

Collaborating institutions

Objects of Inspiration

Royal Cornwall Museum (RCM) and University College Falmouth (UCF)

Country and a summary of the national or regional context as appropriate

UK. Cornwall.

Museum/gallery description

RCM is the county museum for Cornwall, comprising about 76000 objects. It is owned and managed by the Royal Institution of Cornwall, having been founded in 1818 for 'the promotion of knowledge in natural history, ethnology and the fine and industrial arts, especially in relation to Cornwall'. Its collections cover Egyptology, fine art, world cultures, classical Greek and Roman, minerals, decorative arts and old master drawings. As a Renaissance in the Regions hub Young People aged 16-24 years old are a target audience. Louise McDermott, Community Engagement Officer, is responsible for the development of programmes for this audience, both within formal and informal education as well as for NEETS.

HE subject and context description

UCF specialises in Art, Design and Media BA and MA level courses, reaching over 2300 students. It has an active programme of business and community engagement activity. This project was instigated by Louise McDermott (RCM) and Jason Cleverly, Award Leader for Contemporary Crafts at UCF, who has years of experience working within museum contexts. They have worked together since 2007, adapting the project to suit changing circumstances and bringing in other Arts, Design and Media courses each year. The ongoing project between RCM and UCF, has legitimized and woven the affiliation into the fabric of UCF's ongoing curriculum and ethos.

Project goals and ambitions

- to engage a new audience of Young People from HE with RCM
- to facilitate access to RCM collections as stimuli for creative work
- to produce surprising contemporary issue-based interpretations of museum objects that will engage local and tourist Young People specifically and visitors generally
- to provide professional development opportunities for participants
- to refine RCM's understanding of Young People audience interests
- to raise the profile of UCF with local and tourist Young People communities.

Project description

Annually, various UCF BA (hons) courses are offered the opportunity to work to a live brief interpreting the museum's displayed collections for Young People aged 16-24 years old. Third year Contemporary Crafts students participate annually. Other courses have included Spatial Design, Textile Design, Illustration, Photography, Choreography and Digital Animation. Each course receives lectures introducing the museum, the project and the characteristics of Young People audiences¹ and introducing the influence of museum artefacts on the arts. The project brief challenges students to interpret a museum object in their chosen medium for Young People. This is followed by a museum tour, focussing on objects with stories that would likely appeal to Young People. The students then conduct individual research and idea development as part of their course. They return to the museum for interim-project critiques at which they pitch their ideas to a panel of museum staff who advise on idea development and gallery installation considerations (labels, display, interactivity, health and safety, lighting etc). Students develop their final products and display their work at UCF for museum staff to assess them against the project brief. Selected works are displayed at the museum alongside



Urban Clichés – Inspired by 18-19th century Staffordshire figurines and the British tradition of satirical cartoons, Alexis Weetman figurines look at modern day youth culture and the darker side of life in Britain today as portrayed in sensationalist tabloid newspapers.

Why is your project important and worth reading?



Slave Chain – Remon Jephcott highlighted slavery's part in the creation of the 17th century Dutch Delftware Tulip Vase, replacing the decoration with the African slave trade images.

the objects which inspired them and reviewed for accessioning into RCM's Community Collection (e.g. Fig 1).

During the last two years, Facebook has provided an online platform for the project. This year, the tour has been replaced by smaller Revisiting Museum Collections² focus groups with hands on access to objects related specifically to sexual issues. This is part of the Revealing Collections project that will result in an exhibition at RCM in 2011.

This project developed out of the museum's real need to engage the under-represented audience of Young People. In 2006, RCM tried developing a programme of regular activities for local Young People through youth-led consultation, which revealed that there was nothing for Young People in the museum and that greater (unsustainable) capacity was required to engage this audience in a suitable manner. The Objects of Inspiration project was conceived as a practical solution that was sustainable for the period of Renaissance in the Regions support and which would leave a legacy of interpretations of the collections that were specifically tailored by and for Young People, representing contemporary issues. It enabled the museum to practice community work that empowered its participants, providing a platform for debate within the public arena of the museum.

Despite the history of affiliation between museums/galleries and arts practitioners, very few of the student participants already engaged with museums, either in their leisure time³ or for their creative and professional development. This project increased their awareness of this relationship and provided them with direct experience of museum-based work. Several retained their newfound relationship with the museum post-project/university, volunteering at the museum to further develop their experience of exhibition practices and gallery/museum-based learning.

Students said of the project:

- 'It's certainly made me much more aware of what is in the museum.'
- 'I learnt new making skills and how to aim my work at different audiences.'
- 'The best part of the project was discovering what was in the collections and interpreting these discoveries in my own way. Through this I learnt a lot about the history of the pieces displayed.'
- 'I learnt about Cornish History, which was very interesting and something I sadly don't get to hear/see much of, even though I live here!'
- 'Thanks to this project I explored new ceramic techniques and the work of many artists who were previously unknown to me.'
- 'The best part of the project was... my work being publicly displayed in an external place to the university.'
- 'After I graduate this July, work experience/ job/ an internship within a museum or art gallery is an area I am interested in getting involved with.'

The students have produced some excellent pieces of work and, for many, this project steered the development of their final year shows. Several awards have also been won (Figs 5 & 6).

'This exhibition represents an important step forward for both the museum and the college,' said Professor Alan Livingstone, Principal of University College Falmouth during the first year of the project. 'The students benefit from being able to display their work in



Bebo Bully – The commemorative writing on the Rialton Stone, showing the appearance of the Cornish language as a regional descendant of spoken British, inspired Joanne Stambridge to create this sculpture. She cast her teenage daughter's back and used modern text-language to explore the contemporary issue of internet bullying.



an environment that is synonymous with great works of art and the museum benefits by introducing new modes of presentation, attracting young audiences and looking to the future. This kind of collaboration is vital for Cornwall and I look forward to similar partnership projects taking place in the future.'

