the British Museum and Smithsonian



Foundations: From Curiosity Cabinets to Narrative Exhibitions



- Early museums displayed objects without narrative context, like curiosity cabinets



- Modern museums are curated environments, choosing what to show, emphasize, or omit



- An interpretive plan, or 'Big Idea,' forms the backbone of meaningful exhibition storytelling



- Exhibitions now move from object-centric displays to thematic, narrative-driven experiences



The Object as Primary Source and Evidence

- Objects as material witnesses: material, craftsmanship, use-wear, and provenance
- Object-based inquiry: 'reading' an object through the Jules Prown methodology
- Physical details reveal stories that written texts often miss
- Curators bridge the gap between original function and museum meaning
- Selection transforms an artifact into evidence for a historical argument

FIELD GUIDE: OBJECT EXAMINATION



Case in Practice: Reinterpreting a Single Object

- Trace a single object's journey across exhibitions and shifting meanings
- Provenance research uncovers hidden narratives and contested histories
- Looted objects transform museum responsibility and ethical duty
- Case studies: Cannon of Kandy, Benin Bronzes, and repatriation debates



The Power and Limits of the Museum Label



- Labels as the primary curatorial voice: naming, dating, and interpreting objects



- Word choice and omissions shape visitor understanding and reinforce narratives



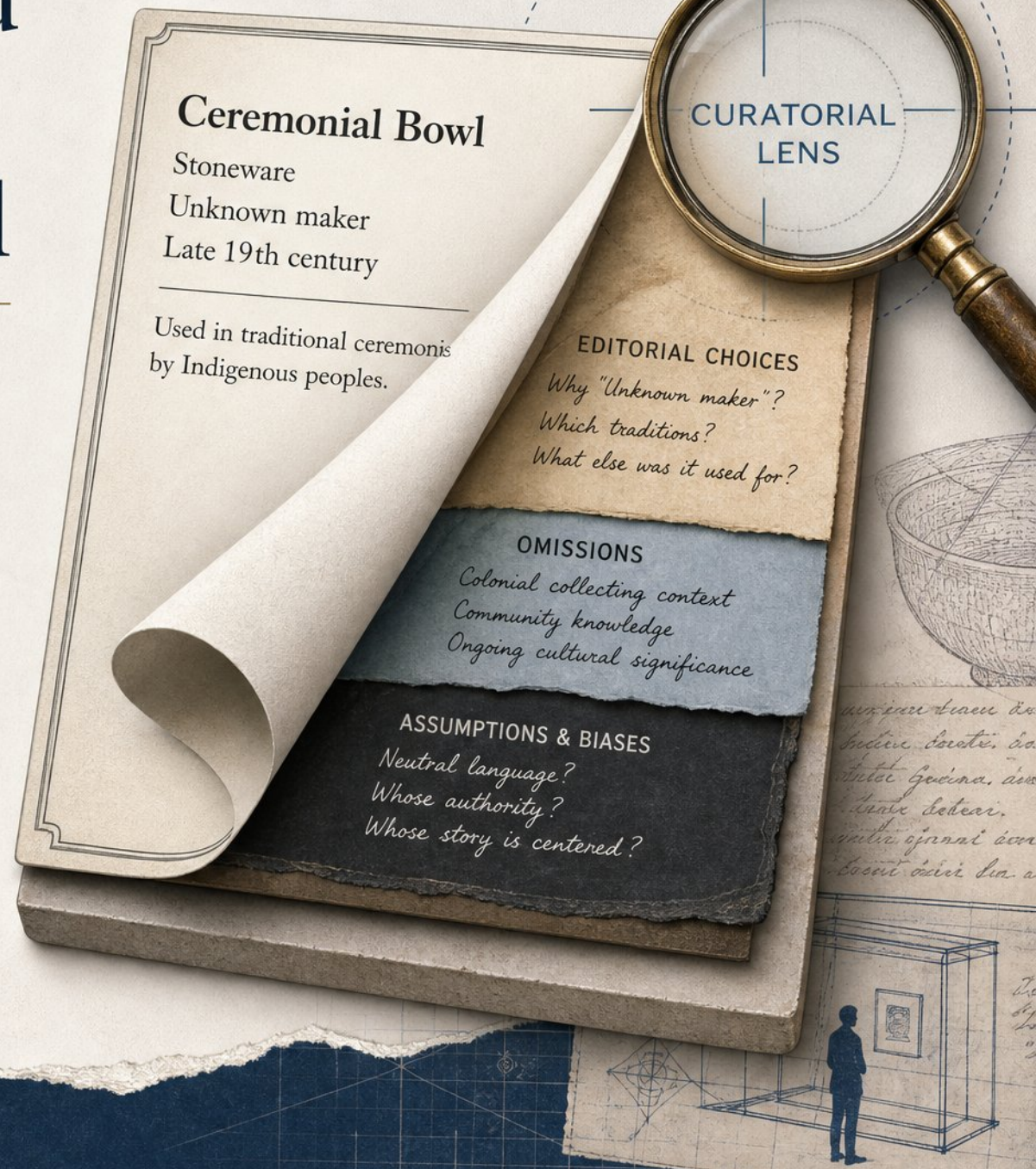
- Shift from authoritative single-voice to multi-perspective, conversational labels



