

# **REVISITING COLLECTIONS: Discovering New Meanings For A Diverse Audience**

**A consultancy report for ALM London**

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# REVISITING COLLECTIONS

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This is the full report of the *Revisiting Collections* project. It was commissioned by ALM London. Caroline Reed, Development Manager at ALM London, was the project leader.
- 1.2 The team of consultants brought together for this study comprised Val Bott, Alice Grant and Jon Newman. The work was carried out between February and May 2005. The project proved to be an iterative process, with the initial brief being refined as work progressed and a clearer concept was developed.
- 1.3 The *Project Brief* sought a tested and developed documentation methodology that would enable London museums to record information about objects that enabled new approaches to uncovering the meaning and significance of museum objects for culturally diverse audiences.
  - 1.4.1 The three London museums which were selected to work with the consultants were- Leighton House Museum, Kingston Museum, and the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA) at Middlesex University.
  - 1.4.2 The project was overseen by a steering group who had worked to define the initial shape, scope and outcomes of the project and to whom the consultants reported regularly. (See *Appendix A* for membership of the Steering Group).
  - 1.4.3 The consultants would like to thank the partner museums, members of focus groups and the Steering Group for all their assistance during the project.

## **2.0 The context**

### **2.1 The ALM London Brief**

2.1.1 The brief sought a suitably qualified consultancy team to research, develop and test a methodology for interrogating museum collections, and the documentation systems that record information about them, and finding new approaches to uncovering the meaning and significance of individual museum objects and groups of objects for a culturally diverse audience

2.1.2 The project was driven by ALM London's determination that the lives of all Londoners should be enriched by engagement with the collections of their archives, libraries and museums and that museums in the capital should be encouraged and enabled to embed the needs and interests of a culturally diverse audience into every aspect of their work on the development, documentation, management, interpretation and marketing of their collections.

2.1.3 Specifically the consultants were required to:

- research and develop a methodology to interrogate museum collections and documentation systems in order to reveal new ways in to an understanding of the meaning and significance of museum objects to a culturally diverse audience.
- identify examples of projects in which a rigorous approach to documentation has enabled museums or similar organisations to create culturally accessible services.
- test and further refine the methodology in depth within two museums' collections, with a view to serving one or more ethnic or cultural minority groups.
- draft a final project report and a practical "toolkit" providing guidelines on the methodology and its wider application to London museums, which ALM London intends to publish.

### **2.2 The consultants' proposal**

We included in our proposal for the project the need fully to document descriptive and contextual material about objects and collections. We identified this as a key means of opening up collections to users and viewers who were not experienced in using such resources for learning or for pleasure. This issue was discussed with the steering group and the partner museums and exploring its validity became a part of the project brief.

## 3.0 Practical experience and museum partners

### 3.1 Practical experience

3.1.1 The ALM London brief required research on current and previous initiatives in this area. We identified a number of relevant projects which were initially presented to the Steering Group in interim reports. A selection of these is described below as they may serve as a source of ideas and contacts for curators contemplating improving their documentation as there are lessons to be learnt from them. Most demonstrate a growing trend towards the collecting of related personal information to give objects a richer context, though they do not all result in such material becoming part of collection documentation. Some are trying out new ways of tempting users to explore galleries or databases.

#### **A *African Worlds: A Celebration of African History and Culture, The Horniman Museum***

The Horniman houses one of the UK's first permanent galleries on African cultural history and artistic expression, opened in 1999. Created over several years in collaboration with experts from Nigeria, Trinidad and the United Kingdom, *African Worlds*. From a display of early Egyptian items, including a 3,500-year-old mummy, to spectacular Benin plaques and the majestic Nigerian Igbo Ijele, a twenty-foot high ceremonial mask, it also features contemporary paintings by leading African artists whose work has been inspired by objects on display there. The gallery presents African culture undefined by international borders, bringing together fine objects from as far afield as Mali, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, and highlighting the significant contribution African diaspora communities have made to the cultural heritage of the Caribbean, Brazil, USA and Europe. Over thirty African 'voices' – artists, diviners, anthropologists, elders and those forced into exile – have shared their personal memories about the objects on show and these are reflected in the text panels and exhibit labelling, where direct quotes attributed to specific people have been used. Comment cards are provided to encourage visitors to add their own views; museum staff monitor the cards displayed on notice boards in the gallery, re-arranging them from time to time to bring common voices together and encourage responses.

#### **B *Twin Lens Reflex: The Photography of Harry Jacobs and Bandele "Tex" Ajetunmobi* A Lambeth Archives exhibition at Swiss Cottage Library Gallery, Camden and the Black Cultural Archives, Brixton**

This exhibition was targetted at and catered for the cultural and local heritage needs of a very particular group – the post-war Black community in Brixton. It showed the work of two photographers, one of whom, Harry Jacobs, first touted for work door-to-door before setting up a studio in Brixton which survived until 1999. His early customers in the 1950s were recently arrived in South London from the Caribbean and West Africa and Harry's camera lens enabled them to re-imagine themselves as a part of the new post-war Britain. The exhibition visitors' book makes clear just how much this exhibition was valued and welcomed by the visitors, particularly in Brixton. There was a consistent depth of emotion expressed in the comments there that Jon Newman, the organiser, had never before encountered. It was an extraordinary reminder of the particular value and meaning that a collection could have for a specific community who saw Jacobs' larger body of work as an extension of the family photographer function that he had fulfilled for them as individuals.

