

# My Personal Museum

A Graduate Thesis



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## ❖ Personal Museum

A “kit” consisting of compartments to safely store, display and revisit an object and the stories that object promotes through audio interviews and other written documentation.  
(developed and designed by author)



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## Preface

When I first decided to apply to graduate school, I became aware of the fact that higher education should draw off of previous academic experiences. In college, I studied cultures from different time periods and from all over the world. One thing in particular that I found myself fascinated with, was what the common denominators were; what makes us, as humans, the same?

The guiding force for this thesis was my application for this MFA program, “Homes as museums in their natural habitat”. It was an exploration of my own home from an anthropological and sociological point of view. I took photos of objects in the home I grew up in: photos, bronzed baby shoes, painted masks, framed children’s drawings, etc. It was about a topic and objects that I knew best and had a great time reminiscing while I was doing it.

The Personal Museum is the next natural step of “Homes as museums”. What better way to show we value an object because of the stories and memories it sparks, than to literally put it on a pedestal? The idea evolved much throughout the process, becoming richer and more meaningful. It morphed into it’s own entity. As objects are highlighted, the actual voice of a person involved in the story can be heard. Handwriting is seen, with impressions and all. I wanted the Personal Museum to be a way for average people to be their own curators, to realize that what they choose will be significant. I wanted it to be a way for everyone to feel that what he or she is doing is important. The Personal Museum hopes to connect families in a

way that, I believe, is slowly dissipating into various technologies (internet, PDAs, television). My intention was to recognize the “technologizing” of modern families but to encourage face-to-face communication.

I used references from the StoryCorp project and other museum examples I have studied in school. I researched literature on various cultures and the ways they tell stories and value objects. It seemed that every week a friend was giving me another website or another book that I should explore. The bank of information was overwhelming. The hard part was digesting the resources that were applicable to my project and using them in a way that was essential for the communication of my ideas. It was evident that what was important for setting the stage for my thesis was the story and the object, equally. I settled on an exploration of what a story was, as well as how objects can tell stories.

While developing my ideas, tweaking my concepts and researching topic after topic, I realized that so much is out there that is similar to my project, StoryCorp, Family Stories and Hallmark’s Legacy Keeper (this one was particularly painful since it is a little too similar to my project for my taste). I kept moving on though, admitting the similarities and strengthening the differences.

I became aware of (and ultimately formally recognized) the vast amount of work that can be completed in order to fully realize my project. Questions about the physical box component of my project emerged. What about containers for objects of other sizes and materials (heavy, wet, chemical)? Questions about marketing and branding were also apparent. For example,

how will people know about this product? What makes it so special? How can/will it be funded? I would have liked to explore some of these ideas further but they fell outside the scope of this project.

I believe that this thesis, “The Personal Museum”, is a true culmination of my studies as a Museum Exhibition Planning and Design MFA candidate. I am proud of the project as a whole and will continue to be excited about the work that I have done and the possibilities for it in the future.

Alexandra Turnier

May 2008

## Introduction

Storytelling is the act of recalling memories and traditions. Storytelling is an art in which events are communicated from one person or a group of people to another person or group of people. The art of storytelling seems to be increasing in its popularity. Folklore Studies programs and storytelling festivals are multiplying and the American Association of Museums has devoted seminars to discussing the act of and importance of storytelling. More examples of evidence for the acceptance of a story's ubiquitous nature will be discussed in Section 2: Objects Tell Stories.

As a student of anthropology and cultural ethnographies, and as someone who is interested in sociological interactions and effects, I have studied why objects play a large role in the course of human history. Museums display many such objects, some that are used today in various forms (functional, creative, etc...) along with the stories of their significance. A museum has been defined as “a non-profitmaking, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.” (International Council of Museums (ICOM) 2008).

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), for example, as well as various tribal and national museums house contemporary objects ranging from culturally significant art pieces to purely functional bowls and textiles. The National Museum of Australia houses objects of cultural



interest using a system of provenance (i.e. where it came from, etc...). The definition and examples described here and later, will provide a foundation for the development of the Personal Museum.

The Personal Museum kit will serve as the museum (in the metaphorical sense) and the individuals completing its stages will become the curator and the tour guide. When I conducted the front-end survey for this project, I found that the objects people keep range from one-of-a-kind (jewelry) to the everyday (ticket stubs). Each of them has some significance, ranging from helping recall memories to personal empowerment.

The Personal Museum will give individuals a set of guidelines to use to tell stories about a chosen object. The kit is designed for the convenient storage of related artifacts (personal objects) and elements related to the object (i.e. photos, collections card, audio component). Individuals will be able to revisit and display a testimony of cherished memories. People can add to the narrative point of view at different times in order to add layers to the object's value (personal significance, etc...). Different personalities are invited to interpret the object in their own way, include it with the completed kit and share it with friends and family. The Personal Museum will evolve.

I have observed, from my studies, that the value we place on objects changes depending on their role in society (personal or community). Childhood mementos, burial offerings, or "priceless" items are important. Everyday objects can have power to the individuals who keep them. What does it mean when a thing has sentimental value? What makes it more important in one's life than a similar object, or even the same exact object

bought new? It is as if these objects take on a certain life of their own. These questions function as a guiding force for the development and design of the Personal Museum.

The Personal Museum will allow families and individuals to interact with each other, honor family histories and promote child development and family bonding. Families are encouraged to include members from all ages (generations) when completing the stages of their own Personal Museum. Adults should allow for full child participation, as this should be completed within a family group. Children should be encouraged to come to their own conclusions about the various aspects of completing the Personal Museum. Bruno Bettelheim states: “Explaining to a child why a fairytale is so captivating to him destroys, moreover, the story’s enchantment, which depends to a considerable degree on the child’s not quite knowing why he is delighted by it.” (Bettelheim 1976: 18) Interaction and interpretation are important aspects of the final, completed kit. It is hoped that adults and children alike will be captivated and “enchanted” by the stories they choose to tell and listen to about an object they choose to bring into the spotlight.

Memories, in the form of objects and related stories, can be stored in an organized and safe way while giving future generations the opportunity to learn about their past. Each object is a testament to a moment in history.





# 1

## Objects Tell Stories





## What is the function of a story?

What is a story? Why are stories so important? What is their function?

