I admit I came late to the matter of selfie sticks. I first heard of them only a few months ago when colleagues began discussing what should be done about visitors wielding cameras on sticks? Some museums are banning them; others are selling them in their gift shops.

As a curator of exhibitions at Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, I’ve been thinking a great deal about how to bridge the gap between our traditional approach and contemporary audiences’ interests and expectations. Technology and the virtual world it unlocks are an inescapable presence for most of us. As much as I love an art gallery or good book, one of my greatest joys is a stolen moment alone with the Internet. The virtual world inside my smartphone asks very little of me, and no matter how dull or frustrating my day has been, I can always rely on it to show me something new and entertaining. Right now.

What can a brick-and-mortar museum offer visitors to rival such relentless and accessible stimulation?

At Winterthur these questions are much on our minds. Costumes of Downton Abbey in 2014 was our first major foray into answering them. We were delighted by the exhibition’s success. Suddenly Winterthur was all over the Internet, and visitors were all over Winterthur. We were especially pleased to discover that first-time visitors who came to see famous costumes were equally fascinated by our interpretation of American and British estate life. Even better, these new visitors did not confine themselves to the exhibition. They toured our mansion and gardens, shopped, ate lunch, signed up for memberships, and attended lectures. They took pictures and wrote blog posts. By all accounts, once they got here, new visitors found Winterthur to be just as enchanting as we have always known it to be.

So now what?

The answer to this question is perpetually under discussion. Winterthur’s collections are rich and deep, and our traditional audience of decorative arts lovers is our backbone, so it is imperative that we continue our strong legacy of collecting, scholarship, conservation, and interpretation.

And yet, we know that decorative arts and upper crust American estates are, in the eyes of many, remote and intimidating. Making nineteenth-century silver ewers, for instance, interesting and relevant to new

Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library in Winterthur, Delaware. Photograph by Jeannette Linder.

The 2014 exhibition Costumes of Downton Abbey—a long with lively programming, such as a costume party—drew new audiences to the museum. Photograph by Laszlo Bodo.

Winterthur’s East Terrace in the spring. Photograph by James Schneek.

By

Amy Marks Delaney
Mustachiosed and polka-dotted, a schoolmaster is one of the whimsical and spirited characters that greet visitors to A Colorful Folk: Pennsylvania Germans and the Art of Everyday Life and invite them to look more closely at the objects on display.

Photograph by Natalie Caccamo.

An enlarged eagle detail from a birth and baptismal certificate for Cornelius Dotterer, c. 1826, introduces the der Staat (nation) section of the exhibition, which also includes a carved eagle attributed to Wilhelm Schimmel (1817–1890) of Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, c. 1865–1890, and an eagle-decorated chest, possibly Snyder County, Pennsylvania, c. 1810–1825. Caccamo photograph.

audiences will take more than assuming a mutual appreciation of their finer points. Unless we are able to look at ourselves and our collections with fresh eyes and share them with people in new ways, we risk being left behind—supported by core enthusiasts, but lacking more widespread impact or appeal. At the same time the culture at large is in danger of being cut off from some of the world’s most exquisite and storied objects.

And so the stories we decide to tell with our collections will play a critical role in our future and in the future of our culture. It’s worth noting, for this reason, the degree to which contemporary technology has changed public expectations about storytelling. We have known for some time now that the public has become less interested in being passive receivers of canonical knowledge and more interested in being participants in a conversation.

Over the past few decades at Winterthur, our core audience of antiques lovers has expanded to include more families, as well as people interested in social history, gardens, and, most recently, period dramas. Fortunately, our galleries present us with an opportunity to reinvent ourselves every few months. If we plan thoughtfully, this ability to shape-shift allows us to serve multiple audiences and be many things to many people. An exhibition featuring new research and classic connoisseurship may excite our more traditional audience, while down the hall an installation that explores links between historical and contemporary design can bring in a new crowd. The possible topics are nearly infinite, and a strategic rotation should keep us in the game. It’s a sound and progressive plan.

Beyond deciding what we show and tell, it’s critical to examine how we show and tell. Some objects and exhibitions call for little scaffolding in terms of interpretation, graphics, or other supplementary elements. A Sargent painting, for instance, can tell a striking, widely appealing, and intensely personal story with little more than some basic information and good lighting. Other objects, while important in themselves and rightfully beloved by their devotees, can only take on new life and generate greater excitement when presented in a novel way.

My case in point is perhaps best illustrated by my visit to Winterthur’s print storage area to see the collection of Pennsylvania German folk art assembled by Frederick Shedy Weiser (1935–2009). I have always
liked fraktur, but they had never sung to me until Lisa Minardi, the collection's curator, opened the first drawer. Inside there was a tiny drawing of a man in cherry red pants, a bright yellow polka-dot coat, and stockings to match. He had a protuberant nose, pencil-thin moustache, crimped hair, and high-heeled shoes. He was holding the alphabet. I was smitten. Other diminutive drawings depicted exotic birds, swirling floral motifs, and geometric drawings that were almost modern in their design sense. Additional files contained larger and more elaborately decorated birth and baptismal certificates, alphabets, songbooks, and eagles that resemble majestic chickens. Lisa also brought out embroidered hand towels, less vibrant but just as personable and elaborately embellished. There were even quilted privy bags to hold early American toilet paper. "These people decorated everything," Lisa said. I wished I could meet them.