*Twin Lens Reflex* showed clearly how you can engage with a community to increase understanding of a collection. By the end of the exhibition the display of several hundred of Jacobs' photos had about 40 post-it notes over individual portraits, identifying people by name, by their shop or profession, saying what they were doing now or if they had died. This "catalogue information" has now been added to the prints; it has also encouraged

exhibition visitors to come into the archives and start going through the Jacobs collection, identifying the people in other photos.

### **C *Linking World Cultures and Local Communities: projects with ethnographic collections in Leeds***

An article by Antonia Lovelace in the *Social History Curators Group Journal* 27 (2003) gives an account of her work with a variety of diverse communities in Leeds since 1997, drawing on over 10,000 items of the sort usually described as “ethnography”. Previous curators of this collection had also worked on local community projects and her purpose was to build upon this and also to begin development work for the proposed new Museum in Leeds. This groundwork for the new museum displays has continued since the article was published and has included creative writing with teenage refugees and asylum seekers, and some successful English language work with an Iranian women’s group. Key activities have included documenting events through photography and acquisitions, asking for help from the communities in making small displays and engaging with partners to make larger exhibitions. The outcomes will be used in the Worldview Gallery and also in the Leeds Gallery in the new Museum.

### **D *Projects at the Manchester Museum***

The Manchester Museum has developed several projects designed to open up collections to a wider community than the academics who were the main users in the past. These include a strong group of viewers’ responses which have been used in various ways.

***Rekindle*** was part of the Museum’s work for their *Living Cultures Gallery*. Members of the Museum’s Community Advisory Panel chose favourite objects from those being prepared for the displays and were recorded talking about them on video. The short films are shown on small touch screens in the gallery itself.

***Collective Conversations*** is a project funded by the NW Hub providing a two-way dialogue with local community groups, working initially with the Anthropology collections. The collections are being re-catalogued, photographed and re-stored to provide increased public access. At the same time local community groups are taking part in recorded ‘conversations’ with the artefacts. The resulting narratives and catalogue records will be available over the web. Initial work has been with Somali refugee communities in Manchester but there are plans to extend this to other groups around the city and even worldwide. A parallel Designation Challenge Fund project is creating links between the Anthropology and Natural Science collections and aims to include community and academic voices from the Pacific. *Summary of project description by Malcolm Chapman, given to the Museums Computer Group Autumn Meeting, November 2004.*

***Pacific Explorers*** is a Designation Challenge Fund project which is collecting responses from groups and individuals to the Pacific collections. It has formed the basis of some of the Museum’s outreach work with local schools and events for a wider audience. A recent drop-in session in the Museum’s Discovery Centre attracted around 120 people over 3 hours, 50 of whom recorded their responses with the help of museum staff. Some of these were drawings, some words, and all were put onto the museum web-site while they were there. Many of the responses are very simple and personal in comparison to the wordy and complex descriptions provided by museum staff but the opportunity to record them immediately appears to be very important. Many respondents provided their names, especially children who were keen to be acknowledged, but the responses do not include detailed personal information. Some are recorded by the name of the school. Few of the responses are directly provided by individuals without mediation by museum staff. The website at <http://emu.man.ac.uk/mmcustom/narratives/index.php> shows a large number of responses; clicking on each one thumbnail details of the object, the full response, with links

to other responses from a similar source and a feedback form so that you can add your own comments. It will be possible to incorporate some of this material in future exhibitions.

## **E The Roads to your Past – Gypsy and Travellers’ Heritage**

This project is led in the UK by Surrey museums, but is part of a wider European venture, the *Access to Cultural Heritage* project (<http://www.accessculture.org/>).

The aim of the project overall is to produce high-quality information on the factors (physical, attitudinal, cultural, organisational, etc.) that improve or impede access to cultural heritage. “It shall also promote good practice and highlight concrete examples of access-related solutions via the network of European partners and other organisations.” The Travellers’ project includes a questionnaire on what travellers would like to see collected; correcting an imbalance or complete absence of materials in current collections. Further information at <http://www.surreymuseums.org.uk/interesting/roads%20to%20your%20past%20research%20brief.doc>

## **F The Petrie Museum of Egyptology website**

This web-site enables searches of the collections, the selection of “favourite” items, and offers space for a few sentences of comments. Users can select objects and e-mail responses to the museum, using software similar to a “shopping basket” on a mail order web-site. The site has been operating for 6 months but no-one has yet sent a response to this section of the site; a separate “opinion poll” section has prompted a number of responses though and the Museum has receive complimentary emails about the site and the educational materials there. The Museum regards the website as work in progress and will review and develop it over time.

## **G www.everyobject.net**

This web-site has been produced by the V&A, with Ultralab and Channel 4, and was commissioned by Culture Online. It describes itself as “a place to share the hidden meanings of your favourite things and to discover the secret stories behind the collections of the V&A and our partner museums.” These include Tyne & Wear Museums, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and Brighton & Hove Museums. Grouping stories by themes such as People, Places and Timelines, *Every Object Tells a Story* lets anyone contribute information about his or her own objects or stories and comment on other people's entries. Local venues including museums, schools and community centres will be holding *Every Object Tells a Story* events, where people can contribute stories and hear other people talking about objects that mean something to them. Visiting the site has a fairly random quality and some of the messages are very slight, offering little in the way of stories connected to objects. The structure has potential, but the results so far suggest that information generated by explorations of museum collections and recorded with the help of museum staff may prove more effective in giving contributors confidence about recording their stories.