Someone, or group of people, has to tell the story while another person, or group of people, has to receive that story. Stories can be organized into categories depending on their function. For example, if a story is meant to create and retain cultural identity, it could be a “fable” or a “legend”, fiction or non-fiction. If it is meant to purely entertain, it could be a “joke” or an “anecdote”. Stories can function as weavers of identity, keepers of values, passers of morals, illustrators of points and venues for entertainment. People tell stories everyday. Children learn the significance of a story at an early age and can identify them easily. Children learn to be interpreters, as well. Stories can be straightforward or complicated (leaving the audience to interpret it’s meaning).

### Story as Keeper of Identity

Stories are told around the world. Individuals of all ages tell stories to create cultural or national identity. For example, the African American tradition of storytelling (stories, riddles, songs, folktales) stemmed from the events of slavery. Such stories are told to express emotions, retain identity and remember a culture left behind. “The African American slave song is just one of many forms where African American tradition and culture can be found. The slave song is

capable of embodying the desires, sorrows, objectives, values, morals, and customs all into an enchanting work of art.” (Papa 2007) These various forms of story were passed down to descendants and have become a popular form of expression (i.e. Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois).

The Personal Museum will encourage the passing down of stories from generation to generation. Stories chosen for the personal implementation of the project can range from those of sorrow to those of joy as long as they are significant and “worthy of attention” (Oxford American Dictionary). The stories surrounding the object will reinforce the importance and value of the object. This will hopefully encourage the individual to be their own curator by finding meaningful connections between the object and more oral stories.

The function of story as keeper of identity spans levels of human interaction;

1. personal identity
2. cultural identity
3. community identity
4. national identity.

National identity seems to be individuals bonding over geography. There is a sense of unity from inhabiting the same political landmass. There is pride in the country in which one lives. This pride comes from an identity as one entity. National identity narratives create a sense of place and transform into stories as “landscape becomes



peopled by story” (Strauss 1996:17). These stories can come in the form of history textbooks or recent newscasts.

The news media tells the stories of the land and its people. “It’s all storytelling, you know. That’s what journalism is all about.” (Brokaw) The news also reinforces commonly held values. It tells about history. While watching the news on television on any given day, the stories focus around people being harmed by some outside force (other people, household product, animal, element of nature), people beating the odds (human interest stories), celebrity interviews, sports highlights, weather and traffic. Obviously, these segments vary by region and scale (whether it is a local or national news show). Value systems appear to exist on multiple levels. Individuals value knowing things about the world around us, positive and negative. They place importance on knowing sports facts and celebrity gossip. That which we hold in high regard (value) is that which is worth our attention (significant).

### Stories told to make a point

Some stories are told to make a point or convey a point of view. This function of stories is seemingly counterintuitive since stories are about personal interpretation. No matter the clarity of the story at hand, personal synthesis of the content of the story happens in order to make it affect the listener. “Stories illustrate points better than simply stating the points themselves because, if the story is good enough, you usually don’t have to state your point at all, the hearer thinks about what you have said and figures out the point independently.

The more work the hearer does, the more he or she will get out of your story". (Schank 1990: 12) In other words, a person likes to interpret and find meaning for themselves in the stories they hear. Schank's statement is illustrated using a story from Susan Strauss' book, The Passionate Fact. This story was overheard at a conference in Washington D.C. by the director of visitor services for the Forest Service, Gerry Coutant:

Gerry was walking down a sidewalk in Washington D.C. with a Native American friend who worked at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It was lunchtime in Washington. People were husslin' and busslin' along the sidewalks, and car honks and hurried engine noises filled the streets. In the middle of all this traffic, Gerry's friend stopped and said, "Hey, a cricket!"

"What?" said Gerry.

"Yeah, a cricket," said his friend. "Look here," and he pulled aside some of the bushes that separated the sidewalk from the government buildings. There in the shade was a cricket chirping away.

"Wow," said Gerry. "How did you hear that with all this noise and traffic?"

"Oh," said the native man, "it was the way I was raised... what I was taught to listen for. Here, I'll show you something."

The Native man reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins... nickels, quarters, dimes... and dropped them on the sidewalk. Everyone who rushed by stopped... to listen. (Strauss 1996: 9)

This story finds its effectiveness in its subtlety. The story was not intended to be about Washingtonians as a bunch of money-hungry people. It was not intended to be about the cricket. It was probably not even intended to be about the cultural differences of Native

Americans and popular society. It is effective in its ability to make the listener think and relate aspects of it to their own lives. In other words, it's interpretability.

### Story as Entertainment

Jokes and anecdotes are forms of story. Not only do they make people think, but they also delight those telling and those listening to the story. They can be true or fictitious, elaborate or concise. They can illustrate a point, teach a moral or just exist to put a smile on someone's face. They appear alongside other forms of story meant to entertain. "To entertain" does not necessarily mean "to make smile or laugh". Engagement, involvement, attraction; all of these words may be used when describing an entertaining story. These stories appear in music, movies and books (for children and adults alike). They can make you laugh or cry. An example of a story that is intended to entertain *and* pass morals is the fairy tale. In his book, The Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim writes of the importance of fairy tales in child development.

Fairy tales are explained as stories where the characters are polarized (very good or very bad), the plot embraces hardships (i.e. death) and the experience of reading it can be fulfilling to young minds. "The child needs most particularly to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity." (Bettelheim 1976: 8) Children should be given the opportunity to come to their own conclusions regarding life and the world around them. Stories are a way to do this. They are

intended to be engaging, in some way. It depends on the personal interpretation and interest as to whether one form will be more entertaining than another.

Whether a story is intended to illustrate a point, entertain, reinforce values or create identity, one thing remains a common thread, interaction. “We do not interact with the world as isolated individuals, but as members of communities.” (Hein 2006: 23) The interaction and interpretation components make the stories surrounding the object that much more meaningful and interesting. It could not exist without the human element. If we *interact* with the world as a group then storytelling is no different. Members of these groups, communities and cultures have the ability to reminisce, evolve, listen, and create for each other.

## Objects as Story

Culture has been defined as “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively”, more specifically “the attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular social group” (Oxford American Dictionary). Culture can be cordoned off into age groups (i.e. “youth culture”), ethnic groups (i.e. Japanese culture), class groups (i.e. homeless street culture) or gender groups (i.e. Hijara culture). Some cultures blur the lines between these categorizations. Many, if not a majority of, cultures around the world place objects in high regard due to various factors explained in the previous section.

