

The Representation of Cultural Heritage through Effective Modes of Presentation and Interpretation

Video Transcript

Hello, my name is Marjorie Hunt, and I'm a folklorist, curator, and education specialist with the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to take part in the digital lecture series on presenting the cultural heritage of diverse communities, given by curators at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

The topic of my lecture is the representation of cultural heritage through effective modes of presentation and interpretation. I will be speaking for the most part about my experiences as a curator at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which, with the exception of these past two pandemic years, has taken place every summer since 1967 outside on the National Mall of the United States in the capital city of Washington, D.C.

But I want to underscore that much of what I will be sharing with you today is transferable to public presentations of cultural heritage and a wide variety of formats and context, whether it's inside a museum, a cultural center or community hall, or outside on the streets of a village, or in a town square.

Each program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is unique in terms of its conceptualization, themes, participants, and goals. Each has its own particular set of challenges and constraints. Yet all of the programs share a common overarching goal to provide a platform that enables tradition bearers from diverse communities to speak in their own voices, to present themselves and tell their own stories, to share their cultural traditions skills and values with others.

The great strength of the Festival, what sets it apart from other mediums of communication, such as exhibitions, film, radio, and publications, is the opportunity it offers for face-to-face interaction and exchange, for cultural conversations between traditional practitioners and the public, exchanges that help to bridge cultural differences and foster greater understanding, appreciation, and respect. The same holds true, really, for any type of public-facing program that features cultural practitioners openly sharing what they know and value with an audience.

During my thirty-five years with the Festival, and a myriad of other public programs, I've compiled a continually growing and ever-changing toolkit, a curatorial practice. One of the most important principles that informs my work is the fact that there is a direct relationship between

modes of presentation and interpretation at the Festival and the effect of representation of cultural heritage. How cultural barriers are presented in a program has everything to do with their ability to engage and interact meaningfully with the public and with one another.

No matter how compelling the themes in the message, no matter how virtuosic, eloquent, and dedicated the tradition bears—if modes of presentation and interpretation are not appropriate or effective, impact of the Festival for both the participants and the public is diminished. In other words, the *who*, *what*, and *why* of any given program are all served by the *how*.

As a curator, I believe that one of my most important responsibilities is to give careful thought and attention to what I call the “poetics of presentation,” to the collaborative construction of cultural representations that enable people to share their expressive traditions in a way that conveys meaning and increases public understanding and respect. The bedrock upon which all of this rests is strong field research, documentation, and sustained community engagement. Both of these go hand in hand.

Curating a Festival program is a deeply collaborative process, informed by reciprocal respect and an ethos of mutuality. A curator works together closely with a wide range of people, including community members, fieldworkers, advisors, presenters, designers, editors, technical staff, collaborating partners, administrators, and many others.

As the Center’s director Richard Kurin has emphasized, cultural representations at the Festival are negotiated and emergent. He speaks of the curator’s role as that of a cultural broker, a role that in his words involves active, respectful engagement with communities, so that a particular cultural representation can be presented to an audience in a new setting in an honest way that accurately conveys its meaning.

My lecture looks at how we can accomplish this goal, explores various strategies and modes of presentation and interpretation, and considers some of the ways in which the Festival programs explore various strategies and modes of presentation and interpretation, and considers some of the ways in which Festival programs can best serve the needs and interest of both the participants and the audience.

So first I’d like to turn to program research and planning, especially fieldwork. In my view, the most successful presentations of cultural heritage at the Festival are those that are based on strong research and planning on the front end, especially fieldwork with tradition bearers in their communities. Fieldwork for the Festival provides critically important background information on cultural traditions, communities, and individual practitioners.

It seeks to comprehend the richness and complexity of cultural traditions, so that they can be presented validly and meaningfully in the context of the Festival. Very importantly, it is through careful fieldwork, if it is undertaken with sensitivity and respect, that we are able, ideally, to establish a close collaborative working relationship with community members.

Fieldworkers identify and document potential participants. They conduct audio or video recorded interviews and take photographs of cultural context. They make recommendations for possible presentations, demonstrations, and performances at the Festival, suggest ideas for discussion session topics, outline the steps of a craft process, and provide information about necessary supplies and materials needed for artists and demonstrations. They identify possible items for display and provide key contextual content, both written and visual, for signs, banners, program book articles, web-based media, and other interpretive materials.