## **H History Wired: a few of our favourite things - Smithsonian Museum web-site**

A complex mosaic of objects from the history of America, with which you can play – enables browsing of objects without any specific initial purpose and if you are any good with the mouse, it is fun. This does not encourage responses, but it does encourage random exploring of object collections. See <http://historywired.si.edu/index.html>.

### **3.2 The Partner Museums**

- 3.2.1 The consultants were also required to work closely with the two partner museums in developing a methodology that was able to mesh with the museums’ own requirements and aspirations in terms of documentation and audience development.

- 3.2.2 Expressions of interest from potential partner museums had been sought by ALM London in December 2004. Participating museums were required to commit to sufficient curatorial and documentation time, have a SPECTRUM-compliant documentation system, be prepared to commit to ethnicity monitoring and project evaluation and to develop over the following year a further major project that would be derived directly from the *Revisiting Collections* pilot. Grants of £2,000 were available to the two successful museums to underwrite additional staff costs associated with the project.
- 3.2.3 ALM London received expressions of interest from four London museums. The consultants were appointed to the contract in sufficient time to assist in the selection process for the two partners. Kingston Museum and Kensington & Chelsea's Leighton House Museum were selected as the main partner museums. In addition to the applicants' clear enthusiasm for the project it was also felt that these two museums would enable us to better test the generic capacity of any methodology through their very different collections; Kingston museum offered a representative local authority museum collection of mainly local provenance and including costume, domestic pottery and archaeological finds; Leighton House contrasted this with its fine art collection of paintings and ceramics, the latter with very specific Islamic and Middle-Eastern associations, within the context of a historic house and its fittings
- 3.2.4 We also considered the application from the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA). While we were unable to include this in our selection of principal partners, we were nevertheless keen to include a non-local authority institution within the project. We were able to hold on to their interest in order to 'test-run' the methodology once developed by work with Kingston and Leighton House and ALM provided another smaller payment to support their involvement.
- 3.2.5 All of the partner museums had been exploring ways of working with culturally diverse audiences, a key issue for this project. The community contacts which already existed in Kingston and in Kensington and Chelsea enabled us to draw together very quickly the focus groups which were needed to test the concepts behind this project. This was important because the time available for the completion of the work was limited.
- 3.2.6 For Leighton House the project brief chimed very closely with a number of ongoing objectives around the larger aim of deliberately shifting the focus and public perception of the museum away from that of Leighton as a Victorian society portrait painter and instead to consider the influence of Middle-Eastern and Islamic culture on the man, his art, collections and house. Specifically the project was seen as helping with the development of the museum web-site and the re-presentation of the collections through this; it would also provide a spur for research into the wider cultural implications of Leighton's "orientalism" that could then be added to the documentation of objects; it would assist with the re-training of house guides to enable them to bring out the cultural diversity within the objects and fittings; and it would support an Islamic artist-in-residence project where the participants might be able to feed in their own responses to items in the collection. At the same time the staff at Leighton House were very conscious that any emerging methodology needed to work equally for their other house museum, Linley Sambourne House, where the wider cultural connections were less obvious.
- 3.2.7 For Kingston the project initially appeared to provide an opportunity to document some un-catalogued collections using the new methodology. The museum staff had already been working with the help of a volunteer to provide basic documentation of a huge backlog of local collections and to assemble history files of contextual material where possible. As the project got underway, our discussions revealed a strong desire to open up the documentation process so that a range of contributors – curators, visitors, original owners – would be able to offer and share their knowledge and ideas
- 3.2.8 MoDA came to the project in mid-May, after the initial testing had been completed at Kingston and Leighton House. This was an important opportunity to test the developing



methodology with a third party. MoDA was already thinking about the value of contextual information and associated stories and how others outside the museum can contribute stories and information to enhance understanding. These approaches chimed well with the then developing work on *Revisiting Collections*. MoDA staff were also interested in using some "viewers' comments" from comment cards in their permanent exhibition and other views from a temporary exhibition, *Outrageous Wallpapers*, where the personal reactions of Friends of the museum had been presented in decorative typefaces in the exhibition alongside conventional labelling by the curators.

