

Keywords

Abstracta in Concreta

Abstracta in Concreta: Engaging Museum Collections in Philosophical and Religious Studies Research

Material culture, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Museums, Research Training

A multi-disciplinary collaborative research training event named *Abstracta in Concreta* (A&C) was held at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (GMRC) on the 21st of May 2009. Organised between the Centre for Philosophy and Religion in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow and the Research and Major Projects Section at Glasgow Museums, this event was an example of museums and universities working together to address the needs of postgraduate students in philosophy, theology and religious studies (PTRS) in higher education.

The *Abstracta in Concreta* theme is a major focus of the work of the Centre for Philosophy and Religion, which was established by Dr Victoria Harrison in 2008; with the original A&C project described here being the first in a series of further planned collaborative activities. GMRC was officially opened in September 2009. Conceived as part of the major refurbishment and redisplay of Glasgow's flagship Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, GMRC is a state of the art centre that houses Glasgow's collection of over a million objects that are not currently on display in any of Culture and Sport Glasgow's other museum venues. GMRC is a storage facility, open to the public, and utilised for research and teaching by a number of institutions in higher education including the University of Glasgow's MSc programme in Museums Theory and Practice. GMRC provides public access to objects that would otherwise be hard to access. Glasgow Museums has a dedicated museum of religion, the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art that opened in 1993 and displays objects from a variety of religions including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Other objects with religious significance that are not currently displayed are stored at GMRC. This unique local environment, including the Centre for Philosophy and Religion, GMRC, and St Mungo, provided a natural context for the A&C research training event.

The event explored the potential of museum collections for contributing to postgraduate research in PTRS by bringing together students from around the UK and focusing attention on the learning and teaching of research methods in the context provided by the museum. The opportunities provided by this context for research students in PTRS were investigated through lectures, discussion and demonstration by professionals from both the university and the museum. A variety of perspectives in material culture studies, such as archaeology, art history and phenomenology, were deployed to provide examples of ways in which the abstract concerns of philosophy and religious studies can be approached through the *concreta* offered by material culture and museum collections. The event was funded by a mini-project award from the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies based at the University of Leeds.

The core goal of the event was to provide research students in PTRS with the tools required to engage critically with museum collections. Students were invited to investigate the '*religious significance*' of objects within the pragmatic context of a museum's service. The opportunity was provided to discuss the significance of objects in terms of how they can be deployed in scholarly research. Students also had the opportunity to meet with other scholars currently conducting research into the material culture of religion.



Other objectives of the day were to

- 1 Facilitate a deeper appreciation of the ways that museum collections can be used to foster innovative postgraduate research in philosophy and religious studies.
- 2 Provide an example of collaborative work between universities and museums that others could emulate and expand upon.
- 3 Enable and encourage research students in philosophy and religious studies to utilize museum collections (such as those held by Glasgow Museums, particularly The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art) in their research.
- 4 Bring together research students in philosophy and religious studies in the United Kingdom (especially Scotland) with an interest in material culture.
- 5 Introduce students to the resources available to them in Glasgow Museums (resources which are typical of those available in museums elsewhere in the UK).

The A&C research training day was advertised widely to postgraduate PTRS students throughout the UK and delegates came from a number of universities in Scotland, England and Wales. There was also some international interest in the project. Only 20 student places were available due to funding limitations. A waiting list of interested delegates was maintained.

Participating staff were drawn from Glasgow Museums, the University of Glasgow, and the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies. In addition to Dr Harrison and Dr Tonner, these included Mr Leon Robinson, University Teacher, Department of Religious Education, University of Glasgow, Dr Martin Bellamy, Head of Research for Glasgow Museums, Dr William Kilbride, Executive Director, Digital Preservation Coalition, University of Glasgow, Ms Elizabeth Schulte, Curator of World Religions, Glasgow Museums, Dr Ellen McAdam, Collections Services Manager, Glasgow Museums, Ms Kirsty Hood, Learning Assistant Glasgow Museums, and Dr Rebecca O'Loughlin, Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies.

Lectures were on such topics as: *'Museum Collections and the Archaeology of Religion: A Philosophical Reflection'* and *'Meanings, Objects, and where the Truth Lies'*. A tour of GMRC was also included — this was led by Martin Bellamy and highlighted objects of particular relevance to PTRS students. The image below was used in a *'hands-on'* workshop facilitated by Ms Kirsty Hood.

At the end of the day the delegates were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire. The result was very encouraging and provided the A&C team with positive feedback and constructive criticism. Comments included:

- Excellent practical exploration of concepts.
- A fantastically interesting collection of talks and a valuable opportunity to meet people with similar interests.
- Great job, very informative and useful.
- I thought the event was very well formatted: particularly liked the introductory session and thought it useful to have a tour of the GMRC collections to tie the day back to how objects can be used in research.
- Tour was excellent – very good insight into the work of Glasgow Museums.
- The theoretical background about using material culture will be most helpful.

The results of the questionnaire, as well as feedback received orally throughout the day, confirmed our view that there was a lack of this kind of structured HE/Museum provision in the subject area



Conclusion

Authors

of PTRS. This supported our subsequent decision to plan further events under the *Abstracta in Concreta* heading. As part of this ongoing project we now offer a consultancy service for those interested in working at the philosophy/museums interface. This is advertised on the A&C website: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/philosophy/cpr/events/abstractainconcreta/>

Most of the difficulties encountered were technical in nature. Some arose from trying to negotiate between the university's IT services and those of Glasgow Museums. We also ran into unanticipated difficulties in executing our plans to secure the legacy of the event by creating an open access online archive of audio and visual recordings of the sessions. This was because of a complication of copyright relating to publishing videos that include power-point presentations that themselves include images where copyright remains with the source of the image and not with the presenter. Ultimately the only artefacts we were able to publish online were photos of some of the participants. These are hosted on the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies' website: http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/events/abstracta_concreta/photos.html

The immediate aims of the *Abstracta in Concreta* research training day were modest, although important in their own terms. We are confident that these aims were met. With the broader goal of developing more systematic and long-lasting collaborations between HE and museum partners in view, we highly recommend this kind of event as a good place to start to test the possibilities of potential collaborations seeking to enhance the research and learning environments of both parties.

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