One example I can give you from my own experience is the fieldwork I conducted for the 2001 *Masters of the Building Arts* program with Nick Benson, a third-generation stone carver and letterer at the John Stevens Shop, a 300-year-old continuously operating stone carving shop in Newport, Rhode Island. Our colleague in Rhode Island had told me about Nick Benson, that he was a superb craftsman and would be a great potential participant for the building arts program.

So I called Nick and made arrangements to visit him and his shop in Newport and went up to see him with my audio recorder, my camera, and field notebook. I was able to speak with Nick to ask him questions about how he learned his craft and to take me through the process, to tell me about the different tools and techniques that he used. I was able to photograph him at work and observe his techniques. I was able to photograph his amazing workshop, which is just so beautiful and has many, many layers of meaning, as it's been in the family for generations and, as I said, goes back 300 years as a stone carving shop.

And very importantly, I was able to tell from meeting and talking with Nick that he would make a great participant for the Festival, for he was not only highly skilled, really a superb craftsman, but he loved talking about his work and was very comfortable sharing his skills and knowledge, and I could tell that this would be something that he would be happy to do in the context of the Festival, to an audience of thousands of people over the course of ten days.

Field research for the Festival and other public programs differs even from research conducted for an academic publication or scholarly presentation, in that it is primarily directed towards identifying and presenting people who can perform, demonstrate, and explain their culture and

folklore to a public audience. The knowledge and understandings of individual practitioners, cultural traditions, and community priorities that good fieldwork provides, informs the curator's vision and goals for a particular program and helps the curatorial team to revise and fine-tune a program's themes and conceptual framework, as well as determine successful strategies for presentation and interpretation.

For example, for the *Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage* program, which I co-curated for the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, our field researcher advisor for the Hawaiian language case study, Aaron Salā, strongly recommended, after interviewing members of the Native Hawaiian community, that we organize the Hawaiian presentation around family groups and include children as official participants, so that we could highlight the important ways in which Hawaiian language revitalization efforts were taking place, intergenerational in the home and community, as well as in the schools with language immersion programs.

His recommendations influenced our decisions about programming and the craft demonstration areas, sessions on the discussion stage, in the family activity area, and performances on the music stage. And, primarily, this had to do with budget implications. Children do come to the Festival, but most often it's as guests brought by their parents who are official participants. For official participants, we pay for their travel, we pay for hotel, we pay for their meals. And people who are guests status, it's the participant who's actually paying those costs.

So when making children official participants, that meant that we were also incurring these extra cost of paying for their travel, their hotel, and their food. So I think we had budgeted for about fifteen Hawaiian participants to take part in the program. We had to recalibrate, and instead of bringing this broader range of adult participants, as we had originally envisioned, we brought fewer adult participants and filled it out with the children. But it made for a very rich program because we were able to show this beautiful intergenerational learning that was going on in the context of family and in community, and ended up being extremely successful.

Fieldwork for the *Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage* program also revealed that the majority of music traditions from the diverse cultural communities around the world that we were considering for the program involves small groups and fairly quiet dance, song, and music traditions. Thus we decided that the main performance stage should be a smaller, more intimate, low-to-the-ground stage that would allow the performers to feel more comfortable and be able to connect more effectively with audience members, rather than go with a large, high stage which we had originally conceived. We also included a lovely small venue in the

program called the Song and Story Circle where participants could conduct workshops and present small-scale performances on the ground, up close to the audience.

For the 2006 *Carriers of Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions* program, the extensive research and fieldwork that my co-curators Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha MacDowell conducted with Native American basket makers across the United States underscore the close relationship that Native basket makers have to the land, their intimate knowledge of local habitats and ecological systems, and the central role of harvesting, gathering, and preparing local, natural materials in the basket making process. Native basket makers or ethnobotanists. We took this into consideration in our presentations at the Festival, prominently featuring natural materials such as a wide variety of grasses, roots, and other plants and displaying large photo murals of regional environments and harvesting activities.

Festival research and fieldwork leads to the selection of participants, which is of central importance to every Festival program. Decisions are based on a thorough program review and involve a broad range of factors and criteria. Chief among them, in my view, is the ability of participants to effectively address the major themes and messages, the storyline of the program, coupled with their desire to share their knowledge, experiences, and traditions with a large audience in a public setting.

An equally important consideration is the potential impact of the Festival, on the participants and their communities, in terms of the cultural work that they're striving to accomplish. It is important to listen to culture bearers and get their input on how we can help to encourage and support community members in their cultural sustainability efforts.