### 3.3 The Focus Groups

- 3.3.1 As well as working closely with the partner museums, the brief required the consultants to identify and test the needs of potential new audiences in advance of developing any methodology. This was an issue that had been clearly articulated by the Steering Group; at its first meeting; community ownership and involvement were felt to be essential prerequisites for the project. The chosen approach to address this was to work with the two museums to identify focus groups drawn from different cultural communities in their locality in order to consult on the developing methodology and to test the pilot work on re-documentation
- 3.3.2 This was in part a pragmatic response; the time scale for the project meant that there was insufficient time to create or recruit new groups from scratch, so in each case the consultants worked with existing contacts with whom the museums were already in touch. In the event, this meant that the two groups comprised people who were already involved with their respective museums and whose professional and in several cases artistic backgrounds had, perhaps, enabled them to engage more easily with the institutions
- 3.3.3 Two meetings were held with each focus group. The initial meeting allowed the consultants and museum staff to explain the objectives of the project and to consider the initial responses of the group to both the theory and the practicality of the project aims. The second meeting was then used to present the work that the museum had done with the documentation pilots and to test the methodology for capturing viewers' responses to objects with members of the group. (See *Appendix B* for findings and minutes of Focus Group meetings)

### 3.4 The Process

- 3.4.1 In order to maximise project time the consultants worked independently with the partner museums, Val Bott with Kingston and Jon Newman with Leighton House, while Alice Grant, who was to develop the generic documentation system, liaised with both museums. Initial set-up meetings were held with the curators, Cheryl Smith at Kingston and Reena Suleman at Leighton House, to present and discuss our proposed approach. In both instances the partner museums necessarily had their own agendas and assumptions about what the project might mean for them. A key purpose of these meetings was to ensure that the broad objectives of the project were shared and owned by the partner museums through the work that they were engaged to carry out, while the local agendas of the participants were incorporated wherever possible in the development of the methodology.
- 3.4.2 Following on from these initial meetings, a valuable joint meeting was held in March 2005 bringing together all the participants from the two museums - including education officers, local history staff and volunteers. It helped inform everyone of the developing and shared methodology and of the larger, generic aims and outcomes of the project which might ultimately be adopted by mda and by suppliers of software. It allowed the consultants to share with the group some of the emerging ideas about how the addition of more contextual information may provide a greater range of ways into using collections and how different people's responses to, as well as narratives and conjectures about, objects might be

captured and documented. On the IT side the meeting discussed the proposed modifications to database templates for the two museums' different systems. Museum staff were also interested in how this work may impact on future acquisition practice and collecting policies, on using existing collections in new ways, influencing the selection of material from new perspectives as well as "front of house" activity.

- 3.4.3 The feedback from curators and focus groups was used to inform the development of new documentation formats. This process was also influenced by the specific sub-sets of objects that the museums had identified for re-documenting and involved some bespoke solutions for individual collections. Wherever possible the new formats achieved conformity with current SPECTRUM guidelines and sought either direct or amended mapping to existing SPECTRUM units of information. A small number of new fields were identified from the consultation – one example is Cultural Display Requirements. The final units of information for the pilot were assembled under five larger headings: Description and history; Associations and references; Use of the object; Owner's contributions; and Viewers' contributions. Although it would have been possible to adapt the existing computer systems in each museum to accommodate the proposed Units of Information, the timescale for the project did not allow either museum to undertake these amendments to their systems. For this reason an [Excel spreadsheet](#) was set up by the consultants and provided to each museum. The use of the spreadsheet also provided a useful format for reporting and presenting newly-recorded information to the subsequent focus groups. After substantial comment and revision the two museums were able to begin work on testing the new cataloguing.
- 3.4.4 The second meeting of each focus group took place at the end of April, after the two museums had had time to re-document a selection of objects using the new templates. These meetings were an opportunity for the curators to demonstrate to the groups the work that had been done and get their feedback on the process. Additionally, we wanted to use these groups to test the Viewers' Contributions parts of the document templates that sought to capture responses to objects and to include these as a part of the accumulating documentation attached to an object. The Leighton House group were asked to test the methodology for collecting Viewers' Contributions, using a set of prompt questions that encouraged and channelled their comments about objects and fittings in the Arab Hall that had been re-documented by the staff. The Kingston group carried out a similar exercise with textiles and dress, using a rather different and more formal version of the questionnaire. The curators from both museums will now attempt to input these comments into the Viewers' contributions fields.
- 3.4.5 The consultants reported back to the Steering Group on 29 April. It was agreed that if possible there should be further piloting before a November launch. It was suggested that ALM London should scan for relevant current projects in London museums (including HLF-supported projects) to see if piloting could be incorporated and also consider advertising for volunteers to join in this process. mda will look into producing a guideline sheet for SPECTRUM, tailored to this project. The steering group also felt that a workshop/guidance session will be needed to give users confidence about the process.

