‘The museum is changing’: activating the power of participatory research in the university museum

Dr Kate Noble
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Our diverse collections and audiences inspire our research, and we aim to ensure that our research **inspires, involves and benefits those audiences**.

Our staff will draw upon both deep knowledge of, and diverse perspectives on, art and material culture to make a difference through innovative and relevant research. Our research will help us to explore the myriad ways in which art and culture touch people's lives, working with our audiences to develop knowledge, skills, agency and a sense of belonging, as well as enhancing health and wellbeing.

*The Fitzwilliam Museum. Research and Impact Strategy, 2021-4*
‘Envisioning a future of global peace and justice, we must all realize that **collaboration is the practice that will most effectively enable everyone to dialogue together**, to create a new language of community and mutual partnership.’

*bel hooks. Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom, 2009: 41*
'Research as an inclusive process of enquiry undertaken by practitioners working alongside academic and non-academic researchers within an open and exploratory environment where expertise is valued non-hierarchically.'

*Emily Pringle. Rethinking Research in the Art Museum, 2020: 163*
Action Research Cycle
Adapted from MacNaugthon and Hughes, 2009, McNiff, 2017
‘reflection- true reflection- leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection.’

*Paulo Freire. Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1970: 40*
Tensions of Belonging
Connecting Cambridge

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With thanks to: Habda Rashid; Miranda Stearn
‘It’s about the democratisation of museums, breaking down the system. The museum is changing, involving people, local people.’

*Susan. Connections Group Member, 2023*
Stand for fruit and sweet treats
called an epergne 1759–60

Made by Emick Romer, a Norwegian silversmith working in London

This solid silver stand has a large oval bowl in the centre for displaying a range of fruit. Four smaller round bowls branch out from the sides to show off prized individual fruits or expensive sweet treats.

Silver
C. B. Marlay Bequest, 1912. MAR.M.19 & a-i-191
This design conjures up a tree with branches bearing different fruit and is all about showing off wealth. An epergne like this may have graced the top tables of Cambridge colleges, and was perhaps filled with desserts made by and fruit picked by people from outside the city who lived poorer, more humble lives. It sums up an economic divide that is still felt in Cambridgeshire.

Issac
Candy Lady  2020

Made by Shawanda Corbett

This pair of tall, undulating vessels were made on a potter’s wheel and are painted with shimmering gold lustre and swirling abstract patterns. One vessel is mainly painted brown the other is painted blue, pink and white.

Two vessels, stoneware, thrown on a potter’s wheel and painted
Acquired with the Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum Fund, 2020.
C.26-2020; C.27-2020
At first I misunderstood these works, then I watched some films about the artist, Shawanda Corbett. In one, as part of an art performance, she does a dynamic, swirling dance which is extraordinary because she has no legs and only one arm. As an artist with motor neurone disease, trapped in a failing body, whenever I struggle with my own work, I think of all obstacles she has overcome.

Rick
Jade

‘The Connections project feels like a welcome step by the Fitzwilliam to bring in community members to help break down the many barriers that can prevent people from accessing Cambridge's museums and art institutions.’

Sue

‘I think [what excites me] is the opportunity to have a voice and create a little bit of anarchy ... I’m passionate about storytelling. For me, it’s about, ‘where’s the story in this?’ and I’m passionate about people being able to connect with what they see.’
References

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