A good example is the Wabanaki Indian basket makers presentation. That was part of the *Native Basket Traditions* program in 2006. Four distinct Native American tribes, the Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot are known collectively as the Wabanaki, the People of the Dawn. They live primarily in the state of Maine. My co-curators Kurt Dewhurst, Marcia McDowell, and I have been working together closely with master Penobscot basket maker and founding director of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, Theresa Secord, who is serving as a community advisor to the project. It was determined that there was funding to invite four participants to represent Wabanaki Indian basket making traditions.

Theresa recommended that instead of selecting four accomplished basket makers, we invite three young, novice basket makers, along with one master artist, believing that this would have the greatest impact back home, fostering the young people's pride in their cultural heritage and their interest and involvement in their Native basket making tradition. As it turned out, the

recognition they received during the Festival had a tremendous effect on the lives of these three young basket makers, bolstering a strong sense of identity and self-worth and encouraging them to continue practicing and perfecting their basket making skills. Today they are among the most talented basket makers in their community, featured in museum exhibitions and winning major jury prizes for their artistic work. Their example has stimulated interest in other young Tribal members and helped to sustain a once endangered cultural tradition.

Successful presentation of cultural bearers and their expressive traditions at the Festival involves a complex interplay of many factors. These include the overall site design, appropriate performance and demonstration venues for the selected participants, visual presentation and display, the physical setup of craft demonstration areas, participatory hands-on activities, the use of interpretive materials such as signs, photo murals, banners, and props, having the necessary supplies, tools and raw materials on hand for skilled demonstrations, the role of presenters, and much more.

Building on the field research and our engagement with communities, a critical undertaking for me, as a curator, is to follow up and engage in ongoing dialogue with the tradition bearers who've been selected to take part in the event. My goal in this effort is to learn what it is they want to convey about their culture and their traditions and to work together to devise modes of presentation that will allow them to tell their own stories and represent themselves in their communities in the best possible way in the context of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Many cultural bearers have never experienced the Festival. They do not have a frame of reference or know what to expect and how to prepare. Program curators and coordinators can impart important firsthand information about what the Festival is like, describing, explaining the nature of the event, what participants can expect to encounter in terms of the audience, and the different types of venues, interactions, and presentations, as well as exchanging ideas about the supplies, materials, and physical setup needed for each of the skill demonstrations. And of course, we impart what we know about certain restrictions and regulations that are required on National Park Service land which is where the Festival takes place.

I can give you the example of Hispanic adobe craftsman Albert Parra from northern New Mexico. He took part in the *Masters of the Building Arts* program. Before he arrived at the Festival, discussing what it was that he would like to demonstrate, he said that he would like to build a small adobe dwelling as part of the program, and went on to say that he would need to dig a foundation for the house. And I was able to say, "Well, wait, wait a minute. We are not allowed to dig on National Park Service land."

And so together and working also with our technical director, we were able to come up with a solution for that and devise a way that Albert was able to demonstrate building a small dwelling with adobe bricks on the National Mall, without having to dig. And it took some time to figure out, but we came up with a good solution and were able to go on from there. Albert revised his methods of beginning the building, and, over the course of ten days, he was able to work on building a traditional Adobe dwelling as part of the program.

Some participants may be thinking about the Festival in terms of other modes of presentation that are familiar to them. For example, a number of the participants in the *Masters of the Building Arts* program are accustomed to the trade-show model, with its booths, videos, screenings, and glossy handouts. We were able to advise them that computer videos in the craft demonstration areas and formal lectures and PowerPoints on the discussion stage do not come across very well in the Festival setting. But instead, interactive skill demonstrations, hands-on participatory activities, and informal conversations with visitors are the most effective ways to connect with the public and share their skills and knowledge.

From the very outset, we encourage all of the culture bearers who will be taking part in the Festival to come prepared to speak for themselves and to interact freely with the public. We also encourage them to meet and interact with fellow participants, both within the program and across the entire Festival. We work to facilitate multiple opportunities for these interactions to take place.

Many times, the participants themselves have the best ideas for successful presentations. Based on his previous experience demonstrating at the New Orleans Jazz Festival, master ornamental plaster Earl Barthé suggested that we build a wall so that he and other members of his family can involve Festival visitors, both young and old, in running a decorative plaster mold, as well as show the considerable skill required to perfectly plaster a smooth, flat surface. Stonemason Joe Alonzo suggested having a chain hoist and several pieces of heavy stone in their demonstration tent, so that he could enlist the help of visitors and show them how masons carefully lift, position, and set—with trowels, mallets, levels, and plumb bobs—the massive limestone blocks used to construct the Washington National Cathedral, a fourteenth-century Gothic-style cathedral being built in Washington, D.C. Brick masons came up with a popular interactive activity in which kids could help lay a course of bricks to build a wall using a special non-setting mortar that would allow the brick wall to be disassembled every evening so the activity could be repeated again the next day.