### Value and preservation of identity through objects

In 1990, the Federal government passed NAGPRA, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, allowing Native Americans to regain possession over culturally significant objects once lost and guarded by museums and Federal agencies. These cultural items include “human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects or objects of cultural patrimony” (NAGPRA 1990). Objects of cultural patrimony is defined within the act as, “an object having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Native American group or culture itself, rather than property owned by an individual native.” NAGPRA is just one example of the recognition of how objects can be charged with meaning. It is important to hold on to the story of cultural identity. Objects, their history and tradition must be preserved so as not to be completely lost.

NAGPRA has been grounds for numerous court cases and years of contention. Some institutions (museums and government facilities) do not want to give up parts of their collections. They want to keep these objects, and the stories surrounding these objects, for their own specific reasons.

The protection of special objects has occurred throughout the world and at many points in the history of museums. It is not a new story. Hitler, for instance, stole cultural significant artifacts to try and provide evidence for his “cause”. Nazi scientists had “initial” conclusions which they searched for confirmation. They collected haphazardly analyzed objects (and geographic regions) to promote Aryan mythology and Germanic power. National identity was and is what is at stake in these cases. The smallest object can mean the world to anyone.

### Quilts and the Collective Experience

When the line between community identity and value is blurred, the object becomes that much richer and more meaningful. For instance, the town of Gee’s Bend, a former plantation and slave colony nestled in a curve of the Alabama River, has a special history. Women in Gee’s Bend, Alabama sew quilts to connect them to their craft, the history of it and the end piece they produce. When slaves were freed, plantations were left abandoned and bleak. Most people living there now share the same last name, Pettway, which was the slave owner’s given name. The town’s inhabitants continue to live there, rebuild their community and tell stories through quilts. Once quilts may have

been made from scraps of the good pieces of worn out clothing to make a functional quilt. Now, their quilts travel the country in art exhibitions.

For the most part, the act of making the quilt is a collective experience. Each quilt has a story, from inception to completion, and after. Walter Benjamin (German philosopher, early 20th century) writes of craft production:

“Craft object, mass-produced objects - include essentially an understanding of experience to be had with objects, and memories evoked by objects or encoded in objects - memories of object in all possible senses” (Leslie 1998:11).

The object has its own story and its own history. It embodies the individuals and groups involved in creating it, as well as cultural history, traditions and, to a certain extent, the future of the people and object themselves. These objects speak and have their own language. “It speaks of a particular time and geographic place” (Senft 1995: 144).

## Objects in Museums

Objects have their own language in multiple ways. They can speak of their production, their travels from one hand to another, their ability to transcend time (i.e. their classic-ness), and illustrate their own personality. They can make a person smile or cry, evoking emotions at times. An example of this is object theater. “Object theater” is a method that museums utilize to give objects a voice. It “combines

project video or slides with computer controlled lighting, audio, and animated objects in a short presentation.” (Larson 2007) Institutions such as the National Constitution Center, The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis and the Mobile Museum of Art have implemented object theaters to engage audiences.

Objects within a museum’s walls have stories to tell. Object theater gives these objects a venue to tell those stories in a captivating way. It gives them power. What better way to learn about another time and place than to hear directly from the object that experienced it? Object theater also gives the institution a way to communicate a message to its visitor which may not be absorbed through ordinary museum means (i.e. text labels, interactive components, etc...). The Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) Museum and Research Center in Syracuse, NY, for example, has an object theater focused on the underground railroad. It “brings to life the struggles of escaping slaves and their journey to freedom” (OHA Museum & Research Center 2008) through the use of objects, lighting and audio.

Objects can tell stories from the special to the everyday. They can tell of a once in a life-time opportunity to meet the Queen of England or one of the many times you went to the supermarket. Objects have whatever meaning we place on them as a culture. A teddy bear would mean something different to a child than to a toy-collector. No matter the function of the object, it is significant to someone or group of people. When an object and a person/people interact, interpretation and the collective experience are key.



## Terminology

The following are my working definitions of key terms which will be used throughout the project. Many of these words have multiple meanings.

### **folklore** noun

legends, tales, and knowledge, often about nature and usually oral, developed by a society over time and repeated to successive generations

*Longleaf Alliance*

the traditional stories and culture of a group of people

*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

### **interaction** noun

Includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject.

*University of Connecticut (Research Division)*

a mutual or reciprocal action

*Princeton*

act in such a way as to have an effect on another; act reciprocally

*Oxford American Dictionary*

### **interpretation** noun

an explanation or opinion of what something means.

*ffotogallery (photographic cultural agency)*

an educational process that is intended to stimulate and facilitate people's understanding of place, so that empathy towards, conservation, heritage, culture and landscape is developed.

*Pearson Education*

the action of explaining the meaning of something  
*Oxford American Dictionary*

making the obscure obvious  
*George Bowitch*

### **narrative** noun

presentation of a series of events in a purposeful sequence, either fictional or factual  
*Resources for Technical and Business Writing*

a framework of events arranged in some kind of order (eg temporal, causal), involving a set of “characters” and relationships between those characters. Narratives can be descriptive and/or explanatory.  
*Environics - (Applied) Cognitive Linguistics*

### **significance** noun

the significance of an image is its meaning, including both cognitive and affective aspects (as opposed to its visual appearance and/or audible sound.)  
*Florida International University*

1 the quality of being worthy of attention; importance  
 2 the meaning to be found in words or events  
*Oxford American Dictionary*

### **story** noun

a retelling of events that led to an outcome which is of value to certain audiences  
*MSDN Academic Alliance*

1. an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment  
 2. an account of past events in someone’s life or in the evolution of

something

*Oxford American Dictionary*

types of stories: account, tale, chronicle, history, news, report, anecdote, rumor, hearsay, gossip, joke, fable, parable, myth, legend, short story, novella, epic, farce, parody

[www.stevedenning.com/Main\\_types\\_story.html](http://www.stevedenning.com/Main_types_story.html)

**storytelling** noun and adjective

the skilled delivery of stories use to present anecdotal evidence, clarify a point, support a point of view and crystallize ideas... Stories can share a “truth” that data can not. Storytelling can help bridge the gap between data and knowledge. A well chosen story gets the audience’s attention.