My delight, however, was tempered by the realization that the power of these objects would be lost if we simply put them up on the walls and opened the gallery doors. How could we present them so their voices wouldn't be lost in an expansive gallery? And how could we create an exhibition that would be meaningful to lovers of Pennsylvania German folk art, yet also appealing to an audience accustomed to weav- ing through images and information with a few taps on a screen?

Many of the pieces Lisa showed me that day are included in Winterthur's current exhibition, *A Colorful Folk: Pennsylvania Germans and the Art of Everyday Life*. Among this exhibition's greatest strengths is Lisa's extensive and engaging research, which lays a solid scholarly foundation for the stories these objects have to tell. But rather than creating a heavily academic exhibition, we wanted visitors—even those who are familiar with the subject matter—to see these objects and the culture that produced them in a new and delightful way.

And so, appropriately, brightly attired six-foot-tall human figures—details from a whimsical 1771 baptismal wish—greet you near the entrance to *A Colorful Folk*, and invite you into their world. Nearby, a late eighteenth-century Technicolor *Schmuck* stands radiant against a geranium red wall, accompanied by sculptural iron weather vanes, vibrant works on paper, and an unforgettable chest embellished with flowers and camels by Henrich Otto. This motley group unabashedly declares right up front that this is not your
grandmother's decorative arts installation. Similarly, each section—das Haus (home), die Kirche (church), die Schule (school), and der Staat (nation)—opens with a life-size graphic detail of a nearby object. When seen in monumental scale, these tiny drawings illuminate a vivid, tangible world—it feels as if you could step into the tulip-bedecked house, chat with the mustachioed schoolmaster, or cross swords with red-cheeked soldiers. The enlarged details also reveal evidence of the human hands that made them. Brushstrokes, pen scratches, and pooling pigment are so clearly visible that, when you look again at the real object nearby, you can't help feeling that you know it, and the person who made it, better.

Language and writing are such intrinsic elements of Pennsylvania German folk art objects that it was vital to give them a voice in the exhibition as well. Several pieces bear messages from their makers that are by turns playful, cautionary, thoughtful, and so poignant that you almost want to answer back. A charming flowerpot given by Absalom Bixler to his wife Sarah is decorated with a cat stealthily closing in on its avian prey, with the caption "READY FOR A CATCH." Young Abraham Grimm's 1803 baptismal certificate, printed by John Bauman, is almost comically morbid to the modern mind, yet it gives us a telling glimpse into Pennsylvania Germans' take on birth, death, and piety: Ich bin getauft, ob ich gleich sterbe, was schadet mir das küßle Grab? [I am baptized, if I die immediately, what harm to me is the cool grave?]. My favorite inscription was stitched on a hand towel by Elizabeth Booser in 1843: So kann ich meine Zeit vertreiben [This is the way I pass my time]. Her simple statement speaks volumes.
about the quiet daily activities that make up much of life, both then and now. By highlighting these personal messages on our gallery walls—in their original language and lettering style—we aim to capture both the immediacy of individual voices and the distinct flavor of the Pennsylvania German culture.

Depending on how they are displayed, these historic forms can also take on a modern, or even a timeless, sensibility. When shown side-by-side at full length, four embroidered hand towels become striking in their symmetry, precision, and alabaster elegance. By contrast, other objects are set apart in a white-walled Stube (stove room) vignette—the cozy heart of the Pennsylvania German home. In the corner a door—painted, of course, and a rare survival—is displayed as it would have been used, with its hooks holding a skillfully embroidered hand towel. The inclusion of this seldom seen detail somehow adds human presence to the simple room, as if its inhabitant put up her hand towel and stepped out the door for a moment.

The things that Pennsylvania Germans left behind reflect a culture that was vibrant with humor, hard work, faith, joy, and loss. *A Colorful Folk* displays these quintessentially human stories in a way that is delightful, resonant, and consonant with the spirit of their creation. We welcome you to bring your smartphone. Your pictures, tweets, and blog posts add a virtual breath of fresh air to our reality.

An elaborately embroidered hand towel—embroidered by Susanna Groff Steinweg (1794–1879) of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1848—hangs on a door of c. 1750–1775 as part of a vignette of a Pennsylvania German home created for the exhibition. *Door, Rocky Hill Collection, Cacskamo photograph.*

An eighteenth-century Berks County *Schränk* and whimsical iron weather vanes, possibly by Friedrich Marstaller (1702–1753) of Montgomery County, pop against geranium-red walls. Nearby are a chest for Johannes Miller with decoration of flowers and camels attributed to Henrich Otto (1733–c.1799) and an 1812 portrait of Juliana Wunderlich by John Lewis Krimmel (1786–1821). *Weather vanes, collection of Augustus Lutheran Church, Trappe, Pennsylvania; chest, private collection, Cacskamo photograph.*

Installed side-by-side, four embroidered hand towels take on a contemporary sensibility highlighting their modern qualities. *Schmeck photograph.*

A hand-stitched inscription on an 1845 hand towel by Elizabeth Booser of Lancaster County reads *So kan Ich meine Zeit vertrieben* [This is the way I pass my time]. *Schmeck photograph.*

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