In addition to follow-up conversations with participants and fieldworkers to discuss the nature of the Festival and ideas for presentation, it's important for the curatorial team to work together closely with the Festival design team and technical staff as early as possible in the process, ideally starting in the conceptual phase. The Festival is a living exhibition, and brainstorming with the designers and fabricators of the exhibition yields valuable ideas for design and structural elements that help convey the main messages of the program to the public, and that serve the demonstration, performance, and communication needs of the participants.

My curatorial goal for the *Masters of the Building Arts* program, and all of the artisan-based programs that I've worked on, has been to create forums at the Festival that will give visitors a chance to meet people face to face and gain an appreciation and understanding not only of the remarkable skills, but their values aspirations and ideals. Working together with artisans, I tried to collaboratively construct presentation contexts that provide multiple ways for the public to understand diverse traditional crafts from the perspective of the artisans themselves.

What is it that they know and value? How do they perceive themselves and their art? What are the underlying cultural and aesthetic attitudes that shape and give meaning to their work? What are the challenges they face today as they strive to preserve and revitalize craft traditions? How are craft skills and standards of excellence being taught and passed on to a new generation of artisans?

One of the main challenges that one has to take into account with public craft demonstrations is the fact that mastery belies skill. Whether carving stone, forging metal, or forming clay, a master artisan makes the craft process look easy. How can visitors to the Festival come away with a better understanding of the extensive knowledge and skill that master artisans bring to the practice of their craft?

One important presentational strategy is the use of interpretive signage for each of the craft traditions featured in the program. A compelling photograph and a short block of text on the sign can provide just enough information about the craftspeople and his or her tradition to prompt questions from Festival visitors and provide points of entry that help encourage conversations with participants and take discussions to a deeper level of understanding. I also like to use first-person quotes from the participants on the signs that foreground the range of themes and attitudes about work, and connect the public with the voices of the craftspeople themselves.

One example from the building arts program is a sign that was outside the timber framer's demonstration area. Timber framing is a craft that had died out in the United States in the early 1900s. In the 1970s, when an interested group of young craftspeople wanted to learn and revive the centuries old craft, they discovered that there were no skilled practitioners left to teach them. There were only the old timber-frame buildings left standing on the landscape. I used quotes from the timber framers on the interpretive signage to telegraph this information. One sign had the quote, "All the old teachers were gone. The lessons came from old buildings." Another sign said, "Our teachers are the buildings themselves. We love to get into an old house, take it apart, and discover how it was made."

Design and physical layout of the craft and illustrations are key to successful presentations of cultural heritage at the Festival. The size and interior configuration of a tent or other type of demonstration space needs to allow the public easy access to the participants. It must be carefully tailored to meet the particular needs of the artisans and the nature of their craft process.

I also think it's critical to pay attention to and arrange for what I call "visual magnets," story vessels or touch stone items, such as a wide array of tools, various raw materials, finished works of art, and pieces that show different stages in the technical process. Such elements help draw visitors to the craft demonstrations and spark questions, facilitate interactions, and encourage cultural conversations.

Photo murals are another effective way to contextualize cultural representations at the Festival. I already mentioned the use of large photo murals for the Native American basketry program. In the case of decorative painters John Canning and his daughter, Jackie Canning-Riccio, in the building arts program, our goal was to connect these artisans to the buildings they helped to preserve through their artistry. Since they could demonstrate their painting techniques at the Festival, but the buildings themselves could not be physically present on the National Mall, we displayed large photo murals of the Canning's historic preservation work on such national treasures as Grand Central Terminal and Radio City Music Hall in New York City and the National Building Museum and the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington D.C., were numerous examples of the effective use of large photo murals to help contextualize presentations. Over the course of the many years of the Festival, one of my favorites is from the Basque program in 2016. As you walked through the program, you came upon a net maker who is mending her fishing nets in front of a giant photo backdrop of a coastal scene from her home community.

Another presentation strategy is to have as many hands-on participatory activities as possible in the skill demonstration areas in order to facilitate quality interactions and active learning. Festival visitors have been able to try their hand at cutting stone with a mallet and chisel, modeling clay pots, making tortillas, weaving baskets, and much more. These kinds of unmediated interactions between craftspeople and the public are not only fun, but they can sometimes be learning experiences that change attitudes and transform the way people think about the cultural traditions of others.

