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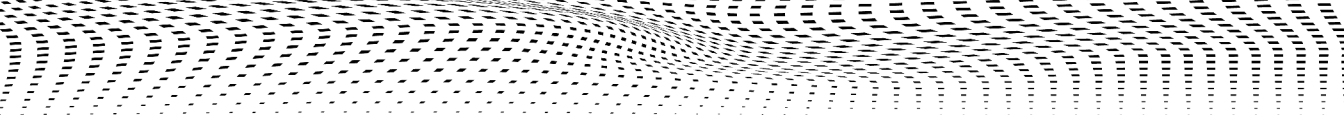
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A Houseful of Boxes, a Defeated Ship, and Two Life-Changing Insights

LAURIE PHILLIPS

A life-coaching game called Museum Sage helps players find answers in artworks. Here are two players' stories.

In January 2015, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, invited some of my collaborators and me to entertain their visitors at its monthly party night. On a snowy evening we arrived to help about eighty partygoers enjoy the museum and, while doing so, gain insight into their life's problems and opportunities.

We brought Museum Sage, a life-coaching game that I created, to the museum. The game turns a seven-step interaction with a work of art into practical wisdom. Museum Sage Guides help players (Sages) find an artwork using one of several random and intuitive methods. The Sage asks a personal question and has a dialogue with the work. If there's a Guide and other players in the group, the Sage receives observations from them as well. The Sage creates an action step that they agree to take in the next few days.

Paolo: Obvious and Prophetic

Paolo closed his eyes and chose a spot on the museum map. I led him to that spot while he kept his eyes closed and walked mindfully, noticing his breathing and everything his other senses were bringing him. (To keep people and artworks safe, we now encourage Sages to look at the floor about five feet ahead of them while walking mindfully.)

When we arrived at the gallery Paolo had chosen on the map, I asked him to sense where his body wanted to go to find "his" artwork. Reminding him to keep his eyes closed, I carefully guided him. After a few turns to the left and right, he landed in front of the work his body told him was the right one—even though he still couldn't see it. I asked him to open his eyes and spend a full minute looking at every detail of the piece ([Figure 1](#)), then describe it out loud.

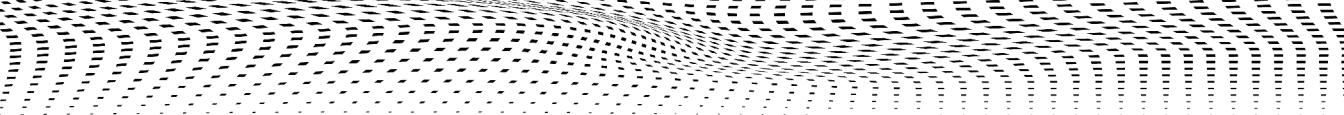
He said, "I see a large mansion in the process of being packed up. There are workers filling crates, two people conversing, and an overseer directing the process." Next to this painting, he noticed, was another one (*not pictured here*) of similar workers carrying furnishings to a small cabin near a river.



Figure 1. Paolo's painting: *Packing Porcelain for Export*, ca. 1825, by Artist in China. Gouache on paper. Frame 24 × 29 1/4 × 1 in. (60.96 × 74.3 × 2.54 cm). Museum purchase, made possible by an anonymous donor, 1983 E81592.23 (Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum)



Figure 2. Emily's painting: *She Fell in the Sea a Perfect Wreck*, 1812, by Michele Felice Cornè, 1752 Elba – 1845 Newport, Rhode Island. Oil on canvas. Image 31 1/2 × 46 3/4 in. (80.01 × 118.75 cm) H × W. Museum purchase, made possible by an anonymous donor, 2008. M27847.4 (Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Photography by Kathy Tarantola)



I asked Paolo to keep describing details. He noticed the hidden storage area on the upper right and a figure dressed in a red uniform in the very back. Then I asked if he was comfortable sharing his question with the group, and he was.

When he asked, “How should I approach the process of selling my home of twenty-eight years and moving to a new home?” I, and the other three people in the group, laughed in amazement at how his question and the painting resonated. I asked what insights this painting, and the similar one next to it, were offering him.

