



## Moving image

Rebecca Atkinson, 15.01.2014

What makes a good museum film?

From the [Rijksmuseum's flashmob film recreating Rembrandt's Nightwatch](#) to an animation of the [American Museum's folk art collection](#), museums are using the medium of film in many different ways.

There are several reasons for museums to produce films:

- To offer interpretation for an exhibition or gallery
- To create immersive experiences
- As learning experiences
- For marketing or fundraising purposes

[The National Mining Museum Scotland](#), near Edinburgh, uses film to bring the post-industrial site to life. "You underestimate the power of film to make ideas and history tangible," says Rowan Brown, the museum's director. "It allows us to demonstrate some of the sensory experiences that we just can't recreate in real life."

One of its first attempts to animate the site was a project called Mining Media, which featured its collection of historic film and archival images in the context of the colliery building to portray the site as it appeared in operation and provide a stark contrast with the present day.

More recently, it worked with the animator [Claire Lamond](#) on Seams and Embers, a short film about the community life of the Scottish coalfields. Funded by Museums Galleries Scotland, the animation featured the voices of staff and volunteers, handmade puppets and recorded oral history recordings.

"We wanted animation because it was something that had the potential to be international and appeal to young people," Brown says. "It's accessible as a medium, slower to date than action film and more attractive to a broader audience."

Once Lamond has finished showing the film in various festivals and competitions, it will be shown

online on the National Mining Museum Scotland's website and be screened to visitors in the galleries. Some of the puppets from the film have also been added to the museum's collection.

### **Learning curve**

As part of the project, Lamond worked with four schools at the museum and helped them come up with their own animations.

Film is an ideal medium to use as a learning experience with children of all ages and ability. Digital heritage consultant [Martin Bazley](#) says a sustainable approach is bringing in a production company to train staff to deliver film-based sessions.

He recently worked with A-level art students at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford to produce a video learning resource about the Victorian art critic [John Ruskin](#). Using a small camera, a tripod and a cheap microphone, the students filmed a tour of the museum by the workshop leader.

"It had quite low production values, but it was good enough for teachers and classes to see how it could work for them," says Bazley. "When producing films as part of a learning experience, there can be a tension between production values and the value of the experience.

"There do need to be certain standards of course, but it's more about the depth of engagement and the creative processes the students go through."

### **Showcasing museums**

John Wyver, co-founder of production company [Illuminations Media](#), has produced films for a number of museums, including most recently the National Gallery's Barocci exhibition and Hepworth Wakefield.

Many of the films he's worked on tend to be in curatorial, marketing or education – with the final result dependant on who or what they are for, as well as the budget.

"It is possible to create films that work across different categories," he says. "Our approach is to make work that tries to be in the service of the artwork and exhibit, with a relatively neutral approach to the subject – we're not trying to bring a sense of authorship to the films, we want to create content that showcases objects and the ideas of curators."

Deciding to bring in an external production company to create a film for any of these purposes will naturally come with a price tag.

Lisa Power, producer and animator at [Glass Cannon](#), a York-based production company, says: "People can be a bit afraid of film as it is high risk – it's a lot of money to spend on something that might date after a few years. But if it's done right then film can be an investment that is totally bespoke to the museum and lasts a long time."

Immersive films are often considered to date more quickly than other live action film, while animation may have a longer shelf life.

But Bazley says that to some extent people will put up with films dating: "It's not possible to future-proof a film, not least because styles change. The less hyped something is, though, the longer it will last."

As a general rule, films used in galleries and websites should be short. "It's good to leave the audience wanting to know more," says Power.

Three minutes – often considered the optimum film length – is not a lot of time to tell a complicated story or add meaningful information to other interpretation.

Power says museums can have different bitesize films throughout a gallery that are independent of each other but still provide a longer narrative and continuity.

The context of where the film will be shown has to be taken into account at the start of the process – things such as gallery noise, wayfinding and other exhibits can all affect the final film. The audience will also determine the final product – who is going to watch it and what will they get out of it?

Jane Williams, an independent producer and director who runs Birmingham-based production company [Fandango Media](#), filmed at several National Trust and English Heritage locations when freelancing for the BBC and is now working on a new production that traces the roots of British American history to [Scrooby Manor](#) in Nottinghamshire.

She says essential elements of a good film include: exclusive access to new material or research; visually interesting objects and locations; and articulate and passionate speakers, both amateur and expert.

“A good film must engage the audience,” Williams adds. “It should generate emotion, provoke thought and ideally lead us to take positive action.”