

CASE STUDY



Olfactory Storytelling Used for Visitor Access and Education Design

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Case Study

Photo credit Filip Wolak.



Marie Clapot

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Sensory methods can be used in heritage spaces for various reasons. Sometimes to heighten immersivity, connect visitors with new and hidden narratives or to increase memory. However, the inclusion of multisensory engagement can also create a more inclusive environment for those with disabilities. The ‘white cube,’ in which heritage spaces are often classified, can be non-inclusive for many visitors. For Marie Clapot, curating with scent has been a source of creativity and inspiration for making the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](https://www.metmuseum.org/) an inclusive place for all.

Who is Marie Clapot?

[Marie Clapot](#) is a sensory museologist, disability justice advocate, and associate museum educator for accessibility at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, USA. She crafts sensory-based programming, including olfactory events for disabled and non-disabled visitors and implements museum-wide strategies to embed olfactory practices in interpretation.

How is the Met working towards creating more accessible environments?

Clapot shared with us that curating sensory experiences to connect disabled visitors to art has been a hallmark of The Met programming for decades. They employ several sensory-based strategies, mainly focussed on touch, movement and sound, to connect the visitor (e.g. disabled people) with inherent sensory dimensions of artworks. For Clapot, working with scent provides a new opportunity to engage visitors with art through the senses, gaining a different knowledge perspective. For her, this is through the historical context of the work and its materiality.

Marie Clapot's thoughts on using olfactory storytelling to expand modes of curation for accessibility efforts:

#1. "Olfaction has a direct pathway to the limbic system or the human memory and emotional processing centre. This makes it a powerful tool to bypass language. When working with visitors who are non-verbal or speak another language, scent can act as a mode of communication in and of itself."

#2. "When we lead an olfactory experience for participants who are blind or partially sighted, we also use verbal descriptions as a process of organising and editing the information that we take in visually. That combination of cross-modal engagement, scent, and description can enrich the exploration and description process by increasing focus as well as bringing language associations across the senses."

#3. "When utilising scent as a means of access, I would recommend anyone to be intentional in designing the olfactory experience keeping in mind that each sense provides us with specific information, meaning olfaction is not a substitute for vision nor touch. If working with blind visitors for example, other modalities like touch and description would also be necessary to optimise access to the work."

#4. “Our focus is often on developing educational programmes for disabled people, but these sensory programmes are also beneficial to a wide variety of audiences including, youth, teens, families, adults, and educators.”

Marie Clapot’s thoughts on how to safely present scents and choose topics for the use of olfactory storytelling, curation and design:

The choice of smell distribution is very important and focusses on three main principles. Firstly, Clapot feels that visitors should be able to preserve their agency while smelling – meaning that they can decide on when and for how long they are exposed to the scent. Secondly, she always aims for visitors to have an optimal smelling experience while also controlling the spread of scent into other galleries or spaces. Lastly, versatility is important. The use of blotters and raw materials (ex. resins, incense woods, fruits, flowers, etc.) is most attractive since it has little production time and is affordable.

In terms of ensuring a safe experience for the heritage institution’s staff, visitors, and spaces, Clapot recommends retaining open communication between all departments. The conservation, curatorial and scientific research departments can assist with determining safety protocols for the works of art, staff, and visitors, as well as to receive guidance on resources about the objects. She also recommends including disclaimers or signs that well inform visitors when a programme or an exhibition includes scents.



Participant of a workshop for educators at the Met sniffing a blotter. 2015. Photo courtesy of Marie Clapot.

She emphasises that it is not just the presentation and safety that is a key part of olfactory storytelling but also the subjects presented. When choosing topics of olfactory storytelling, she says that “the choices for olfactory storytelling are informed and guided by our collection and the exhibition programmes of the museum itself. We look at these exhibition topics and see if there is a link with or an angle available of olfactory storytelling. This could be through specific objects, but also relate to the wider theme of the exhibition.” A good example for this is the public programming around the Met’s exhibition in 2019 titled *The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated*.

The [Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated](#), focussed on the artistic tradition inspired by Japan’s most celebrated work of literature, *The Tale of Genji*. It highlighted through various [objects](#) a little-known history of the tale which is its connection to *Kodo*, or incense appreciation and preparation. *The Tale of Genji* literature was the basis for ‘Genji-ko,’ a game involving incense. In short, the game is centred around five different types of incense which players are tasked to distinguish by their fragrance. Clapot led two Genji-ko sessions at the Met: one for adults and another for multigenerational audiences during a programme called [Family Afternoons](#).



A family participating in the ‘Genji-ko’ incense game at a Met Family Afternoon, 2019. Photo Courtesy of Marie Clapot.

Why Marie Clapot believes that olfactory storytelling contributes to worthwhile storytelling in heritage institutions:

- #1. “It provides visitors with more choices for how to experience the museum, and offers a new way to connect with works of art.”
- #2. “It can be a conduit to accessing knowledge as well as a delightful way to learn about art history.”
- #3. “Olfactory storytelling is at the centre of diverse artistic explorations and cross-disciplinary partnerships. It is a powerful tool in fostering meaningful conversation amongst staff, visitors, and external contractors.”

#4. “Scent is an important medium to incorporate into the public space as smelling encourages us to slow down and spend more time in front of an artwork. More than the other senses, smell simultaneously brings you into the moment and breaks down boundaries of time and space by recalling past memories and emotions.”

Marie Clapot’s advice for starting your own olfactory events:

#1. “When utilising scent as a means of storytelling, I recommend to be intentional when designing the olfactory experience and to keep in mind that each sense provides us with specific information – olfaction is not a substitute for the other senses.”

#2. “It is crucial to think through what added value(s) the scent will bring: does it support the exploration and understanding of the work of art, should it be historical, aesthetic, etc., and is the use of scent appropriate for your targeted audience?”

#3. “Tuning into senses other than vision does not necessarily come easily to us. To assist this process, I often start sensory tours with a meditative exercise encouraging participants to bring awareness to their body and their senses. Specific to olfactory storytelling, I remind participants that the point of engagement is not to guess what specific scents are, but to be curious about it.”

#4. “Keep in mind that smell experiences – conscious and unconscious – have a memorable impact on our psyche. I have experienced first-hand how scents can trigger memories that we did not know we had. This raises the challenge of smell as a medium. Difficult memories could be triggered and be dysregulating for some, potentially creating distress and other painful emotions, impacting the visitor’s museum visit.”