“Some background is that I’ve been procrastinating this move and sale for several years,” Paolo said. “I interpret this painting to mean that I should pack with care, get help when I can, and maintain a sense of imminent inevitability—that this move and sale will happen.”

After I asked if it was okay for me and other group members to share, we added observations like, “There are thirteen workers pictured here. Make sure you get enough help of all kinds.” “Your fragile objects will arrive safely if they’re securely packed like the objects in the painting.” “The home in the first painting is huge, while the home in the second painting is much smaller and in a natural setting. Downsizing might mean that you can afford a house in a beautiful area.”

For his action step, Paolo committed to looking for a professional moving company to hire when it was time. I used his phone to take a photo of him with his art, and another of the art’s wall label, so he could research the piece online later and perhaps receive even more insights.

Six months later I heard from Paolo. “After our Museum Sage session,” he wrote, “I proceeded with a focused approach to culling my belongings, staging my home for optimum appeal to prospective buyers, and carefully packing things I would keep. A few months later my house was ready for sale and on the market. It was under agreement to sell within a week, so the process of packing up began in earnest. Soon there were seventy banana boxes full of my belongings stacked in various rooms. Then within two weeks I found the only place I’d seen in months that I truly wanted, and it was near a river. I bought it. Moving day was much like what was portrayed in the first painting, with many people working and two overseers of the process in the home I was moving out of, and then several people working on managing others who were moving things in and setting up the furnishings.”

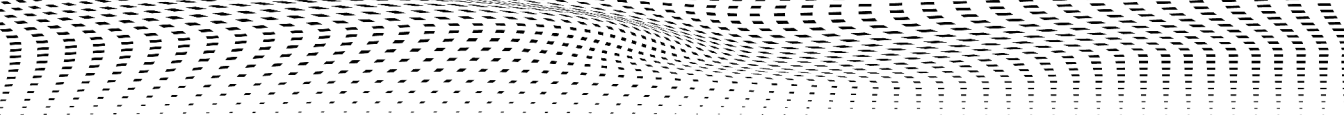
Paolo’s last comment was “Wow! Museum Sage taps into and aligns with the truth that is always out there and in here at the same time.”

Emily: A Dream-Interpretation Technique Bears Fruit

The question Emily had in mind was “why can’t I find a house to buy after looking for such a long time?”

Emily ended up in front of a maritime painting ([Figure 2](#)) that documented an event from the War of 1812: a victorious US warship towing a defeated British warship into harbor.

There was a problem: Emily wasn’t coming to any conclusions from looking at the overall image or considering its details. So I suggested she enter into and speak as each “character” in



the image—the American warship, the British warship, the sea, one of the seagulls, and the stormy clouds.

After imagining herself as both ships, she said, “One part of me, the part that thinks I should settle down and buy a house, is dragging the other part of me around. I relate much more to the defeated ship.”

After some conversation with me, Emily had an aha moment. “Now I know why I couldn’t find a house to buy,” she said. “I don’t want a house! I don’t want to be burdened with a house. That’s someone else’s vision. I just want to travel!”

Using a dream-interpretation technique helped Emily untangle the complex feelings she had about buying a house. She was then able to make a choice that aligned more closely with her authentic self.

Emily’s and Paolo’s Museum Sage sessions each took less than half an hour. Of course, not all Sages receive such direct messages so quickly. Like powerful dreams, some messages aren’t clear for days or weeks or months. A Sage who had a session many years ago shared that even though she still doesn’t know what “her” piece means, she visits it (an ancient Greek sculpture of a caduceus) whenever she goes to the museum. It’s become her symbol for a spiritual touchstone that can’t be put into words.

After our evening at the Peabody Essex Museum ended, we Guides gathered in our hotel bar and shared stories of the Sages we’d guided and the revelations they’d had—many of them as powerful as the ones described here. We all raised a glass to Museum Sage ... and the Muse.

LAURIE PHILLIPS is a graduate of the University of Colorado, Boulder, attended classes at the San Francisco Art Institute, and did graduate study at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. After years working as a graphic designer, she trained as a life coach. She developed a process that she calls a “game” called *Museum Sage*, in which a Guide helps an individual address a personal question inspired by artwork. Laurie has developed a free app called Museum Sage so that people can do this on their own. *Correspondence:* laurie@museumsage.com.