

What's the Story: Harnessing the Power of Narrative

Presented by Mary Hall Surface
Phoenix Art Museum
February 2019

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Opening of Workshop

I've had the incredible opportunity to create plays for the National Gallery inspired by visual art. My most recent production was a dream come true because it was based on Henri Matisse's *Cut - Outs*, which I adore. I leapt at the chance to write this play when the topic was presented to me. And I was sure that it would be my Best. Play. Ever.

BUT once I tried to write it, I got lost! There are so many stories in the cut-outs:

- How Matisse made them--
- Why he made them--
- What they depict!

I spun myself into creative paralysis trying to capture all the things that I loved and admired about these works. I had some pretty dark nights of the creative soul trying to find my way.

Then, finally, I thought:

- What is it—truly—that I want to illuminate about these works of art?
- And how can I best connect an audience of adults and young people to the art?

Well, these two questions have always been my guiding lights when I make theatre about art. I just lost sight of them in the pressure I put on myself to make something extraordinary. SO after a bit more blood, sweat and tears, the play was born.

It's called "Color's Garden: An Adventure with the Elements of Art: Color, Line and Shape. You see, color was fed up with being secondary to Line and Shape in painting – she wanted to go first! So: Off the three friends went on an adventure where they discovered a whole new way to work and to play together to make a whole new kind of art.

"The End."

So, I've just shared a story with you – a narrative. From my narrative, you've learned some information about me:

- That I'm a playwright,
- That the National gallery asks me to write plays,
- That I love Matisse
- And that I can spin myself into deep holes creatively.

But something else happened beyond the passing on of information.

- Anyone else ever had that spinning till you're stuck feeling that I shared?
- When you try too hard?
- Or you want something to be so wonderful you can't do anything?
- Or you have so many ideas that you can't choose one? Yes?
- And then there's the feeling the joy, of relief when you climb out of the hole!

Through my brief story I hope that we began to make an emotional connection. We've known each other for about three minutes-- but a bond has begun between us through story.

Today is about building bonds-- even in the short time we have with our museum visitors and community members.

Today we'll explore how we as docents can deepen understanding and engagement by approaching the content we share as narratives--

- By thinking like writers
- Like storytellers, if you will.

Now please note, that I use the words "narrative" and "story" interchangeably.

- I know that sometimes when people hear the word "story" or "storyteller" they think of something made up, a fantasy, something childlike.
- Or worse: My mother used to say, "Are you telling a story?" which is a southern euphemism for not telling the truth.
- Please know that when I say "story" I'm talking about
 - an intentional,
 - crafted way of presenting
 - information, ideas, and reflections
 - with a purpose in mind.

This will be an interactive two hours. I invite you to participate fully in the prompts and reflections we'll be doing together. And I've built time in for questions at the end. And we'll take a 10-minute break about midway through. So, ready? We're off.