- Inclusive practices: collaborative writing, belonging-focused frameworks, and questioning bias



- Labels as invitations for dialogue, not monologue or cultural stop signs



Rethinking Labels:

Inclusion, Authority, and Voice

AUTHORITATIVE LABEL



Bowl

China

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)
Porcelain with underglaze blue

Chinese export; made for
foreign markets.

*Gift of an anonymous donor.
Accessioned prior to 1950.*

CONVERSATIONAL LABEL



Bowl

Made in China during the
Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)
Porcelain with underglaze blue

This bowl traveled across oceans
and time. What stories might it
hold? How might we learn more
together?

*Part of the museum's collection.
Let us know what you think.*



- Analyze real label pairs to uncover hidden bias and jargon



- Debate including vs. omitting nationality to avoid stereotypes



- Shift from authoritative monologue to inviting dialogue



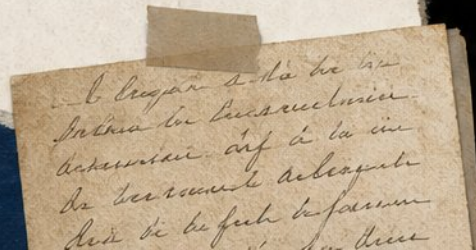
- Use collaborative review to foster belonging and plural voices



- Ask: Who speaks? What is unsaid? Whose perspective is missing?

Choosing What to Show: The Art of Selection and Omission

- Collections are shaped by historical practices, power dynamics, and chance
- What remains in storage is also a key part of the museum's narrative
- Curatorial selection is an act of power: inclusion and exclusion define history
- The Benin Bronzes controversy: looted objects, ethical debates, and repatriation



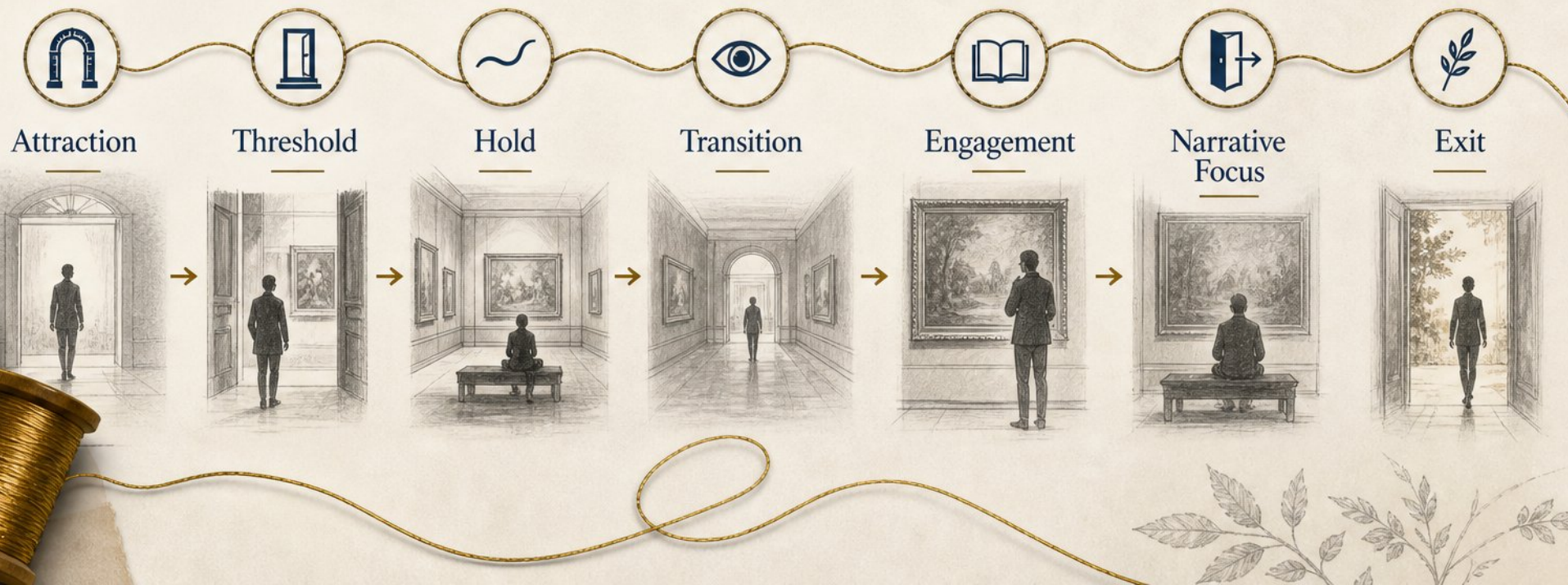
Context Creates Meaning: *Spatial and Sensory Design*

