

Creativity Incubator
Boscobel
Hudson Valley, New York

By Franklin Vagnone

Not many people know this about me, but if the data suggests – and the situation allows, I am not afraid to change my mind. Going in another direction (either literally or figuratively) provides me with more possibilities. One of the reasons why I consider myself a “museum anarchist” is that I shy away from narrow mission statements or highly curated environments. Situations like these only constrain decision-making, solidify stasis and repress innovation and experimentation.

After the daylong “Creativity Incubator,’ organized by the Greater Hudson Heritage Network with the New York State Council on the Arts, someone told me that my words of the day were “grit” and “foil”. It came as a surprise to me because I am usually so in the moment that I don’t have time to be so immediately self-reflective. These two words speak to the need for flexibility in museum process. This gathering was attended by museum, cultural organization staff and board members. Its purpose was to provide a safe and open space to experiment with collections items and play with ideas on how to innovate, re-combine, and expand visitor interactions with them.

The first segment of the day consisted of an engaging, tactile dialogue in how we may view “things.” Things and collection of things can hold tremendous potential in the ways that we as curators and program managers organize and use them. I always learn something when I am a part of exercises like these. I am so lucky to be asked to become a part of events that are populated by such experienced, thoughtful professionals. I never feel like I am teaching, rather I feel like I am proposing a hypothesis and asking others to test it and respond.

In this case, we curated a pile of things. We excluded some things and pushed them aside. In sitting on the floor, looking at the pile of things, we discussed narratives, interpretation and how stories can be told using the items in our pile. In the conversation, it became clear that, in curating, we had marginalized and excluded a lot of possibilities. My question was, “Where is the GRIT in this pile of things?” There didn’t seem to be any FOIL to the highly selective curation that we had just completed.

In some ways, this exercise held meaning to the location that we were holding this incubator. Boscobel is an extraordinarily beautiful, although extensively reconstructed & moved, historic house. The contents are some of the finest Federal-style furniture and artifacts anywhere and rivals the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The wonderful curator Jennifer Carlquist explained that Boscobel shouldn’t be viewed as a house museum, but rather a Decorative Arts Center. The meaning and function of the spaces are galleries to present the artifacts and the story of the family isn’t the core mission of the organization. The house’s environment holds a beautiful, yet constantly grand, shiny, fancy, sameness. I wondered, “Where is the GRIT?”

This was our task for the day. How to produce grit in an environment that seemed to go out of its way to be consistently fabulously Federal. In the end, I feel like we had approached this idea through our five conjectural experimentations using Boscobel collection items. In fact, I was quite amazed at the ability of our various teams to pull it all together into a cohesive narrative and program. I think events like these are extremely important so that we all can come together and share our ideas, concerns and perspectives on moving forward.

My biggest concern for Boscobel and its contents is that they remain in a world of seclusion. Like a beautiful prince or princess, locked away in a far-off castle. One wonders how best to use this beauty? Is the beauty a hindrance to engagement? Even I was stunned and blinded by the sparkle and sensuousness of the gilded pieces, the stiff clarity of the cabinet pieces, and the blinding reflections of the mirrors. Can such beauty be a foil for the world, where mostly we are all confronted with pain, sadness, and confusion with the world around us? What are the stories that can provide meaning and context to our lives today, while still standing at a pinnacle of curated specificity?

Boscobel was the perfect place to discuss these ideas....