## 4.0 Interim Evaluation

### 4.1 The Museums

- 4.1.1 Leighton House set out to catalogue a set of 50 objects. The curator and education officer made a deliberate selection of objects in different media that they felt would lend themselves to the cultural objectives of the project. These included many of the features and fittings within the Arab Hall that had never previously been catalogued as well as oil paintings and de Morgan ceramics for which documentation already existed. The developed methodology for the museum had emerged from discussions between the curators and the consultants with this selection in mind
- 4.1.2 In the fortnight available Leighton House was able to catalogue 27 objects. They found the template that they were working with initially unwieldy, but that they were able to speed up as they became more familiar with the process. The time taken was also heavily dependent on the research they undertook around an object; this varied or could become generic and this also affected the time taken. They found that the template pre-supposed a high level of collection knowledge and research ability; for instance, they had hoped to do some of the work with a recent intern and this proved impractical. Some objects were clearly not worth the research process of drilling down for additional levels of meaning – which begged the question whether one could satisfactorily pre-select objects for this enhanced form of re-documentation. On the other hand the participants all welcomed the way the template structure required them to look again at ostensibly familiar objects in quite a new way. However, the museum staff felt that this sort of re-documentation could probably work most effectively within the context of a project that used selected objects, perhaps in the context of a particular exhibition
- 4.1.3 Leighton House staff views on the value of the viewer's responses to objects as tested by the focus group were considered. They felt that the public, via focus groups or other means, could play a role in determining the quality of interpretation available and that their opinions could help redress omissions in the initial documentation of artefacts. At the same time existing information, in the form of labels, interpretation panels, also needed to be there for consideration and feedback. Otherwise the focus groups' or other individuals' responses might not provide a coherent assessment of multi-cultural or indeed any other interpretation of the objects.
- 4.1.4 Kingston catalogued a total of 25 objects, from their costume and textile collection. We chose to focus on this collection because we agreed it was likely to offer a range of meanings and significances across cultures. Three staff worked with Alice Grant to comment on and refine the developing template and then to trial it for re-documentation. They were very happy with the process and felt it worked well on with their sample records; they particularly liked the opportunity it provided for capturing instinctive/emotional responses to an object. However, like Leighton House, they also felt that this element could probably work best with pre-selected objects and viewers; they suggested having a list of users from particular groups or backgrounds who could be invited to offer responses to particular objects.
- 4.1.5 Kingston were less happy with the results of the focus group; they found that the questionnaire approach to eliciting comment didn't work particularly well with their group for a variety of reasons. Like Leighton House they also found the project timetable unreasonably tight and, as a result, felt somewhat abandoned at the end of the exercise. One useful suggestion for overcoming this was to set up a mail list for all participants so that they could continue to develop and share ideas.

4.1.6 At the time of writing MoDA have not completed the work on cataloguing; but their initial responses to the methodology are as follows. They found the framework easy to understand, and felt the suggested fields would fit into the existing collections management system. Elsewhere it served as a useful prompt to think again about underused fields. The notion of collecting and documenting viewers' responses chimed with their own thinking about the museum as a place in which lots of different stories can be told and not just the curator's story/view. They felt that the culture of their institution is such that these ideas are not perceived as threatening or outlandish. They also felt the process could be usefully extended to incorporate label text/visitor comments from institutions to which they loan items, thus deepening the information held further

## 5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

- 5.1 Throughout this project we have been looking at ways of making collections appeal specifically to culturally diverse audiences through changes to documentation. The issue with which we began – museums' poor levels of knowledge of their collections – remains significant. Effective and full documentation will make the curators' job more straightforward and greater knowledge of their holdings will encourage wider use of the objects in their care. It has also become clear that engaging non-users of collections will be easier for all groups of potential users, whatever their cultural origin, if documentation is thoughtful, makes explicit cultural connections (such as the trade links by means of which imported textiles influenced our clothing or foodstuffs influenced our domestic equipment) and uses language with sensitivity.
- 5.2 Documentation alone will not reach specific audiences without changes in the way collections are presented (in whatever medium) and the marketing of museums to reach specific audiences. We have recognised that there is no tradition of individuals making wide use of museum collections, other than through gallery displays and some museum events and activities. Without encouragement this kind of use will not develop – though it may, in time, become a by-product of increased collections information on the internet, with requests to see specific objects emerging from the discovery of their existence through this source.
- 5.3 The issues we have been trying to deal with in this project are not completely new, nor are our proposed solutions, either in terms of identifying the database fields which can carry this information or in terms of developing the range of information recorded, including input from others outside the museum. However, the project has raised a number of important issues about implementation which are considered below.
- 5.4 ***Collections as evidence***  
The active use of museum collections for enjoyment and learning is not widespread and local history is often taught through library/archive materials rather than objects. Public awareness of objects as evidence is growing through, for example, popular television programmes covering archaeology, art history and natural science themes, but schools do not teach observation and the forensic skills needed to study collections of this kind.
- *Museums can easily use the concept of evidence in exhibitions and in learning programmes while schools may need greater encouragement. This concept should be built into museum education training, both for new teachers and through training offered by museums for serving teachers and group leaders.*
- 5.5 ***Professional confidence***  
Providing fuller descriptions requires confidence in identification and dating of objects of which curators may have relatively little detailed knowledge. The initial approach should include the recording of descriptions based on observation and should include details such as signs of wear or personalisation. Curators should make references to other sources of information for users to pursue and consider imaginatively the appropriate contexts which could allow users to make wider connections with collections.
- *National and regional bodies concerned with professional standards should offer more training and advice on working with objects in order to increase confidence*

## 5.6 ***Finding time for documentation***

Documentation is already seen as time-consuming in a museums culture where public-facing activity has high political priority, yet our emerging proposals require more time to be spent on it if collections are to become an accessible resource. In particular, further research may be needed to relate existing contextual material, such as correspondence, photographs, acquisition details, and so on to the objects. The value of doing this work and providing public access to additional data may not be immediately apparent in comparison with the preparation of exhibitions and provision of museum education sessions. However, it is already demonstrable that a wide range of potential users are already confident about obtaining information from the internet and that placing good quality collections databases in the public domain is likely to enable new users to discover what museums hold and lead them to explore further.

