

SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN WORLD CULTURES COLLECTIONS: THE VIEW FROM LATE 2020

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Introduction

CW and HM: In October 2019 over 70 people gathered in Brighton as part of the annual Museums Association conference to reflect on the key skills and behaviours required by curators of world cultures collections. The event was co-organised by the ‘Museums, Archives, Exhibitions’ research strand at the University of Brighton’s Centre for Design History, and The Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove (now The Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust) [1]. Short provocations delivered by Christo Kefalas [2], Rachael Minott [3] and Rebecca Bridgman [4] set the tone for the debate. Following these presentations, the delegates worked together in a workshop format to list their top required skills and behaviours. They were also asked to document their answers to two further questions: 1) ‘What are the current barriers preventing individual and institutional change?’ and 2) ‘What are your recommendations moving forward?’. The discussions were rich, challenging and inspiring. They were designed to support the museum sector and professionals working with ‘world cultures’ collections by documenting and advocating for their specific needs.

Since that event, much in our sector and the wider world has changed. Yet, as we reflected on what might make an appropriate opening comment for this issue of the *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, the issues and recommendations raised by this group of practitioners, academics and students seemed to us more relevant than ever. Despite the attention paid in museums to the past, our institutional and collective memory is often opaque; previous projects and lessons learnt are easily forgotten. With this in mind, it strikes us as especially important to document the Brighton discussions here. We also take this opportunity to reflect on the impact of Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on the sector, and develop some expanded recommendations. We hope these will help stimulate further discussion, support advocacy for resources, and – perhaps most importantly – prompt action.

In Brighton, the key skills identified reflected the increasingly ‘human-centred’ nature of our work: listening, facilitating, mediating and resolving conflicts. Adaptability, experimentation and the capacity to abdicate power were key. Language also emerged as a central area of concern, both in terms of dealing with outdated and offensive terms and terminologies which have historically accompanied the cataloguing of colonial-era collections and in finding a common, shared language through which to communicate with the many stakeholders for world cultures collections. Curators were encouraged to be reflexive and to recognise their own positionality. One speaker highlighted the

‘vulnerability and sense of exposure’ experienced by people of colour working with collections borne of imperial violence; others identified the need for emotional resilience.

Barriers to good curatorial practice included disciplinary hierarchies and boundaries, a fear of ‘getting it wrong’ and of damaging the professional reputation of the individual and/or the institution. Limited resources were also a factor, as was a lack of specialist and representative staffing. Yet disciplinary and organisational structures also had the potential to lead to silos of knowledge, and expectations that world cultures’ curators were exclusively responsible for progressive change in museums. It was felt that academic qualification requirements also act as barriers to incorporating plural forms of knowledge and experience into the sector.

In what follows, the session chairs and speakers reflect back on the workshop, each commenting individually on two issues raised by speakers and delegates which relate especially directly to our work in late 2020. We then offer a brief conclusion. Before we do so, Christo Kefalas provides an outline of this challenging year, and the particular impacts of its developments on the museum sector.

An extraordinary year for the sector

CK: The day-to-day activities of many of us working in the heritage sector took a sharp detour in 2020. From March, a novel coronavirus called Covid-19 spread throughout the UK and the world. Covid-19 restrictions meant that libraries, museums, and archives had to change their offer for audiences, as most were closed in the UK until at least July. Museums and galleries were amongst the worst financially hit in the cultural sector during the national lockdown due to the decline in international and domestic tourism and an inability to run income generating activities. The UK government implemented the Job Retention Scheme so that employers could continue to pay employees for whom they had no work by placing them ‘on furlough’, with a view to returning employees to work when they were needed. At the time of writing there continue to be restrictions on heritage visits with local lockdowns and foreign travel restrictions limiting tourism.

On writing this summary in November 2020, we are still in uncertain times. Organisations have felt significant financial pressures and redundancies are incumbent. A key challenge will be how we deal with the emotional impacts that will echo into the future, the lack of resources in the short term, as well as the risk of long-term losses to our institutional knowledge. Emergency funds were opened, such as Arts Council Wales and England’s Cultural Recovery Fund for organisations that were at risk of failure, and the UK government’s Heritage Stimulus Fund to restart construction projects of vital importance to the sector. Many of these funds were established quickly to alleviate the financial strains of Covid-19, but there will be a very significant shift towards a greater need for support from charitable, government, and specialised funds as organisations have less money in the future.