*Stuhlman Management Consultants*

storytelling is the way you can make sense out of events, experiences and relationships, observe how people interacted, or didn’t, and deepen your understanding of who you are and perhaps why you think, or believe or react the way you do.

*Dr. Jackie Black*

the art of conveying events through one person or group of people telling a story while another person or group of people receives that story.

*Author (Alexandra Turnier)*

telling or writing stories.

*American Heritage Dictionary*

**value** noun

respect: regard highly; think much of

*Princeton*

1. the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance or preciousness of something

2. one’s judgement of what is important in life.

*Oxford American Dictionary*



# 2

## Thesis Overview





## Thesis Problem

What if there was a venue where families could spend time together and re-collect stories? Storytelling is a fundamental and integral part of being human. Since before the written word, stories were told to preserve traditions, history and legacy. They helped people remember and interact with others. Once writing was developed, some of these stories were transferred onto paper for all those to read, not just the immediate community. Storytelling is an important aspect of our society which is slowly being absorbed, and is evolving, into more widely accessible digital formats (i.e. websites, blogs, etc...), drawing from Walter Ong's work regarding digitization and "the technologizing of the word". Ong embraces the idea of the evolution of the format of the written word. This project acknowledges this as well, but intends to steal family members away from their computers for human-to-human interaction, incorporating the tactile nature of involving a 3-Dimensional artifact.

Storytelling has the ability to transcend time (i.e. traditional folktales) and age. It is something that can be explored further by every person, specifically when an object is involved. Children and grandparents can find common ground with an interesting tale. They can each hold the object, feel its texture and weight and remember. Stories are a necessity, not only to maintain and preserve the past but for individual development (i.e. child), cultural acceptance and appreciation of future generations (i.e. genealogy).

## Thesis Statement

Stories are narratives which connect events, places and things with those people involved. Storytelling is an art that everyone seems to know how to do. From child development to retaining cultural traditions and histories, these narratives allow people to interact and communicate with each other. Telling stories involves recalling events and experiences in one's life. This allows for reflection and appreciation of other peoples and their stories with the past.

The Personal Museum will ultimately target individuals and groups of all ages and cultures. For this project, however, the focus is on family objects and the stories the objects generate. This includes parents and children, extended families and alternative lifestyles. The end result could be kept and preserved or displayed in a family or family-friendly space (i.e. home, community center). The Personal Museum is analogous to a brick and mortar museum, allowing for preservation and display of objects.

Guidelines for organizing these stories with the object(s) that accompany them will act as a seamless way to facilitate remembering and organized storage. A baseline will be established to take this project to the next level.



## Goals

- to encourage personal/group reflection in a guided way.
- to provide guidelines for the completion of the Personal Museum allowing for the effective communication of stories from which the highlighted object prompts.
- use current practices on storage and preservation as a guide to understanding the design of the Personal Museum.
- allow for a smooth transition between completing the stages of the kit and displaying/sharing the Personal Museum to an audience by providing clear instruction and tips on effectual and affectual communication.

## Methodology and Approach

I intend to use my academic background as both a student of Anthropology and Museum Studies as a basis for my research and understanding of the project. References of sample literature, such as works by Susan Strauss (professional storyteller) and Walter Ong (priest, historian, professor and philosopher) regarding storytelling practices will act as the cornerstone for this project. Ethnographic studies, like works about indigenous tribes around the world and other cultural groups will be foundational for the understanding of this thesis as a whole. One of the most important things taught in an introductory anthropology class is the subtext that each culture has its own traditions and beliefs, but we are all inherently the same. Universities around the country have folklife studies courses and programs focusing on the oral and material traditions of a culture which transcend time (i.e. Penn State's American Folklife Studies program).

StoryCorps and Hallmark's Legacy Keeper will act as models for my work as these are the most similar projects to my thesis to date. StoryCorps is a nation-wide oral history project. Individuals are interviewed by StoryCorp staff members in a StoryCorp booth or mobile recording unit. The audio file is later posted on the web for visitors to listen to for free and also added to the archives at the Library of Congress. Legacy Keeper is a Hallmark Company kit with interview questions, an mp3 recorder and compartments for photographs, etc. to record memories.

The Personal Museum will stress the importance of the object as a key to telling a story. It will strongly suggest meaningful preparation prior to completion of the stages of the kit. It will embrace the presence of the object in memories, what it represents (if anything) to the family members completing the stages of the Personal Museum, and the preservation of the chosen object. A completed Personal Museum will have the ability to be a display piece in homes. The stories about the object will be able to be added to, also. As the individuals who interact with the kit grow and change, so might the stories. As generations are added to the family tree, so do the perspectives and voices of the narrators/interviewees.

The Personal Museum will be a means by which individuals can preserve their personal objects and record their stories. The stories can be about a specific object or event or subject.

The result of the thesis will be an organized kit with which to keep memories and stories organized and preserved for later consideration and display. It will, in effect, be a time capsule. The design of this end product will take into account some of the things that are necessary to store, preserve, illustrate and create the story related to a specific object or group of objects. The box will have compartments to store the components of the kit. It will also include text on the effective usage of the kit (refer to Section 3: Mini-Museum Kit Overview).

## Conceptual Framework

The framework for recording the stories and memories about objects are not a “how-to” or rules-based. They are more a guide. It provides a foundation to use in order to record and keep memories safe and easily accessible. It is more than a who-what-when-where-why. It allows for later investigation of the object and its story. It includes a means with which to also share these stories with others and expand or add stories at a later time. Using advice and references from professional storytellers, open-ended questions will direct personalized and easy-going discussion. A portion of the project would include the instructional text on how to use this kit. The end product is the tangible kit which family groups can complete on their own time, preferably with each other, as it will ideally promote social interaction and intrapersonal bonding. Accompanying the kit is the guidelines for initiating the project.

To use it cognitively/physically: synthesizing information to complete the components of the kit.

- using the provided guidelines for effective communication
- complete the stages (i.e. prepare for interview, conduct interview, choose object, choose photograph, etc...).

To use it emotionally: usefulness of remembering and storing important moments and objects in one's life.

- learn something new about oneself or others?
- what one values is significant

- importance of furnishing community with history
- seeing how the stories around the object may (may not) change over time.