- *A strong case needs to be made within the sector, to government, to governing bodies and to museum workers, with briefings provided to demonstrate the significance of improved documentation practice for access in the long term.*

## 5.7 ***Others' responses to collections***

Collecting others' responses to the collections may be seen as desirable by curators and museum educators in terms of engagement with diverse communities – indeed, with all potential users – but accepting that they have a validity as significant as that of the “expert” curator may be harder and will colour the way such responses are recorded, used and managed. Many museums are using comment cards and other methods of enabling visitors to their galleries to leave messages behind them, but few as yet see these as a source or usable information.

- *Making use of others' responses to collections and recording the source of the information, even minimally, to show whether it is the holder of the collections, the donor/vendor or the viewer, and whether a name is appended or not will contribute to a change of culture and increase engagement with and shared understanding of collections.*

## 5.8 ***Encouraging adoption of the methodology***

Our proposed methodology offers a way forward, growing out of our conclusions. However, London's museums include many that are small organisations, with staff already working under pressure to fulfil existing demands on their time. Strategic agencies like ALM London and the London museums hub will need actively to foster, and possibly to provide resources including staff, to support the adoption of this approach. At the very least training sessions should be offered, and networks of users created to offer mutual support and feedback.

- *We believe the project has demonstrated its potential but that a pilot project with a larger number of museums involved will be needed to develop and clarify the effectiveness of the proposed methodology before it is widely adopted. mda can also play a significant role in disseminating this approach and demonstrating how it contributes to fulfilling and even enhancing SPECTRUM standards*

### 5.9 **London-wide contextual information**

There are also London-wide themes, such as information relating to London's population, trade, local government and so on, which could be accessed as electronic links to give a London context to the collections of all the museums in the capital. Broader contextual collections-related material, could be assembled on a London-wide web-site, rather than in every individual museum's database, which could also be significant for the Museum of London's documentation processes. This might use a similar structure to the Wikipedia, with opportunities for users of collections to contribute their own views and information, or it might be constructed separately with links to Wikipedia.

- *Further work is needed to define what this might be, who could take responsibility for managing it and how it would be funded.*

### 5.10 **Collecting viewers' responses**

Staff in the two partner museums and members of the focus groups were very interested in the idea of recording responses from those who have seen or used museum collections. The *African Worlds* gallery at the Horniman Museum demonstrates how powerful the conscious inclusion of such material can be. The Horniman's project took three years, with artists in residence, and continues with comments cards some of which are retrieved and preserved; many museums would find such an approach very demanding of their time. Enabling direct personal comments to be made can move on one step on from the comment card to an approach similar to the Manchester Museum's Pacific Explorers project. As viewers become more confident about relating to collections this could develop as a collections message board; it would require a mediator or editor, but this could become a very accessible means of collecting and sharing response to objects. The Every Object Tells a Story module of the V&A web site is an example of this approach but offers little structure within which to present object-related stories and needs considerably more development to succeed.

- *There is more to be learnt from other museums' experience in order to inform new approaches in London and beyond.*

## **Appendix A**

## **Steering Group Members**

**Caroline Bressey    Black & Asian Studies Association**

**Sarah Jillings, Jewish Museum**

**Siham Al-Karmi**

**Suzanne Keene, UCL Institute of Archaeology**

**Nick Lane ALM London**

**Rebecca Lim, Croydon Museum**

**Darryl McIntyre, Museum of London**

**Sally Macdonald Petrie Museum, UCL**

**Chandan Mahal, Museum of London**

**Steve Martin**

**Nick Poole, mda**

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## Appendix B

## Focus Group Meetings

### Leighton House First Focus Group 15.03.05

**Present:** Allan Kirwan (Leighton House), Jon Newman (Consultant), Donna David (Diversity Officer for RBKC), Karimah Bint Dawoud (The Karamah Arts Organisation), Joy May (The Portobello Arts Group).

Alan had set up the group from existing users who were already very familiar with the museum. Because of this we decided not to use any objects in the discussion, but instead to use the groups existing knowledge of the house and its contents. All three members of the group had an existing professional involvement with the house either as artists who made use of the house or, in Donna's case, as the Diversity Officer for RBKC with involvement in the Museums Diversity Marketing Web Site project.

Alan and Jon started by outlining the scope of the Revisiting Collections project. Alan talked about the previous focus of the house and the collections upon Leighton as an artist and as a representative of late Victorian society and the fact that his other interests – in travel, collecting and Islamic culture had been neglected in the way he had been valued and interpreted. Jon talked about the generic aims of the Revisiting Collections brief.

We then discussed why in the opinion of the group B&ME communities might not visit museums in general or Leighton House in particular; what the group liked about Leighton House and, finally, what measures would be more likely to encourage new visitors.

An example of ongoing context-less display was the African statue of a mother and child in the current BM Africa 05 exhibition that gave no information on the extraordinarily powerful and symbolic value of motherhood within African societies. (Karimah)

White staff and curators needing to move on from guilt or embarrassment around previous imperial/colonial/slave associations with other cultures and their objects and representatives; generally this was not an issue for black audiences, or not one that they would be holding the curator responsible for (Donna)

Importance of new and culturally equal partnerships within the sector e.g. the contemporary African artists exhibiting at the Hayward as part of Africa 05. (Karimah)

For Muslims it was important to be able to restore the Islamic values and context of the decorative materials that Leighton had used in his house and to see Islamic art as an alternative response to figurative art (Karimah)

Although the LH museum was large and awesome it was still recognisably a domestic house (unlike say the BM) and that gave it a common purpose with much smaller domestic spaces and one could compare across cultures and classes the way that people surrounded themselves with objects in their home (Donna)

Particular outcomes that the group would like to see from the project:

- Teachers' packs or other learning resources targeted at different communities and at different KS
- The guide, the web site, handouts and some signage in the house should be in multiple languages
- Opportunities for people from B&ME community groups to work with curators in selecting pieces for exhibition or re-presentation, or artists and writers from these cultures to re-interpret through their own work, residencies, workshops using traditional techniques, etc.