The following short video shows Guillermo Bautista, a potter from the Andean highlands of Colombia, demonstrating his craft at the Festival as part of the 2011 *Colombia* program illustrates many of the points I've been making about successful craft demonstrations. You can see that Guillermo is speaking for himself, explaining the process of throwing a pot. There's examples of his pottery on the table next to him. Interpretive signage is behind him. Visitors are able to easily approach him to observe the process and ask questions. And there are opportunities for visitors to handle the clay and try their hand at turning a pot themselves.

Presenters, or moderators, play a central role in Festival presentations. As the Center's former senior folklorist Peter Seitel once noted, presenters help performers and audiences build bridges of understanding. Many of you are probably familiar with the role of presenters who introduce musical groups on performance stages, or who act as moderators for discussion panel sessions. I also find it extremely helpful to have a presenter for each of the class people or craft traditions, featured in the Festival program in the context of skill demonstration areas. Presenters can help facilitate interactions between the artisans and the audience by asking if the visitors have any questions, by providing brief background information.

It's important that the presenter not speak for the participants, but they can help jumpstart cultural conversations and encourage deeper exchanges by bringing out themes not immediately apparent to visitors who want to learn more but perhaps don't know what to ask or where to begin. For example, a presenter can model questions such as: what are the standards of excellence by which good work is judged in your tradition? Or, how do you teach and pass on your skills?

I think the main thing is to avoid the sense of participant on display, with people just passively watching someone demonstrating their craft. What I tend to do when I'm presenting in a craft demonstration area is, if I see a group of people watching and not asking any questions, I'll just raise my voice a little bit and introduce the participant, say a few words about his tradition or her tradition, and then ask if there are any questions. Then I might even ask the participant a

question myself and get them talking, and then with the audience and then that helps things flow.

Unlike documentary films, articles, and exhibitions, the Festival is not a linear experience. There's no clear path or storyline for the audience to follow. Instead, it allows visitors and participants, in the words of Richard Kurin, to chart their own experiential routes. This is both a good and desirable thing.

As a counterpoint, more structured forums and scheduled activities have an important role to play at the Festival. The discussion stage is perhaps one of the most successful venues for presentation and cultural representation. Thoughtful programming of sessions on a small and intimate discussion stage can frame important content and themes, and very importantly bring together different participants to share knowledge and experiences, similarities and differences around a common topic.

For example, in the *Masters of the Building Arts* program, we brought together artists from different crafts: a blacksmith, a stone carver, and a woodworker to talk about the common theme of tools of the trade. We also had panel sessions on materials matter, teaching and learning, and family-run businesses, among many other topics. In the *Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage* program, discussion session on the intergenerational transmission of language featuring Siletz Indian cultural leader Bud Lane with his granddaughter Halli, and the cross-cultural panel discussion with Welsh and Colombian participants on the role of verbal arts and music and language revitalization efforts are just two examples of the more than seventy narrative sessions that were presented over the course of the ten-day Festival.

The role of the presenter during discussion sessions and workshops is to frame the session in terms of its themes, introduce the participants, and ask questions of each of the traditional bearers taking part, striving to keep the conversation flowing and making sure that each participant has a chance to speak during the allotted time period, which is usually about forty-five minutes.

The convening power of the Festival, the invaluable opportunity it gives participants to meet and interact with one another, to share and learn from one another's experiences, to forge new working relationships and friendships, is one of the most powerful and positive aspects of the Festival. As a curator, I try to create space and time for participants to come together. Cross-cultural programming on the discussion stage is one important context in which this can happen. Others include participant orientations and workshops, special ceremonies and celebrations, and informal social gatherings at the hotel.

In the *One World, Many Voices* program, which brought together more than a hundred speakers of endangered or minority languages, from more than fifteen different language communities across the world, having the chance to learn about one another's language revitalization efforts, about strategies, struggles, and success stories, was inspiring and encouraging experience for all the participants.

And so in conclusion, I just want to underscore again that the Festival seeks to give tradition bearers a platform where they can share their skills and knowledge and tell their own stories. It strives to foster greater cultural understanding and to help sustain and support the vitality of diverse cultures across the United States and the world.

For the Festival to accomplish its goals, it is important to give careful thought and attention to the poetics and power of presentation, to the collaborative construction of cultural representations that allow participants and visitors to engage in meaningful interactions, and which help community members present their cultural traditions in ways that convey meaning and value.

Thank you.