

## Expanding the context for diversity in Manchester with audiences and collections



At Manchester Museum, The Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery, we're committed to 'a new and different approach to diversity and equality in our organisations.'<sup>1</sup> Creative Case North's bursary gave us an opportunity to test ourselves, reflect on this commitment and identify the key drivers that could push diversity forward in different ways.

To avoid being 'male, pale and stale,'<sup>2</sup> we've looked beyond the issue of the workforce and identified opportunities to improve diversity, namely opening up new uses for our collections and finding fresh avenues for connecting with marginalised audiences. By doing this, we aim to broaden the context for understanding diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Manchester Museums Partnership Equality and Action Plan 2015-18, updated for 2016-18

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Sir Peter Bazalgette's Address 'Arts Council and the Creative Case For Diversity', Sadler's Wells, 8 December 2014

### The Activity

We focused our activities on extending our work via two local charities: Henshaws Society for Blind People, and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, a mental health charity for young people. Henshaws took part in audio-described tours across the partnership and reflected on what worked and made a difference to their visit. 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's work was two-pronged. Their young people conducted mystery shopping at the Whitworth and, separately, visited Manchester Art Gallery to conduct action research about how there could be a collaborative approach to unlock different ways of using collections.

My aim was to listen, to find out how we interacted with our community experts and to test how truly open we are and could be.

### Learning and Insight

The two months of the bursary gave me time and space to observe, think and discuss. Each step, from sessions with Henshaws and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, to discussions with Professor James Thompson (University of Manchester) and Professor Richard Sandell (University of Leicester), and conversations with the team at the Open Museum in Glasgow, provided moments, insights and learning.

The two key insights that emerged were the 'power of the personal' and the 'power of the object'. Perhaps these are obvious. All of us working in cultural organisations know the power of person-to-person contact, the humanising nature of speaking to individuals and groups. Familiar also is the nature of contact with the 'real', be it the real painting, genuine Egyptian artefact, live song or performance. But what struck me continually was how important and effective the 'personal' and the 'object' are when connecting with new and diverse audiences.

Comments from Henshaw's participants:

***"I can't believe I actually handled 2000–3000-year-old artefacts; it just seemed so unimaginable that they were so old and yet so 'perfect'... So thank you to everyone who made all this possible; my personal enjoyment was immense."***



***"It's not good having sight loss, but I've learnt more now since coming to the Henshaws group and to 'Making Conversation' at Manchester Art Gallery. As I've said before 'out of the darkness comes light'."***

## Impact

The immediate impact of my research has been to refresh my understanding of how the Manchester Partnership connects with marginalised audiences through audio-described tours, object-handling sessions, mystery shopping/training initiatives, and investigations into using collections. Regarding the latter, the young people have proposed using a collection of Victorian prints in 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's upcoming capital project to develop a new community arts amenity. They're also taking inspiration from this collection to inspire a drawing book for young people to use as a stress-busting tool.

But amidst all this activity, the real impact has been to explore a new context for understanding and improving diversity. By bringing to the fore the personal contact between museum/gallery staff and audience groups, we can create a new space where the organisation and the 'new' visitor establish a mutual affinity and understanding. Add in accessing and handling museum collections, and the experience becomes a powerful one, where expertise and viewpoints can be exchanged. Professor Sandell is currently working on the nature of 'trading zones'.<sup>3</sup> This phrase describes the creation of a space where different experts from diverse backgrounds come together on an equitable footing to resolve an issue or propose a venture. Crucially, the trading zone recognises and values not only sector skills and specialisms, but also those gained from the 'lived experience.' The Open Museum in Glasgow succinctly identifies community groups as having 'expertise of experience'.<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting on the work with Henshaws and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street across the Manchester Partnership, the most powerful results occurred when a 'trading zone-like' environment was established. These instances occurred when the young mystery shoppers fed back to gallery staff, when museum/gallery expertise connected with the life-experience of the visually impaired visitors, and when the group of young people came up with new ways of using collections. These sessions showed a heightened level of collaboration (with an emphasis on the 'co'), demonstrating and recognising sector expertise that is open and relates to the incoming life experiences of the participating group.

The trading zone offers us a model for facilitating further interactions between the museum/gallery and community groups. It can help us diversify by opening us up to external voices and expertise, whilst recognising our own sector's specialisms. To avoid the narrowness of only measuring diversity by looking at the workforce, Professor Sandell suggests adding the diversification of collections/programmes and audiences.<sup>5</sup> At Manchester, we are seeking to do that by trading expertise, listening to the voices of our audiences and by finding new ways of working with collections.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, Ceri Jones *Trading Zones: Collaborative Ventures in Disability History* (to be published).

<sup>4</sup> In conversation with Patricia Allan, Chris Jamieson and Elaine Addington (Glasgow, April–March '16)

<sup>5</sup> Richard Sandell (2000) The Strategic Significance of Workforce Diversity in Museums, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*

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Manchester Art Gallery [www.manchesterartgallery.org.uk](http://www.manchesterartgallery.org.uk)

Manchester Museum [www.museum.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk)

The Whitworth [www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk)

Henshaws Society for Blind People [www.henshaws.org.uk](http://www.henshaws.org.uk)

42<sup>nd</sup> Street [www.42ndstreet.org.uk](http://www.42ndstreet.org.uk)

The Open Museum, Glasgow [www.glasgowmuseums.com/openmuseum](http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/openmuseum)

StageTEXT [www.stagetext.org.uk](http://www.stagetext.org.uk)

University of Leicester, School of Museum Studies [www2.le.ac.uk](http://www2.le.ac.uk)