- There needed to be more visible involvement of peoples from other cultures in presenting and marketing the museum to break down the assumption that it was a white, elitist organisation
- more partnership working with cultural organisations e.g. Visual Islamic Traditional Arts
- International context created through use of maps and time lines e.g. to show Leighton's travels, the original locations for particular technologies e.g. glass, ceramics etc
- That this could be done in an exciting way eg globe that lit up or web site clicking on hot spots
- That different communities could find ownership and pride within objects through re-contextualising their display or through exploring issues around early technologies, craftsmanship etc.
- More affordable and culturally diverse artefacts and reproductions on sale e.g. in addition to the rather expensive facsimile tiles currently on sale why not produce some of those Islamic designs as plastic transfers?
- A move to reposition Leighton and Leighton House away from the fine art tradition and to re-value the other elements of the house; indeed to present it as a meeting point across cultures

### **Leighton House Second Focus Group 25.04.05**

**Present:** Allan Kirwan (Leighton House), Jon Newman, (Consultant), Donna David (Diversity Officer for RBKC), Joy May (The Portobello Arts Group). Hilde – (Leighton House volunteer guide), Delia – (Leighton House volunteer guide)

The second meeting of the group had two of the original members plus two Leighton House guides. Jon and Alan explained to the group the work that had been done by Leighton House in terms of detailed research using the developed methodology. It had only been possible to catalogue 16 objects in the time available.

We then discussed the idea of capturing personal responses of viewers to the objects and asked the group to test this approach using the series of prompt questions. The group worked in two pairs and were able to comment on six objects, mainly ceramic tiles and fittings in the Arab Hall. There was then a final discussion to assess the value of the exercise.

All of the participants said they liked the discipline of being made to look and comment – even the guides, one of whom said that she felt like she was actually looking at an object that she had frequently pointed out to visitors as if for the very first time. The two non-guides also felt that their responses to the objects would have been more valuable if they had had access to more contextual information about materials, origin etc. Conversely the two guides were locked into the idea that successful guiding was not about conveying hard or serious information to visitors and that what they said had to be entertaining snippets.

All of the group were aware that they were not able to respond personally to the Islamic meaning of the objects and there was a debate about whether this mattered and whether their responses about colour and design were therefore less important.

## Kingston Museum First Focus Group 22.03.05

**Present:** Ni Cuu Lieu, Liana Miller, Asina Ismail (Global Arts), three museum staff: Cheryl Smith (Curator), Emma Rummins (Local History Officer) and Keith Hathaway (volunteer who has been working on collections packaging and documentation) plus Val Bott (consultant).

We began with an introduction to the project and by introducing ourselves. Ni Cuu is Vietnamese, works as a graphic designer and has contributed to Kingston Museum and Global Arts projects, Liana is of Jamaican origin and works as a volunteer in Kingston Museum and Asina is a Muslim woman, who has lived in Africa and the UK and runs Global Arts. The background of this group is similar to that at Leighton House.

Val asked everyone to try and describe an object which meant something to them, partly to break the ice, but also to start the discussion about objects and what we can learn from them. Val also brought an object – a wedding dress – which she described and used to explain how it was important to the family member who had kept it.

We looked at clothing and accessories which museum staff had brought from the stores, as well as some history files. Val showed items one at a time and asked the group to talk about them – at first this was difficult as they were not sure what to say, but gradually we considered what we could discover from objects as evidence. We looked at

- Two children's coats, c 1890, one in very fine cotton with machine lace trimmings for a small baby, and one for a toddler in cream satin with embroidered edging and pearl buttons. We talked about the size of the children who had worn them, their social class and whether the garments could be adjusted as the children grew. We compared them with "babygros" and discussed laundering and caring for them. There was some confusion about the social class of the items and what poor children would have had – for example, was lace trimming upper class? We also talked about the fact that the cotton, the silk and the shells from which the buttons came may have been imported from other parts of the world and about the pride of women in their needlework skills and their universal(?) desire to present their babies as attractively as they could.
- Three individual children's shoes from a box of shoes found in the structure of buildings. Two shoes were much worn and two had had their buttons removed. Damage to a small boot on one side was spotted and discussed – was this worn by a child with a health problem?
- A pair of white kid wedding (?) shoes of c1900 – we looked at the levels of wear on the uppers which were scuffed, on the soles which were in extremely good condition and the level of internal wear which had resulted in the loss of a ribbon edging, as well as split back seams. The group considered this evidence and talked about how the shoes may have been special, but too tight, or worn only indoors, or for dressing up later – they were comparing them with their own experience and identifying with the wearer.
- A 1956 evening dress and bolero with its petticoat, accompanied by 2 photos of the wearer and a copy of the menu of the dinner for which it was made – first we guessed who might have worn it and what for, then we considered the contextual items. Cheryl explained that she had been able to ask the original wearer, who donated it, about the dress and the event and this created a great enthusiasm for trying to add a photograph of her today to the collection.

