

Mysteries in the Museum

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Works well especially with grades four through eight.

Set the tone by talking about the Museum being like a time machine that can enable us to travel through time and through space – the engine of the time machine is our imagination.

Ghost Stories

Period rooms are a perfect setting for ghost stories:

<http://artsmia.org/haunted-mia/>

The Connecticut Room

The one I use most. Guards actually tell stories of doing the rounds and finding that the four poster bed shows the shape of a person – as if someone had been lying there.

Get the group to imagine what it would be like to live in this house. After over 200 years of existence and many inhabitants, perhaps someone has come back to “visit” this room.

In addition, there is a story of someone standing in front of the fireplace and feeling a draft coming down the chimney (there is no outlet for this chimney).

Fireplace and walls come from different sources.

The Doll’s House (Community Commons)

Stories told by the guards tell of items having moved within rooms of the doll’s house.

Japanese Prints

There are several Mia Japanese prints that convey ghost stories:

<https://new.artsmia.org/search/ghost%20stories>

Frequently some of them are on display. My favourite is from *Hyaku Monogatari* [*One Hundred Ghost Stories*] by Hokusai:

<https://publicdomainreview.org/collections/hokusais-ghost-stories-ca-1830/>

Japanese friends would meet to share fantastically frightening tales from folklore and their own experience. Having lit a hundred candles, they would give their blood-curdling accounts, one by one, blowing out a candle after each, plunging themselves deeper into darkness. Upon the last candle going out, a spirit was said to appear.

Hokusai, The Mansion of the Plates, 56.52.4

After the maid Okiku had accidentally broken one of a set of elegant Korean plates, her infuriated master bound her and threw her down a well, where she died in body but not spirit. In 1795, wells around Japan became infested with a species of worm covered in thin threads, which people believed to be a reincarnation of Okiku; the threads being the remnants of the fabric used to bind her. They named it “Okiku mushi” [the Okiku bug]. Main characteristics of Japanese ghosts – no feet and disheveled hair.

Nayarit House

The second level – make sure to have a good torch to light up the underworld.

Parallel life of the dead – connect with the Dia de los Muertos observed in current Mexico.

Pillsbury Owl

Wine pitcher for the dead . . . I put on a lugubrious voice and copy Neil McGregor’s tone and ask my audience if they ever had dinner with the dead. Most of the bronzes in the room were funeral objects buried with their owners to provide for them in their afterlife. Talk about importance of grave goods for finding out about life in the past.

Other Mysteries

Lady Tashat

We know there are two skulls in the cartonnage based on a CAT scan done at the VA Medical Center in the Twin Cities. This article in the New York Times was written in 1983:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/22/science/riddle-of-mummy-with-two-skulls.html>

It’s likely the skull was placed there during mummification. She also has damage to her feet and broken bones. The second skull shows evidence of being beaten in. Her injuries and the extra skull remain a mystery to this day.

[Note from IPE staff: We are more aware now about how having human remains on display in museums is problematic. We want to treat this work with complete respect. If you decide to talk about the two skulls, think about where you are going with that story. We don’t encourage speculation or sensationalizing the story.]

False Door

What I call a landing strip for the soul; discuss the *ka* and how it is able to recognize its body and return – stress the importance of afterlife for the Egyptians.

Power figure (formerly Nkisi Nkonde) 71.3

Label copy: It looks like a man being punished or tortured. But to its Kongo makers and users, this figure was a container, empowered by a ritual specialist to house a specific spirit. The figure was consulted like a traditional chief to settle disputes and arrive at binding decisions. Each nail and blade, driven in to energize its powers, represents an issue resolved by its ritual authority.

Ife Shrine Head

The mystery of who she is – more an idealized portrait than actual person; why do you think she is portrayed in this way?

“Scholars believe that the Ife heads have a double significance. Firstly, they are portraits of kings and other powerful individuals, who were also considered by the Yoruba to be gods. Secondly, of all parts of the body, the head was particularly important to the Yoruba. It symbolized knowledge, good judgment, and character.”

https://www.norton.com/college/NRL/epack_ancillaries/gatewaystoart/videos/BeninAndife.html

Most successful mystery story:

Magritte, The Promenades of Euclid 68.3

Mystery of the painting – remind the audience that it's a 2D image – show picture prop of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe. (This is not a pipe.)* 2004.228.16:

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/95739>

SO this is a painting within a frame of a window with an easel in front of it.

What is reality – get the audience to vote as to whether what is behind the painting on the easel is the same as the scene behind the painting or is it a creation of the artist?

Also where are we? All other buildings including the tower are below us – are we in an early sky scraper?

Highlight the parallels of the tower and the road; same shape but artificially made to look different by use of shadows.

Madonna of the Embroidered Foliage – Virgin and Child 90.7

Secret language of flowers, many symbols included in painting which we no longer recognize.

With older audience stress how in 15th c. literacy was very rare (France and Belgium under 10% and mostly men) but people in general had greater visual literacy than we have today.

Symbols in the painting:

Walled garden = garden in Bible's "Song of Songs"

Iris = sorrows of the virgin

Violets = humility

Strawberry Plant = righteousness

Peacock = paradise or eternal life

Stags = human soul and piety

Water = baptism and salvation

Further mystery: unknown artist; most likely a group of artists – existence of many paintings (four are known) with same design; could use a cartoon to trace the design and then customize for the individual commission.

Talk about how status of artists until the Renaissance was really that of an artisan – most work made by several individuals within a workshop.

Shiva Nataraja – Lord of the Dance, 29.2

Mystery of how he is both creator and destructor.

Attributes that identify who the figure is:

What about this figure tells us that he is a superhuman being?