



Collaborating institutions

Country and summary of the national or regional context as appropriate

Museum/gallery description



HE subject and context description



The Mary Greg Collection at Manchester Art Gallery

Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University

UK

Manchester Art Gallery and The Gallery of Costume are home to the city's world-class art collection. They hold over 25,000 objects of fine art, decorative art and costume, developed over 200 years and still growing. Best known for its world-famous Pre-Raphaelite paintings, the collection also includes British and European art from the 17th century right up to the present day. It also has over 13,000 objects of craft and design from ceramics, glass and furniture to metalwork, wallpaper and dolls houses. Highlights include early English slipware, 17th century silver, and our growing collection of contemporary furniture and lighting design. The Gallery of Costume at Platt Hall holds over 21,000 items of clothing and accessories, covering all aspects of the history of dress from 1600 to the present day. 18th century fashion and 19th century women and children's dress are particular highlights.

Several members of staff at the gallery are involved in this project, but especially its Interpretation Development team (Liz Mitchell and Alex Woodall) whose remit is to involve audiences in the participatory process of interpreting collections in innovative ways. Other team members include Martin Grimes (Web Manager), Joanne Davies (Schools & Colleges Manager) and Sarah Rainbow (Collections Care Officer).

The **Faculty of Art & Design** at Manchester Metropolitan University is one of the largest providers of art and design courses in the UK. It offers a wide range of art, design, theatre and architecture courses to over 3500 students. The Faculty is made up of three Schools (Manchester School of Architecture, Manchester School of Art and Manchester School of Theatre) and one Research Institute (Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art & Design).

This project was instigated by members of the School of Art: Sharon Blakey, a ceramicist who teaches on Three Dimensional Design, and Hazel Jones, a metalworker who teaches Interactive Arts.

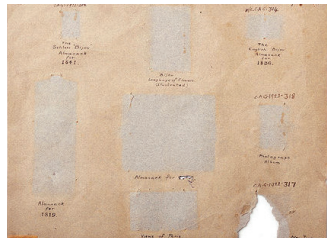
In 2006, Hazel Jones and Sharon Blakey selected objects and showed work together in 'Out of the Ordinary', an exhibition about the ways in which artists use collections to find inspiration for their own work. It was based on the Special Collections at Manchester Metropolitan University with the aim of showing how historic collections have contemporary relevance. Yet what became apparent was that their interests lay not in the 'valuable' items, but in the untreasured, forgotten, broken and everyday remnants or traces of things that once were. The project therefore began to challenge the museum's notion of value and the concept of collecting itself. And it was through a chance encounter with these artists' responses by Liz Mitchell from Manchester Art Gallery that ideas for Mary Greg project began to germinate.

Project goals and ambitions

The Mary Greg project has been entirely open-ended and organic in its development, starting from humble origins and from the passions of individuals, but rapidly spiralling into an increasingly large-scale collaborative and multidisciplinary project. Initially the goal was simply to invite Sharon and Hazel into the gallery's stores to delve in the stores as they had done at MMU, using the collection creatively to inspire their own art practice.

Yet soon, we found the goalposts shifting and widening. What if





we were to document all our research findings, sketchbook material and ideas live online? What if we were to invite further members of the public into the stores and give others the opportunity to create whatever they liked in response to the collection? What if we were to undertake detailed research of both objects in the collection and all the correspondence of Mary Greg? What if we could film the journey we were all on and create projects for students at MMU to work on? And what if we could develop all these ideas into a physical exhibition?

Mary Greg has enabled us to address some complex museological issues both practical and theoretical, and even to challenge institutional methodologies around public engagement with collections. For example, we are asking:

- What is collecting and why do people collect things?
- What is valued in a museum collection? Why/not?
- How can we use collections (creatively)?
- How can we describe the museum's performative relationship with collections?
- How can we facilitate (and encourage) public access to museum stores?
- When/how/should the museum 'let go' of traditional notions of curatorial authority and open up collections for creative use?
- How can we manage this truly collaborative and open-ended project within an institutional context?