An interesting opportunity arising from the pandemic has been a shift in our understanding of what we can offer existing and new audiences through our digital reach. The interpretive lens curators utilise to create in situ immersive experiences has now been turned towards the medium of the website through focused articles, online experiences, and social media. 'Back of house' activities like enhancing object documentation have been prioritised, with conversations around drawing on shared resources and working across organisations gaining a renewed focus. Digital engagement is a truly different skillset, requiring an understanding of projected audiences and conveying a story online meaningfully. The collaborative process of creating museum interpretation has now been translated into a fruitful opportunity for experimentation and revised frameworks for how we write, what we say, and why it matters.

The social and political BLM movement has had a large impact on libraries, museums and archives across the UK. The movement gained international prominence and strength after George Floyd was killed by the police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, at the end of May 2020. Protests were organised across the UK in opposition to incidents of violence and racially motivated police brutality. For those of us who have long been working within the realms of decolonising the museum, it was refreshing to have an awareness of systemic racism and inequality drawn into the light of public consciousness through this forum. The discourse stimulated in the sector around BLM resulted in many institutions returning to their core purpose, with some making position statements that they would become actively anti-racist. Many others re-affirmed their need to acknowledge systemic inequalities through promises to work with community groups, highlighting an appetite for change and the need for transparency in the continuous endeavour to decolonise our practice. There were also widespread challenges levied against heritage organisations by the public and media that framed anti-racist and decolonising declarations as an act of 'virtue signalling'.

Curation of cultural heritage is meant to respond to the social and cultural movements of our time and has always had a political dimension. Public statues and monuments became a key focus for BLM protesters, and cracked open a faultline of national identity politics in relation to how the Authorised Heritage Discourse* is told in the UK. In June 2020, the stories around key figures in British history were questioned. Sir Winston Churchill's statue in London was sprayed with graffiti reading Churchill 'was a racist', and the statue of Scottish merchant and slave trader, Robert Milligan, was removed from outside of the Museum of London Docklands following consultation with the local community.

While the events of 2020 will have a lasting impact on the sector, the most troubling has been the deep politicisation of culture through polarising politics. In September 2020, the Culture Secretary wrote a letter to the DCMS and museum bodies arguing that the government does not support publicly funded bodies removing contested heritage and insinuating that government funding could be withheld. The implications of this kind of direct political interference in the sphere of culture and heritage are complex, but two things immediately come to mind in relation to curatorial practice.

Firstly that we can no longer deny that cultural heritage is political, as even the act of remaining silent about relevant aspects of history connected to colonialism, racism, and oppression is a political statement. Secondly our responsibilities to make careful decisions about heritage with communities must be a commitment backed by entire organisations, so that changing political agendas do not affect our renewed curatorial focus – to illuminate lesser-known histories that have previously been overlooked or wilfully omitted. Far from re-writing history, this kind of contextualisation is exactly what heritage experts do on a regular basis. The framework is now different, but we continue to listen to voices on both sides of the political divide to make informed and sensitively thought through decisions that align to our organisational values.

*Note: The Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) is a term coined by Laurajane Smith to describe the discourse of archaeology as dominated by Western understandings of history, materiality and meaning. It is also relevant to recognise the role that heritage professionals and experts have in supporting the AHD, which has often constrained community understandings of heritage.

Critical issues for World Cultures Curating in 2020

Specialist knowledge and Subject Specialist Networks

RB: Covid-19 has brought into focus social division and inequalities. Specialist knowledge and an understanding of what museums hold remain important elements of the work identified in many institutional statements that responded to BLM. Better collections' management and understanding facilitates collections development and democratisation, leading to the weaving of nuanced and layered interpretations from a range of people. As the Museums Association publication *Empowering Collections* (2019) makes clear, ultimately knowledge about collections ensures that they become more engaging, inclusive and relevant.

No one person can ever gain detailed knowledge of the vast expanse of chronology and geography included in World Cultures collections in the UK. In many regional museums across the country there is often only one person (or no specialist in particular) curating world cultures collections and beyond. Lack of knowledge and understanding of these collections, combined with lack of diversity in the museum sector, means that they often languish in store. Frequently, this is rooted in fear from staff of making a mistake that might cause offence or even lead to accusations of institutional racism.

Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) have a key role to play in supporting museum staff through sharing knowledge and expertise on collections. They can give them the confidence to work with collections beyond their specialist areas. The importance of SSNs has been recognised by sector surveys, including the Mendoza Review (2017) and Art Fund (2017): they help retain and develop specialist collections knowledge at a time when curatorial roles are dwindling and becoming increasingly hybrid. They offer training to staff across the sector, through conferences, practical, object-handling focused study days and on-line resources providing guidance on specific topics. Examples range from the Museum Ethnographers Group's important online resource on repatriation

(<http://www.museumethnographersgroup.org.uk/en/resources/436-a-repatriation-resource.html>) to the SSN Islamic Art and Material Culture's support scheme, providing bespoke expertise in collections and engagement for individual organisations (<http://islamicartssn.org.uk/funding/>). Undoubtedly, training and support can help museum staff better understand and develop their collections. Nevertheless, expanding and retaining collections knowledge when curatorial teams are shrinking remains a challenge, particularly to regional museums. SSNs can help provide some of the answers but that needs to be within a wider model of skills sharing across academic partners and museums as well as with experts and researchers beyond those sectors.

Language: within and beyond institutions

CK: Language is important for both verbal and written communications, especially now that we communicate on digital forums more often. If we want to tell the stories of our collections in ways that avoid euphemisms and evasion of painful histories for the communities we engage with, one of our barriers is the language we use. We are not always equipped at institutional levels to expose individuals or groups to how our collections are labelled and described. Within the sector we also often work with communities for whom English is a second language, and we need additional support for our work when we are not equipped with the linguistic or cultural nuance to carry out research and display projects.

The language we choose to use should enable choice and opportunity. A key skill is understanding that language will continue to evolve so we must keep dialogues about terminology open with relevant communities. In the digital age where how we communicate must reflect our internal values, it is important to recognise that the journey for making choices around language is as important as the other choices we make.

As curators, our channels of communication and what we say externally starts with the internal conversations in which we engage. That is not to say that there is always consensus, and definitely not that we get always get our way, but working across departments helps add multivocality and a diversity of opinion to the work we present externally. It also supports achieving the organisation-wide buy-in that is necessary to ensure that the work we do is aligned to our purpose, and organisations can stand behind the things they say.

Sustainability and plural forms of knowledge

HM: The need to generate long-term, sustained change from short-term funded initiatives remains a critical issue for the sector, especially given the added financial challenges presented by Covid-19. Project funding is often used by policy makers and organisations to kick-start strategic initiatives. However, the narrow window for activity in these time-limited schemes risks leaving partners and participants hanging, and outcomes not properly reflected on nor institutionally embedded before the organisation is under pressure to chase another shiny new grant fund. As raised by the Mendoza

Review (2017), funding organisations could better support the sector with a more ‘joined-up’ offer including opportunities for follow-on funding. For museums, strategies for playing a long game include setting long-term goals to which short-term projects can contribute and – most importantly – developing meaningful, sustained critical friendships to help steer the organisation. Such friendships, in my experience, are not easy or comfortable, but necessary to provide the rigour, scrutiny and accountability needed to realise long-term change.

In terms of the need to deconstruct ‘specialist’ knowledge (highlighted by our workshop participants at the Museums Association conference), the subtext is that museums have for too long privileged certain forms of knowledge at the expense of others. Some progress has been made in the interpretation of world cultures collections which today often allows for ‘multiple perspectives’ but substantial work remains in the need to more fully utilise collections management systems so that they can enable more complex, non-hierarchical, relational approaches to provenance and collection documentation. Following on from Rebecca’s observations, structural change is also needed: in museums to diversify the workforce and to ensure that knowledge and expertise are recompensed with acknowledgement and a professional fee, and in the higher education sector to create meaningful and equitable ways in which researchers based in and outside the academy can participate in knowledge generation. Museums have an important role in the knowledge economy, but they do not have to be at its centre.

