Defining Interpretation

What is interpretation?
Man is what he believes.

Anton Chekhov, author
In the end, we conserve only what we love.
We will love only what we understand.
We will understand only what we are taught.

- Baba Diuom, Senegalese poet
The natural setting of a park, the preserved battlefield, the historic restoration, are exactly those places where interpretation finds its ideal opportunity, for these are the places where firsthand experience with the objects of nature’s and mankind’s handiwork can be had.
Freeman Tilden

The purpose of interpretation is to stimulate the visitor toward a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statements of fact.
The interpreter arouses interest by dealing in big principles -- not with detached and colorless information.

He creates more permanent interest in the biography of a single tree than in the naming of many trees.
The interpreter is at his best when he discusses facts so that they appeal to the imagination and to reason, gives flesh and blood to cold facts, makes life stories of inanimate objects... gives biographies rather than classifications.
The interpreter will quickly discover that visitors gain little from a mere recitation of facts. Rather, the interpreter’s goal is accomplished when he strikes a note to which a visitor relates, finds interest in, and becomes so excited about that he seeks to discover more on his own.
Interpretation is something individual, something that comes from knowledge and doing, but you’ve got to feel it. It’s not just relating facts, but making facts live and tell a story.
Enos Mills, nature guide and father of Rocky Mountain National Park

The best interpretation comes from the heart and is laced with imagination, creativity, inspiration, revelation, and personal commitment.
Many a guided tour is simply a vocal listing of facts and figures. It is information that is so often given; it is interpretation which should have been accomplished.
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Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings of the resource.
An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, firsthand experience, and illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.
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An *educational activity* which aims to *reveal* meanings and relationships through the use of *original objects*, *firsthand experience*, and *illustrative media*, rather than simply to *communicate* factual information.
Interpretation is:
- Educational (purposeful) communication

What does it do?
- Reveals meanings and relationships
- Appeals to the intellect and to emotions

How?
By using
- Original objects
- Firsthand experience
- Illustrative media
Interpretation is any process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage through firsthand involvement with an object, landscape or site.
Freeman Tilden’s Principles of Interpretation

1. Interpretation that does not somehow **RELATE to the** personality or experience of the **visitor** will be sterile.

2. Information is not interpretation. Interpretation is **REVELATION** based on information, but they are entirely different things.

3. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but **PROVOCATION**.
To characterize a good tour leader we would settle for a middling good storyteller, the kind who proceeds in a leisurely, even aimless fashion, finding an appealing side to everything encountered ...

You have to be a genuine enthusiast, almost impelled to share your knowledge with others. You must be able to pump yourself up over the life history of a snail or a lock of Lily Langtry’s hair.
What is this object?

- A pottery vessel
- Native Americans
- Pottery
- Art
- Changing technology
- Sociology
- Nature study
- Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
What is this object?

- A trolley
- Changing transportation
- Technology
- Changing cities
- Map reading/routes
- Math/timetables
- The physics of gears
- Geography/materials
- Electric vs. gas power
What is this object?

- A tea kettle
- Life in a kitchen
- Foods and drinks
- Geography/sources
- Physics of steam
- Steam power
- Character of water
- Water systems
- Daily life
Interpretation is helping objects tell their stories.

Every object has hundreds of stories. Tell the stories which bring your visitor in contact with the mission, resources and values of your site.

It is information that is so often given; it is interpretation which should have been accomplished.
Interpretation

How?
• Reveal meanings and relationships

Using
• Original objects
• Firsthand experience
• Illustrative media
Ron Thoman, Chief of Interpretation, referring to Josh Barkin, whom Freeman Tilden called “the interpreter’s interpreter.”

He was a genius of interpretive technique, using romance, adventure, mystery, magic, surprise, exploration, discovery, laughing, crying, and ‘miricalizing the common’ to lead visitors through the process of awareness, understanding, appreciation and a commitment to preservation.
In the end, we conserve only what we love.
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