Project description

Mary Mary Quite Contrary is based on the Mary Greg Collection of 'Handicrafts of Bygone Times' at Manchester Art Gallery. This is an astounding collection of over a thousand beautiful, yet humble, everyday objects ranging from keys, to miniature books, to rusty spoons, to toys and dolls' house ephemera. Perhaps ahead of her time, its indomitable collector, Mary Greg (1850 – 1949), was fascinated by the potential of such domestic objects to inspire the education of children. Married to the renowned ceramics collector Thomas Greg, whose collection was bequeathed to the gallery, Mary also left much of her extensive collection to Manchester. Yet for much of its life, this significant collection has lain dormant. In storage for some 50 years, it has been housed, almost forgotten in dark cupboards and drawers. In fact, the place of Mary Greg's collection is contentious within the gallery: some think it would be better placed in a social history museum or even disposed of as it is simply not deemed art.

In addition to the physical objects within the Mary Greg collection, we also have the complete correspondence (1920-1949) between Mary Greg and Thomas Batho, the then curator at Manchester Art Gallery. These fascinating letters document a rich and ever-developing relationship, in which Mary, highly courteous, nevertheless has a way of ensuring that her mark is stamped onto the gallery displays. The letters have been photographed and transcribed and are as much a source of inspiration for the artists as the objects.

The project blog, www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk is the vessel for all our research findings. Our ambition is to invite creative practitioners to use this rich material as they see fit, creating new narratives and truly open-ended responses to Mary Greg and her remarkable collection. We have begun this process by inviting students from MMU's School of Art to undertake in a project inspired by their visit to the stores, and hope to continue this process having developed more robust procedures for managing access to the collections.

The public will thus take on responsibility for determining the future of this collection through explicit questioning of its value.





Why is your project important and worth reading?

In exchange for coming to see the collections first-hand, artists will be asked to provide new interpretive work to be posted back on the blog, to create a truly open-ended interpretive response to this wonderful collection. By September 2011, we will have a rich and increasing array of interpretive material to explore in a physical exhibition at Platt Hall Gallery of Costume.

This project has been collaborative, passionate, innovative and risk-taking from its inception. It is unusual in its liberation from quantitative evaluation: we currently have no target visitor numbers, no key performance indicators. Through working collaboratively between a university and a gallery, we are able to truly challenge the purpose of the art gallery and augment its relation with the public. We have directly impacted upon the way we enable the public to handle collections, to access the stores, and to have freedom to use objects for undetermined outcomes.

What happened?

Through viral networking on the blog (facilitated by Manchester Digital Development Agency), we have surprisingly made contact with Mary-philes from across the country and beyond. We have developed links with museums and galleries with Mary Greg collections as far away as New Zealand. We have developed links with academic departments of social history, women's studies, literature, drama, history, museum studies, web development – all interested for infinite reasons. We have begun to shift institutional thinking to allow public access to collections instead of protecting and conserving them in darkened rooms. We have opened up the collections for use. Sharon and Hazel have been inspired to create a plethora of new work.

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

Yes! We continue to work on this project as a source of joy: both for its content, but also because of the partnerships involved. Through Sharon and Hazel, we have developed links with the Graphic Design department (to create advocacy material and a Mary Greg font) as well as Creative Writing courses. We are exploring the potential for Animators, Dramatists, Musicians from MMU to use the collection. We would like to see the project as something that any faculty of the university can be involved in. One issue has been seeking funding: we are currently investigating possibilities of having research students involved in the project, as well as developing funding for the exhibition and to create an outreach travelling case for accessioned material to take to schools and community groups.

What did you learn?

So many things. One of the interesting findings has been the institutional attitude to the project. Initially seen as slightly renegade, in the age where funding is harder to come by and galleries are looking to energise themselves through their permanent collections rather than with expensive blockbuster exhibitions, this project is absolutely key and could be used as a model for the development of further partnership projects to do new things with what we have and who we know at MMU.

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

Doing an open-ended project is scary but absolutely rewarding. Documentation via the blog is a real strength in our communications not only to the world, but also to each other since we are all learning things all the time – too much to remember.

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

We would like to secure AHRC (or other) collaborative funding to develop this project further with research students and/or associates to explore its public potential.





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

Author

As ever, funding and time are key barriers.

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