This case study illustrates how audience-focussed projects can fulfil both museum and HE requirements for public engagement. As well as providing tangible benefits to its participants, it has also given a voice to Young People in the museum environment and online (website in progress). The website will enable Young People (or people working with this age-range) to access the collections physically as well as intellectually, in groups or individually. In this sense this resource will fulfil the Learning Revolution White Paper⁴: facilitating informal learning situations using museum collections that are presented on the audience's own terms.

What happened?

In 2007-8, Louise McDermott and Jason Cleverly worked together to coordinate the OBJECT + IDEA + INSPIRATION = OBJECT exhibition in the museum's Community Link Gallery. This showcased third year BA(hons) Contemporary Crafts students' interpretations of RCM collections. Their interpretations were tested with a panel of local Young People, which has steered what we know of this audience. Having established a high standard of product, the museum selected the best to be temporarily displayed alongside the objects of inspiration in the main galleries.



Handle with Care – Louise Batchelor was inspired by a Staffordshire cup and saucer. Technical exploration with porcelain slip and glass casting translated the object into new materials. Louise won the Pearson's Glass Student Award in 2008 and was a finalist for Bullseye Glass' E:Merge competition Oregon USA in the same year. She has continued to exhibit since graduating in 2008.

In 2008-9 the final year Contemporary Crafts and second year Textile Design and Illustration students benefitted from seeing the previous year's installations and produced another body of work that were installed directly into the galleries. A guide booklet that took visitors around the galleries to the students' work accompanied both this and the previous year's installations. Spatial Design students also worked with the museum on redesigning the galleries based on consultation with a variety of non-user groups, one of which was Young People. The students' final designs were displayed in the museum and the public voted on their favourites.

In 2009-10, due to the redisplay of the Main Gallery, Textile Design students installed their work in the museum café and Contemporary Crafts exhibited their work at UCF, though a couple have made it into the museum's permanent galleries since then. First Year Photography students' interpretations were also temporarily installed in the permanent galleries.

Would you do it again? And if so, what would you do differently?

We have repeated this project for three years so far and it has changed each year. During 2010-11 participants worked towards the Revealing Collections exhibition, looking at objects mostly from stores rather than those displayed. This provided more object-based learning, though it is more intensive and therefore more costly.

What did you learn?

We learnt a lot about our audiences and ourselves. It takes a huge effort to marry the lead-in times required for coordinating access to and display of objects in museums with annual changes to university courses, differences between courses, the myriad directions individual students' work develops, internal programmes and external competitions. Museum staff are less cautious about working with students and allowing interventions within the permanent galleries as processes now facilitate conservation, curatorial and technical input. Selection at temporary exhibitions

Contemporary Canopics – The Ancient Egyptians preserved mummies' organs in canopic jars, each organ being protected by a different god. This inspired Lucy Foakes to create her modern versions featuring celebrities whose death related to a specific organ. These icons guard the jars' contents. Lucy won the BDC New Designer of the Year award in 2010 for this work.



hosted at UCF enables direct installation in the museum's galleries, resolving the need to commit an exhibition space to the project two years in advance (now problematic with annual funding cuts). The partnership's main strength has been its flexibility: adapting to new situations, limitations and opportunities influences the annual refinement of the project.

What advice might you give others and how could others learn from what you have done?

- Tailor the project brief to each new course with HE staff (who may have little experience of museums). Revised annually to accommodate changes and results of evaluation.
- What policies and processes are in place and will changes be required? For example, how are collections' images and information shared with the public to avoid breaches of security or copyright? Who owns photographs taken by participants? How will accessioning objects into the collections affect collecting policies?
- It is important to have clear support from senior management for new ways of working necessitated by attempting to engage new audiences in participatory ways.
- Establishing direct communication with participants rather than only via the HE institution. This facilitates access to collections, evaluation and continuance of the museum-student relationship post-project/university (for volunteering and communicating about student's products remaining at the museum).
- Facebook: rather than a showcase at the end of the project use it from the outset as a platform for sharing collections information, creative inspirations, artists, practices and discussions of the issues. Hand as much ownership of the site to Young People as possible, but be realistic about how much students will input given their course demands. Young volunteers can help with this.



Fool Hardy – Inspired by Staffordshire and Derby figurines, Demelza Whitley echoed the figurative compositions of Derby figurines and took dysfunctional transport as her theme.

How would you roll this project out in other places and why would you?

This project, as well as the others with HE institutions at RCM, provides university students with direct experience of real institutions and ways of working which skill them for life. These are evolving projects and as such I would not recommend 'rolling them out' as such. Instead they are recipes for adaption to local circumstances. If anything to be rolled out, it would be a recommendation for support (both attitudinal and financial) to strengthen museum and HE relations with public engagement at the heart.

What implications are there for policies and what are the key barriers to further collaboration?

With Renaissance in the Regions funding withdrawing, the threat to this project (and any collaboration by RCM with HEIs) is serious. Without a Community Engagement Officer, this project will end. Without exhibitions, collections, conservation, documentation and marketing staff supporting the project, it will lose vital elements.

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Endnotes

- 1 Based on consultations with this audience at RCM as well as studies by other museums and agencies seeking to better understand Young People's interests and needs.
- 2 See <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/About%20Revisiting%20Museum%20Collections%20Toolkit/assetId/288/fileDownload/true>
- 3 See 'I just don't feel right in museums.' A critical review of undergraduate student's attitudes to museums and galleries. Dr Carrie Winstanle, CETLD pg 9
- 4 See http://web.archive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.dius.gov.uk/skills/engaging_learners/informal_adult_learning/white_paper