It will give people the means to make their own personal exhibit about what they choose, hence the name “Personal Museum”

What is more interesting or valuable than that which we project as interesting or valuable? Going to a museum or other cultural institution can only reach a person so far. This will be the ultimate visitor-curated exhibit, one that has personal implications and the curator(s) would be experts on the subject.

The future of this endeavor will be as an accessible keeper of heritage. It would be effective if families utilized the end product to preserve memories and history. It will be useful for elders to reconnect with the youth of society (regardless of time period). Children will be allowed to place a stamp with their point of view for their family and friends. Family members of all ages could have access to this information. The kit will have potential for making future changes. The end product will tell individuals about their past and their future. It would tell of identity and community, family and history. It will have the ability to change its impact over time depending on who has a story to share about the object.

## Front-End survey analysis

For this project, the intended survey group was to include individuals from all ages and backgrounds. Individuals and family groups would yield the information that would best help with the most useful data for this thesis. The goal was to get 100 surveys, a high goal. The information that the survey focused on was how people record stories and memories, if they do at all.

The survey which was conducted over the months of December and January yielded 33 respondents. More than three quarters of them (78.8%) were female. 94% were between the ages of 19 and 35.

When asked what *kinds of things* they kept, responses were very consistent with what I had initially expected from the open-ended question. Out of 29 that answered this question, 21 said they kept photographs or pictures, while 11 said ticket or movie stubs. Another 11 said they kept written things (i.e. letters, notes, journals) and 9 referenced 3-Dimensional objects (i.e. jewelry, uniforms, trinkets).

When asked *how they store the things* that they do, 12 out of the 15 who responded said “box(es)”. No surprise there either. Words like “unorganized” and “randomly” were used when describing the state of the box of keepsakes. One person even explained how they would like to organize their things but did not have the time to do so.

When asked *why they keep the things they do*, 21 out of 29 responded by saying that they like to remember. Of those, most referenced good or fun times in their pasts. A few said that they were pack rats, unable to throw some things out. 3 even said that it helps them to keep these things in some way, whether it is “empowering” or “might aid” in some way in the future.

When asked *when was the last time they told a story*, more than half said “today”. 9 people said “yesterday” or “last night”, while only 4 said the last time they told a story was a week or longer. The respondents explained that they tell stories of the special and the mundane. Ranging from “an amazing summer evening in central park” to “my day”. They mostly tell stories to their friends (50%). 6 said a family member, while co-workers and significant others got 4 each.

What I have taken from the results...

People typically keep small or flat things. This comes as no surprise since they take up little space and are stored easily.

Most people keep things from their past, but in an unorganized way.

Whether it is due to time-restrictions or lack of knowledge how, there is a need to clean up.

Individuals like to be nostalgic. Reflecting on happy or sad times is never a bad thing, if done in moderation. It puts the present in perspective.

People tell stories everyday.

## Research/References

Desmond Morris's "The Human Animal"

StoryCorps - nation-wide oral history program

Legacy Keeper - Hallmark's new kit, question book

Institutions and case studies of exhibits exhibiting everyday objects

Folklore/folklorists

First Person Festival

Ethnographies - i.e. National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)

Professional Storytelling techniques - storytelling instructors

Materials on Collections Management/Conservation/Preservation

Art Packing







3

# Personal Museum Kit Overview





## Mission

Objects and the stories surrounding them have a certain indescribable power when brought together in one place. Appropriate storage and display of these memories, stories and objects is a necessity in peoples' lives.

## Goals

- allow for families to leave their mark for future generations in a coherent and efficient manner.
- promote interaction between individuals in family groups through participation with, or experiencing others' Personal Museum projects.
- promote communication and understanding within and outside "cultures" (i.e. ethnicities, age groups, religious groups) through the utilization of common information completed in kit.
- preserve significant objects and their stories through proper interview techniques, possible revisions and modifications to the story surrounding the object.

## How to Use

### Cognitively/Physically

Familiarize yourself with all parts of the kit before doing anything!  
Make sure you read the instructions for the digital voice recorder and test it out. Check to make sure all the included parts are there.

#### 1. Choose object

Suggestions of types of objects:

- jewelry
- small toys
- small stuffed animals
- trinkets
- souvenirs

#### 2. Choose Interviewer and Interviewee

*Role of Interviewer* - Asks clear, open-ended questions. Must be prepared. Don't be afraid to stray from prepared questions. Don't forget the object!

*Role of Interviewee* - Provide detail-rich long answers  
details - dates, names, verbal descriptions of other objects, places or photographs

#### 3. Complete "Collections Information" Card

Affix it in the "Collections Information" card compartment where the guidelines booklet it initially placed.

4. Choose and add photograph relating to the object.

Find a photograph in relation to the chosen object (no larger than 4x6 inches). It could be a picture of anything. People, a place, or another object. Affix it in the photo compartment using the included photo corners.

5. Prepare for interview

It is highly suggested that you have a plan of attack before asking/ answering questions. Talk about the story with family members involved in the event. What are the most interesting aspects of the story? Asking these questions is interpreting, to a certain degree. If you are too constricting, the project will be tight and sterile. If you are too open, the project will not be coherent.

*Preparation: What are some of your goals here?*

This will help you stay focused while completing the stages.

***Example 1:***

Do you want your child to tell a story about his/her favorite toy displayed in the “Personal Museum” because it is broken but too important to throw out?

Goals could include;

- Giving your child a voice.
- Preserving the memory and story of an object that may literally dissolve over time.
- Allow for the conversation to continue 5 years down the road, 10 years.

*Example 2:*

Have you recently gotten married and received a family heirloom from your grandparents which is too fragile to display on the mantle but too precious to throw in a shoebox? You want a place to keep this piece safe and take it out to show friends and family whenever you want.

Goals could include;

- Obtain generational views of the heirloom. Grandparents and younger family members, included.
- Honor the history of the object

*Preparation: General Research*

Here, the interviewer officially takes the title of “interpreter”, as well. He/she can choose to focus on a specific theme surrounding the object and the interviewee if they so choose. The more information and research that is done beforehand, the more meaningful and interesting the interview will be in the long run. Go to the library, surf the web, find as much information as you can.

*Preparation: Interview Questions*

The interviewer should prepare open-ended questions in order to give the interviewee much to talk about. The interviewee should be prepared to be as detailed as possible. Assume the audience will know nothing about the project.



Sample Questions:

Who? What? When? Where? Why?