- Lighting, color, and enclosure direct visitor attention, emotion, and movement
- Juxtaposition places objects in dialogue, tension, or parallel to tell complex stories
- Immersive period rooms and theatrical design transform perceived object value
- Spatial sequencing maps visitor psychology: Threshold, Transition, Focus, Closure



Exhibition Design as Visitor Psychology

- Space maps to attention: Attraction→Threshold, Hold→Transition, Engagement→Narrative Focus, Exit→Closure
- Enclosure and scale shape dwell time; light-and-shadow guides emotional tone
- Rijksmuseum's 'At Home' uses diorama rooms and daylight cycles for intimate, structured journeys



Whose Story Is It?

Shifting Authority and Co-Curation

- Museums shifting from sole authority to shared, community-led narratives
- Penn Museum collaborated with eight Indigenous consulting curators on every detail
- Source communities now decide what is displayed, including what stays private
- Manchester Museum co-created exhibition with Warnindilyakwa people after repatriation
- Empty display cases honor Indigenous sovereignty over cultural heritage



Repatriation and Renewal: Storytelling Beyond the Object's Return

- Repatriation begins a new story chapter, not an ending
- Tsilhqot'in Nation co-created 'Nexwenen Nataghel?ilh' at MOV, 2025
- Manchester Museum co-curated with Warnindilyakwa people after return
- Partnership rebuilds trust, corrects wrongs, creates living legacies
- Communities lead voice, design, and conditions for public display

OUR STORIES, OUR FUTURE

These belongings carry our histories, laws, and relationships. Their return is not the end of the story—it is the beginning of a shared journey forward.



Digital Objects, Digital Narratives: New Frontiers

- - Digital surrogates risk losing materiality and original context during storytelling
- AI frameworks like Kyber and VaseMuseum assist with curatorial narrative generation
- RAG architectures combine knowledge graphs with LLMs to produce verified, multi-modal stories
- AI risks include hallucination and decontextualized narratives without source verification
- Curator-approved "Digital Master" archives ensure AI references verified source and context



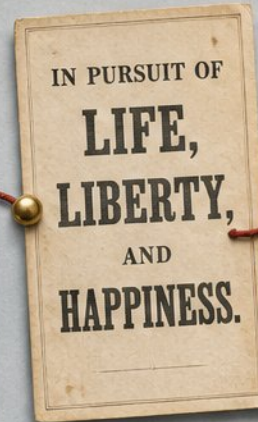
Synthesizing the Narrative: *From Object to Thematic Exhibition*

- Begin with a single 'Big Idea' to drive all selection
- Select objects to support, not just illustrate, the thesis
- Labels, space, and design must reinforce one coherent argument
- Use 'In Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness' as a thesis-driven model
- Every element is a choice: inclusion, omission, and placement tell the story

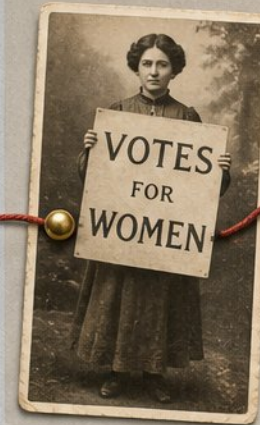
A SINGLE THREAD,
ONE COHERENT ARGUMENT



Founding
Idea



Articulating
the Ideal



Striving for
the Promise



Continuing
the Pursuit



Transfer and Application: A Framework for Critical Museum Viewing



- Why this object? Why not another?



- Who speaks in the label? Who is absent?



- What perspectives or communities are missing?



- How do space, light, and design shape your feelings?



- Apply the framework to one exhibition you select.



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