- Three brocade gents' waistcoats, c 1850, one complete and the others just the fronts. We tried to imagine the shape size and posture of the man or men who wore them and talked about the quality of the silk fabric. We discovered that a number of other items had come from the same source (including a tortoiseshell and ostrich feather fan – again made of raw materials from other countries) which turned out to be a family which was very conscious of its history – this history file for this group was full of useful papers and letters one of which revealed a trading link with Gujerati embroiderers. Emma knew of other material in the local studies collection – paintings by a family member and drafts of family histories and a family history website that they had created. Did the large number of surviving objects stimulate the interest in the family history? Or did the family have a long-standing interest in its history which prompted it to preserve all these things? We thought it would be worth working further on this group of items.

Our summary discussion was about the value of getting close to the objects – the participants welcomed the chance to touch the fabrics, etc and also discovering stories which accompany the objects, or those which could be deciphered from the evidence the objects revealed.

### **Kingston Museum Second Focus Group 25.04.05**

**Present:** Ni Cuu Lieu (graphic designer working with Global Arts), Liana Miller (museum volunteer), Mayumi Elwood (museum administrator), Sarah Kelleher (work experience student).

**Museum workers:** Keith Hathaway, Emma Rummins, Cheryl Smith

**Facilitator:** Val Bott

#### **The Process**

Mayumi and Sarah joined us for the first time but Asina who had been to the first focus group was not able to come. Mayumi is Japanese and Sarah is a white teenager from a local school We began with tea and introductions and a brief discussion of what the project was about.

Cheryl, Emma and Keith had brought out items of clothing and accessories from the stores again, but this time they provided print-outs of the database entries in AdLib for each item as well as their new records made using a Excel spreadsheet to test the new methodology. Keith did a brief presentation explaining the work that had been progressing since the previous focus group and then we considered the objects with their information files, one by one.

We considered

- Items of Romanian national costume, red wool “aprons” with geometric patterned needlework in silver thread and a long heavy linen shawl or stole with large panels of floral embroidery at each end and tassel trimmings in very brightly coloured wools. Kingston had “adopted” a Romanian village at a time when Ceausescu was attempting to forcible modernise villages; these garments were sent as a gift to the local authority by that village.

*We discussed*

- how the garments might have been worn – with the help of illustrations from a book
- how old they might have been – it had been suggested that these were mid 1850s but the stole included fluorescent colours and must have been more modern
- whether we liked the designs – several thought the colours very garish
- Mayumi recognised that the designs were similar to some Hungarian traditional dress she had seen
- the symbolism of the gift of these traditional garments at a time when the villagers' traditions were threatened

- A fireman's brass dress helmet with the badge of Kingston and Surbiton Fire Brigade, with photos of the fire brigade and a news cutting about person who sold the helmet to the museum.  
*We discussed*
  - whether this was a dress helmet or one that had been worn in fire-fighting, examining the leather lining inside it
  - the confusion which arose from the information recorded from the vendor at the time of the purchase when compared to what she was quoted as saying in a local newspaper interview twenty years earlier
  - the fact that the purchase price had been £400, quite high but paid for an object sought after by collectors
  - how fireman are perceived today as good looking heroes
- A commemorative crimson velvet purse, one of four used for the presentation by four little girls of charitable gifts to a local church in the 1880s which were received by the Duchess of Albany.  
*We discussed*
  - how small the purse was and that it was probably seen as rather special by the little girl who carried it (her daughter had donated it)
  - how much money the gift inside the purse might have been
  - the fact that the purse was mass produced, though decorative, and that the (Duchess's?) monogram surmounted by a silver crown on one side had been roughly attached
  - that just as in England there is a tradition of putting a small coin in a purse when it is given as a gift, in Japan 5 yen would be used, since the word for 5 yen is the same as for "good luck"
- An ornamental table-cloth, used at meetings, embroidered with the name and symbol of the Surbiton (later Thames Valley) branch of the Electrical Association for Women  
*We discussed*
  - what this organisation did, which surprised the group
  - how electrical appliances were at first hired to customers by the electricity companies and whether England was a pioneer in providing electricity so early
- A 1923 wedding dress – we did not have the dress to study, but we had a wedding photo, a photo of the dress being conserved and one of the bride with her first child whose christening gown was made from the train of the dress.  
*We discussed*
  - how much you could learn from the pictures and the information on the database and the spreadsheets
  - how important it would be to show the picture of the bride and groom with the actual dress

Kingston museum staff had prepared a questionnaire based around the guide questions developed at Leighton House, and encouraged the focus group participants to complete these sheets in order to try them out. This met with varying degrees of success – the group clearly preferred offering information informally face to face, rather than "officially" in writing. Sarah was the most confident about completing the forms but said she thought the questions should be more open.

In general everyone agreed that the chance to discuss the objects with good background information was much more enjoyable and informative than it had been at the first meeting when we had very little contextual information to go on. It was noticeable, however, that the responses were very personal to the participants, involving expressions of their taste or curiosity about incomplete information, rather than explicitly culturally defined.