What time period did the event happen during? What makes it so important to you?

What was the event? Was there someone performing? Did you perform? Tell me about the performance?

What is the object? Is it a part of a larger collection? Why do you collect those things? Can you trace it back to a specific moment or time?

Who gave you this object? Why are they significant in your life (if they are significant at all)? Was it something they did to affect your life? Was it something they didn't do?

6. Conduct Interview

Conduct the interview using the included digital voice recorder. Make sure you familiarize yourself and test the recorder before you do any of the interview! You do not want to think you were recording a great interview and realize only afterwards that nothing was saved.

- Be neutral and polite - ask questions that start with "Tell me about..." or "Describe...". To be too specific in your questions will give you short and constricted answers.
- Don't interrupt! Don't argue! This is about their story.
- Be specific with the facts, though. Refer to actual dates, proper names, etc...
- If anything that the interviewee seems unclear, ask them to clarify.

- You want to make sure that the interview is thorough and clear.
- Don't assume that whomever will be viewing the Personal Museum will be familiar with the topic.

*(Sommers and Quinlan 2002)*

7. Place object in protective storage bag.

Try to make sure no air can get in.

8. Secure object in Object Compartment.

Secure the object into place in the object compartment with the included velcro strips. Make sure it doesn't move around!

*Other Suggestions:*

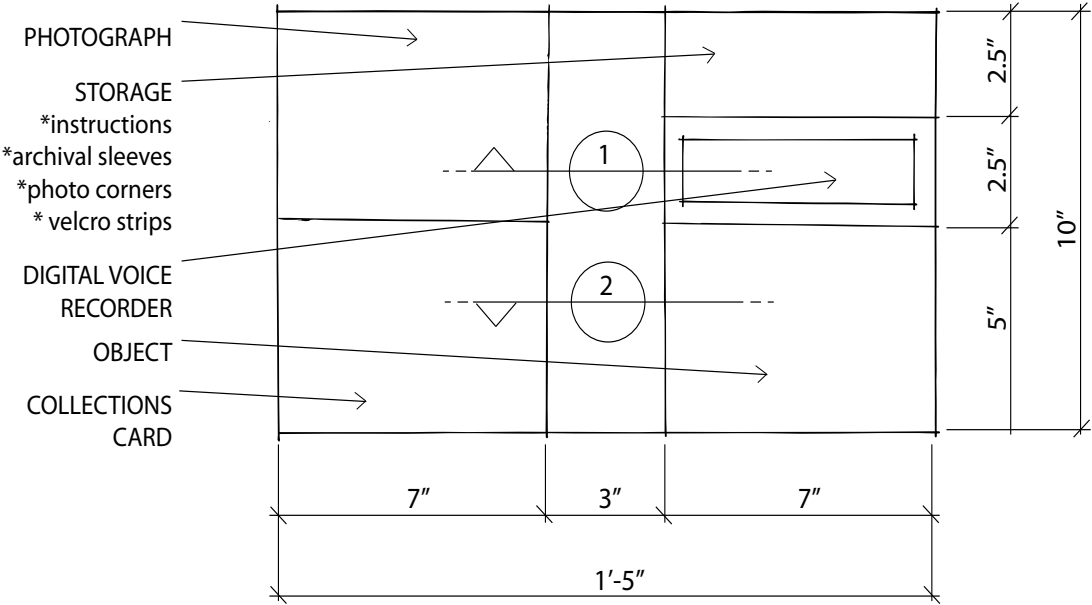
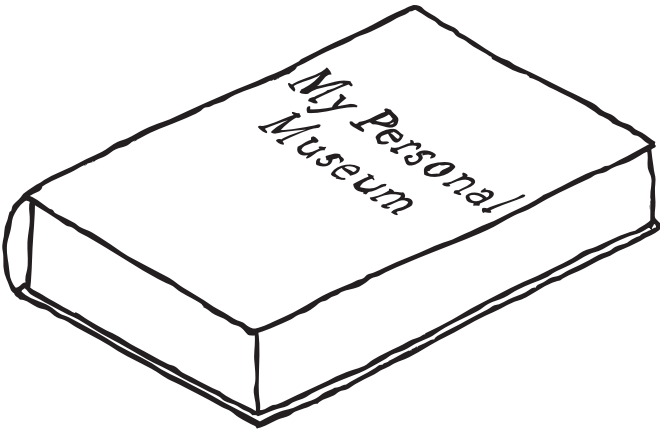
- Do background information on the object itself, it's origin, etc...
- Do background information on the time the object gained it's significance. What was the political atmosphere? The social atmosphere? What was popular at the time? (now?)
- If you have a computer, back up the oral (interview) portion to your hard drive for additional security.
- Take photos of the personal museum, for additional security.
- If you have access to video equipment, feel free to video record the interview as well.
- Transcribe the interview
- Make a plan to revisit the personal museum in a set amount of time to add information/objects (if they are proper size) to it. Much can change in 5 years!

Remember! You can (and should) have more than one interviewee! You will have more prep work to do, but the end product will be that much richer. Each interview you record will save to it's own file on the digital voice recorder. Use the enclosed booklet to record the dates and names of the interviewees to keep your Personal Museum organized.

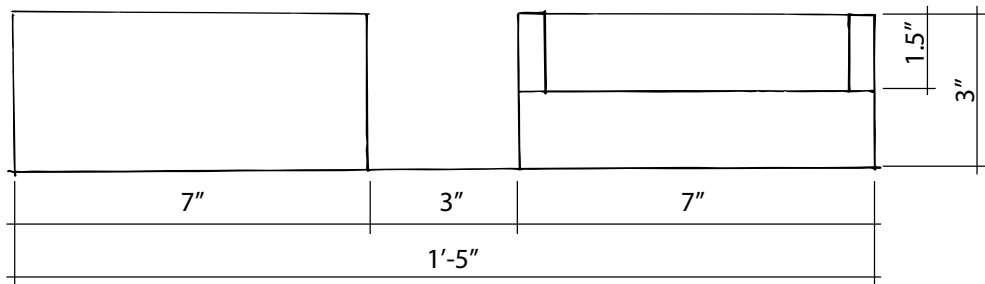
## Emotionally

The Personal Museum's intended emotional use is varied. People who complete the kit should be honest with themselves and those that they complete the kit with. People should not be afraid to laugh or shed a tear. During the process, individuals can learn something new about themselves, their family and their community. Sommers and Quinlan explain how "Gerontologists often use oral history techniques. Working with elderly people, they use life review techniques as therapy." (Sommers & Quinlan 2002: 5)