Collaboration, multiplicity, remuneration and transparency

RM: While 2020 in many ways has highlighted divisions, discontent and feelings of isolation, in others it has brought us together in common conversations, reenergised long fights for equality and created avenues for connection that transcend physical limitations by thrusting us into a digital space. It has made clear the need to cross barriers and boundaries to work together, that we must make concerted efforts to communicate with those with whom we may disagree or see as fundamentally different than ourselves. In the hyper digital workplace we now find ourselves in, some elements of collaboration are simpler; conversations across the country and the world can be arranged and held within moments, screens shared and documents collaboratively written. However, the disparities between access to digital resources, skills and stable internet connections mean that many are being left behind in these new paths.

And so we must remember the basics, ask ourselves who should be involved in these decisions and discussion, who will be impacted - not just who can I reach most conveniently. Ask for advice and extra perspectives to see if you have thought of everyone. While this is a search for diversity of thought and experience, strive for multiplicity rather than representation. Remember we can only truly represent ourselves, and/or those who nominate us to speak on their behalf. Look for the best mechanisms to communicate, do not forget the analogue in this digital world. If you are consulting and asking for knowledge gained from lived experience, or looking to source creative

ideas, remunerate your participants. In these uncertain times, do not wait for participants to ask for payments: be transparent with your offers and your budgets and allow them the opportunity for early, informed decision making.

When you have brought a group together, agree your purpose: what you hope to achieve together, how you hope to reach this, and the legacy of this work. Transparency of process and paths of clear communication is key to ethical collaboration. Our resources are limited and our work for equality is urgent. Connect your projects, build upon one another and build in legacies, whether crowd sourcing for interventions into databases; empowering individual or group research projects that blossom beyond your institution; democratising decision making on budgets, restitution claims, acquisitions; disseminating information and resources to enable others to learn and grow through these.

Institutional memory and support for wellbeing

CW: Recent debates on the role of language and power in museum practice are critical, but world cultures curators have discussed the socio-political implications of collections documentation and access since 1976 when MEG began. In both 1984 and 2019, MEG held conferences to discuss the complexities of building trust with stakeholders. What has changed in 35 years of practice? What lessons have been learnt? Particularly in these stretched, fraught times, expending scarce resources reinventing the wheel is exhausting and prevents positive transformation. In our current rush to acknowledge BLM, we must make time to attend to and build upon earlier debates, and to document our current experiences for each other and future generations, disseminating them in open access, democratic forms. Critically, we must also act upon institutional memory, upon these earlier statements of intent and fledgling hopes, to move beyond discussion and practise meaningful action.

The emotional challenges placed upon museum practitioners involved in institutional and professional change should also be recognised. As Kefalas and Minott highlighted in their provocations, practising human-centred work and working with challenging collections can be painful work. World cultures departments are not the exclusive repositories of objects of colonial violence, but their collections do hold accessions that require particular care. The emotional impacts of BLM and Covid-19, and the resourcing implications of the former, have added to the pressures of this work. Museum practitioners and academics with specialisms in psychology, health, museum studies and cultural memory should work together to document and understand the impact of this emotional labour and trauma, to map emerging strategies for care and wellbeing, and to build further arenas of support for the mental health of a stretched museum workforce. Anxiety, vulnerability and discomfort are important catalysts to change, but sufficient support is required for this labour.

Concluding comments

HM: Reflecting on discussions held at the Museums Association's 2019 conference from the perspective of late 2020, it is clear that, as Wintle suggests, many of the issues raised are 'old' problems given new dimensions and urgency by the developments of this year. Many of us working with world cultures collections have always argued that these collections offer compelling resources for thinking through major societal challenges but this has never been more evident. Such collections provide the materials for reflecting on Britain's colonial legacies as well as for exploring the possibilities of a 'post-colonial' or even 'decolonial' future. Without underplaying the significant obstacles presented to collections access – from outmoded knowledge hierarchies, collections gatekeeping and archaic collections management systems, to dwindling resources and scope for curatorial advocacy – we hope that the above recommendations make visible some paths for enabling these collections to become future-orientated tools for action, as well as discomfiting reminders of a colonial past.

Notes

1. The event was organised by Claire Wintle, Principal Lecturer in Museum Studies, University of Brighton, and Helen Mears, Keeper of World Art, Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust, who chaired and summarised the session respectively.
2. Christo Kefalas is World Cultures Curator for the National Trust.
3. Rachael Minott is an artist, researcher and curator.
4. Rebecca Bridgman is Curatorial and Exhibitions Manager, Birmingham Museums Trust; Chair of the SSN Islamic Art and Material Culture

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