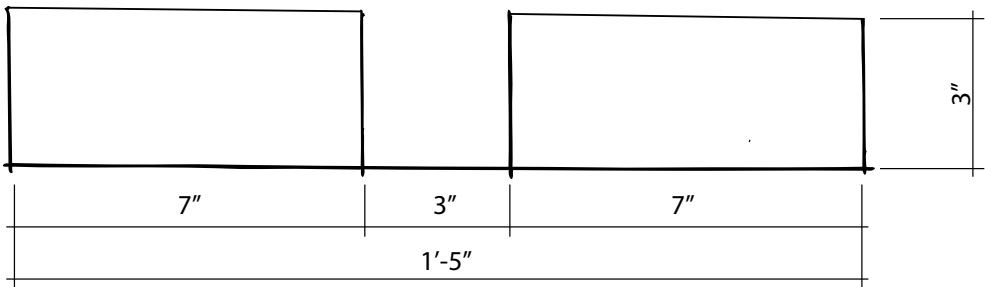
Oral histories indirectly explore that which one values as significant. This significance can be personal or global, but focused on the personal or cultural values of the person being interviewed. Reflection is important in this stage, whether it is consciously guided (by one's self or an outside interpreter) or subconscious. Completing the stages of the Personal Museum has potential to be a cathartic experience. It is an important role to furnish family and community with history.



TOP VIEW



1 LONG SECTION



2 LONG SECTION

## Box Specifications

The end-product of this project is the kit, including instructional text. The physicality of the kit (the box) is intended to be:

- a. user-friendly
- b. able to withstand use

For this project, the box is a “clam-shell box” (refer to drawings on page 31 and 32) - Approx 7x10x3” (WxLxD). This type of box can provide extra support for objects and the other contents. It will allow easy use by little hands and unfamiliar hands.

Both sides, or trays, of the box must be full depth (3 inches), for support. The left tray will include areas for a 4x6” photograph and “Collections Information” card (3.5 x 5.5”). The right tray will include the compartments for the object (5” x 7”), digital voice recorder (2.5” x 5”), and storage (4.5” x 5”).

The depth of the box (3 inches) is wide enough to have the box stand up on it’s side to use as a display piece. However, it is suggested that the “Personal Museum” be stored in a bookshelf or other safe place and taken out when interacting with it (adding a story or showing friends).

## Components

For the prototype of this project, components are as follows. Refer to “Implications” section on other physical possibilities for the kit.

- object (less than 7 in x 4 in x 3 in) - *not included*
- digital voice recorder - included
- “Collections Information” card - included on the  
backside of guide booklet (refer to page 36)
- photograph (no larger than 4x6) - *not included*
- storage area for:
  - velcro strips - included
  - photo corners - included
  - archival quality polyethylene storage bags  
(1: 4x6in, 1: 10x14in) - included
- guideline booklet for completing kit
- instructions for voice recorder



## Incorporated Text/Graphics



*Actual Size*

*Guide Booklet*  
*3.5 x 5.5 inches*

## Incorporated Text/Graphics

**Collections Information**

Name of Project:

Today's Date:

**Object Information**

What is it?

Date acquired:

Where was it acquired:

Dimensions:

Condition:

*Actual Size*

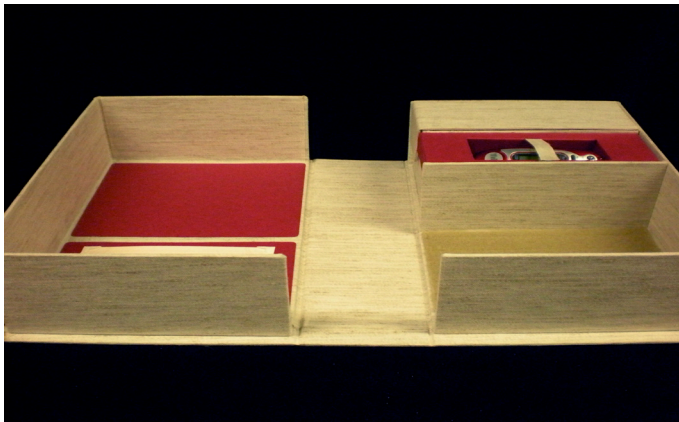
*"Collections Information" card*

*3.5 x 5.5 inches*

## Photographs



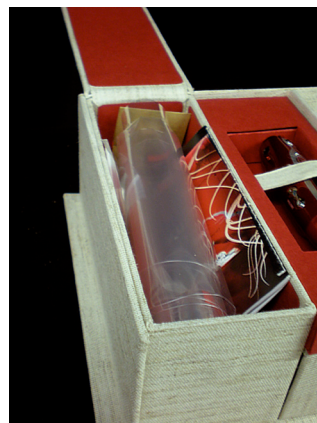
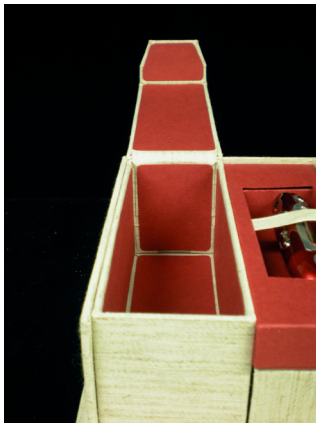
prototype constructed by Ansley Joe,  
MFA in Book Arts/Printmaking 2009.



## Photographs



prototype kit constructed by Ansley Joe,  
MFA in Book Arts/Printmaking 2009.



## Future Implications

A resource to learn of the heritage and past of a family or community.

Initiated in community centers, only children, only elderly individuals, elementary schools, high schools, universities, cultural centers, etc....

Programs incorporating different cultural centers, different schools, different age groups together.

Gain appreciation for those unlike oneself. Appreciation for the history and the personal stories of individuals of all backgrounds.

Museums, natural history museums, federal institutions, Library of Congress

Website or central place to record completed kits. Track the stages of completion and addition. Upload stories, photos of object, etc...

Can survey completed kits to find common threads between. Used to point out a larger context (or group of them) which can be included in the next iteration of this project.

Children can create handwritten storybooks with illustrations, etc... regarding stories and objects explored in the Personal Museum experience.

Produce a how-to guide on building your own Personal Museum.

Research funding opportunities for distribution of the kit to individuals.

Marketing, branding, logo design. These should be developed further if this project is to ever be realized. These components must make the project accessible to a wide range of audiences.

Research proper ways to reach the public, to get this project out there.

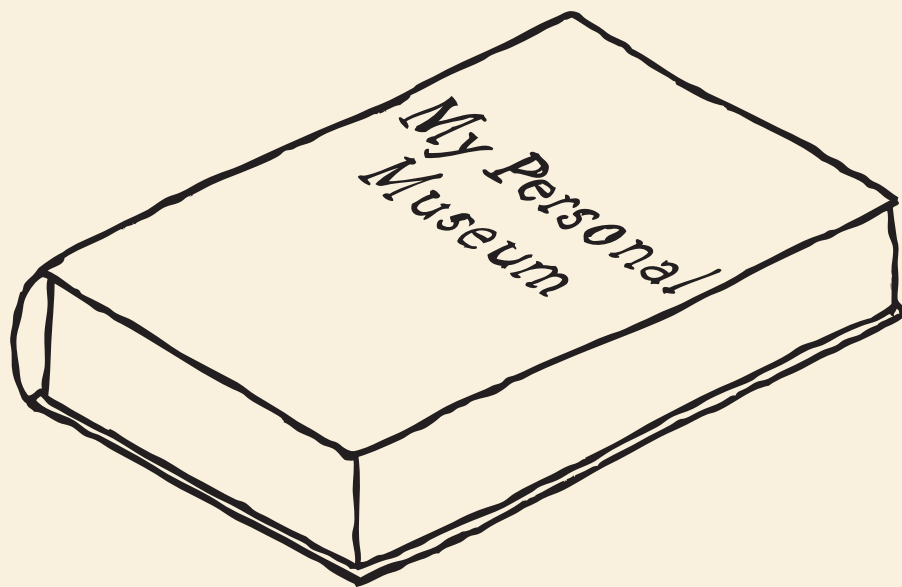
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# Inspiration

“Home as Museum in it’s Natural Habitat”

- \_ Why do we keep objects around us?
- \_ What kind of power do they hold?
- \_ How do we keep and present these objects in our homes?

Museums displaying common functional objects/tools

- \_ What allows these objects to be placed on pedestals?
- \_ textiles, bowls, tools, toys, etc...



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# Thesis Problem

## The Object

- \_ Keep important things safe
- \_ Display them whenever and to whomever we choose
- \_ Preserve, respect and re-collect objects and family histories.

## The Story

- \_ Everyone can tell a story. People tell stories everyday.
- \_ Recall events and experiences.
- \_ History, traditions and legacy
- \_ Share. Interact. Find common ground.



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# Approach

What is a story?

- \_ Beginning, middle and end
- \_ Interaction
- \_ Interpretation

What are their functions?

- \_ Keeper of identity
- \_ Reinforce values
- \_ Pass on morals
- \_ Make a Point
- \_ Entertain/Delight

What makes them important?



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# Approach

How do objects retain value/significance?

- \_ Place meaning/value on an object
- \_ Cultural differences
- \_ Transcending time

How do objects tell stories?

- \_ Quilts and their Quilters
- \_ Object Theater
- \_ Children or Toy Collectors



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# Audience

Families and family groups

Inter-generational

\_ Children, adults, grandparents

Survey Results

\_ There is a need for an organized way to keep objects/memories

\_ People keep small and/or flat things

\_ People tell stories everyday



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# Goals

- \_ To provide guidelines for the completion of the Personal Museum allowing for the effective communication of stories from which the highlighted object prompts.
- \_ Allow for a smooth transition between completing the stages of the kit and displaying the Personal Museum to an audience by providing clear instruction and tips on effectual and affectual communication.
- \_ Allow for families to leave their mark for future generations in a coherent and efficient manner.



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008



# Goals

- \_ Promote interaction between individuals in family groups through participation with, or experiencing others' projects.
- \_ Preserve significant objects and their stories through proper interview techniques, possible revisions and modifications to the stories surrounding the object.



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# My Personal Museum

- \_ Individuals will act as curator and tour guide for their Personal Museum.
- \_ Easy to prepare, use and display.
- \_ Process of completing the stages of the Personal Museum is intended to be a thoughtful one, making later viewing straight-forward.



Alexandra Turnier  
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23 April 2008

# The Box

## Clam-shell box

- \_ sturdiness
- \_ extra support
- \_ easy to use (no clasps or buttons)
- \_ store in book shelf

## Archival Quality

- \_ no hazardous materials



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# The Box

## Compartments

- \_ Object
- \_ Photograph
- \_ Collections card
- \_ Voice Recorder
- \_ Storage

## Storage

- \_ Instructions for Voice Recorder
- \_ Archival quality bags (1: 4x6, 1: 10x14)
- \_ Photo corners
- \_ Archival ink pen
- \_ Velcro strips



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# How is it used?

Choose Object

Choose photograph

Choose Interviewer and Interviewee

Prepare for interview

- \_ Familiarize oneself with voice recorder
- \_ Research object, interviewee, dates, names
- \_ Interview questions

Conduct interview

Complete Collections card

Secure object

Secure photograph



Alexandra Turnier  
MFA Thesis  
23 April 2008

# Future Considerations

Different sized boxes for different sized objects

Expandable box

Different groups (schools, cultural centers, etc...)

- \_ Display within group

- \_ Trade and display to other groups

Website for collecting information about initiated Personal  
Museums

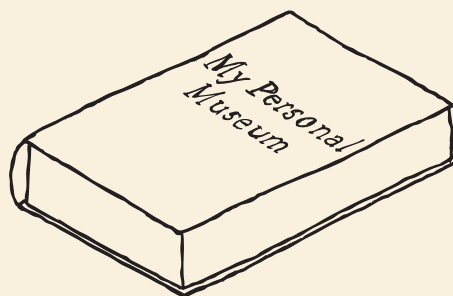
- \_ Online community project

- \_ Collect and use as market research

Specific context (i.e. major familial event, travel)

Children can create illustrated storybooks about objects and their  
stories highlighted in Personal Museum





Thank you.