Introducing the new UMG newsletter

This is the first newsletter in our new format. In order to better connect with and support members, newsletters will now be quarterly; they will deliver news from the group as well as opportunities for collaboration and funding, highlights from UMG collections and contributions from collaborators.

In recent years, UMG members have expressed the need for more connection. This new format aims to more clearly and consistently communicate the advocacy work the UMG engages in year-round, as well as to make activity across the network more available to member institutions.

The contents are decided according to what you have told us you want to see more of: news from peers, sector opportunities and places to speak with one another. In light of this, the UMG is also trialing drop-in sessions with the Coordinator, with details below.

If there is an area of focus you want to see included here, if you have any questions or if you would like to write something to share with the UMG membership, please do get in touch: umg@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk.

Catriona Wilson and Lyz Bush-Peel



Aruna Bhaugeerutty (University of Oxford) chairs a panel at the UMG Conference 2026.

UMG Conference 2026

The UMG Conference in June, hosted at Newcastle University and well-attended by representatives of universities across the group. Focus sessions included collaboration and advocacy, research and teaching in public programming, and collections and digital infrastructure. The day began with a guiding introduction from the UMG Co-Chairs, Malavika Anderson (Newcastle University) and Dr Luke Syson (University of Cambridge), followed by a welcome from Professor Jane Robinson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Business, Partnerships and Place at Newcastle University. Professor Rhiannon Mason (Newcastle University) opened with a provocation about museums and public trust, setting the scene for a full and rewarding day of discussion.

A selection of presentations volunteered by speakers is available here: https://universitymuseumsgroup.org/links/umg-conference-2026/

The conference also featured a discussion around UMG's membership offering, facilitated by Ciaron Wilkinson (Manchester Museum), which sparked the UMG's reworking of our membership offering, including this newsletter. Notes from this discussion are available here: UMG Membership Discussion Notes, 16 June 2026.

The 2027 UMG Conference will be at University College London in June, with the exact date to be confirmed on the website soon.

The 2028 UMG Conference will be at the University of Leeds, with the exact date available on the website closer to the date.



Collections image supplied by Durham University's Oriental Museum.

Three New ACE Designations Highlight the Strength of University Collections

University museums, galleries, libraries and archives were strongly represented in the latest round of Arts Council England's Designation Scheme, with three university-held collections among the record nine newly Designated collections announced on 8 September 2026. The newly recognised university collections are the **Japanese Collections at Durham University's Oriental Museum**, the **Science Fiction Collection at the University of Liverpool**, and the **Bill Douglas Cinema Museum Collection at the University of Exeter**.

These awards reinforce the critical role that university museums and collections play within England's cultural and research infrastructure. The three newly Designated university collections reflect the remarkable breadth of the sector: **Durham University Oriental Museum's Japanese Collection**, spanning over 8,300 objects from historic ceramics and armour to contemporary popular culture; the **Bill Douglas Cinema**

Museum Collection at the University of Exeter, one of the UK's most important collections on the history of the moving image; and the **University of Liverpool's Science Fiction Collection**, Europe's largest repository of science fiction books, archives and manuscripts.

Established in 1997, the Designation Scheme celebrates collections of national and international importance held outside the national museums. Today there are more than 160 Designated collections across England, held by a broad range of local authority, independent, military, ecclesiastical and university institutions.

University museums and collections have been central to the Designation Scheme since its inception, now numbering more than a quarter of the total. Among the most prominent early recipients were the collections of The Courtauld Institute of Art's Courtauld Collection and the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, both recognised in the first year of the scheme, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham, and the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology at University College London, both of which followed in 1998. These early Designated university collections demonstrated that university museums could combine public engagement with world-class teaching and research, positioning them as cultural assets and essential components of the UK's research infrastructure.

Collectively today, Designated university collections encompass some of the world's most significant cultural collections including fine art, archaeology, anthropology, natural history, zoology, geology, botany, medicine, military history, literature, theatre, music, publishing, rural life, design, film and global cultural heritage.

The Designation Scheme highlights the contribution university museums and collections make to research environments as well as community engagement with research and recognising their role in supporting scholarship, academic partnerships and the development of new knowledge.

University collections occupy a unique position in this regard, sitting directly alongside researchers, students and academic departments to enable object-based learning, interdisciplinary collaboration and original research. University museums and collections, Designated or otherwise, are vital research infrastructure: generating knowledge and international partnerships, and enriching academic and public understanding.

As the Designation Scheme approaches its thirtieth anniversary, university collections continue to be among its strongest ambassadors and we congratulate our colleagues at Liverpool, Durham and Exeter on their success!



Staff at the newly designated Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.

Member news

Ciaron Wilkinson, Head of Partnerships and Engagement at Manchester Museum, was appointed in August 2026 to the board of trustees for the European Museum Forum.

Specimens from the Grant Museum of Zoology were featured at the premiere of *How to Live on Earth,* a feature documentary about responses to the climate crisis narrated directed by Fredi Devas and narrated by Benedict Cumberbatch.

Historic Environment Scotland's Retrofit Centre for Traditional Buildings is set to join Scotland's Centre of Excellence for Canals and Traditional Skills as part of the AHRC's RICHeS project.

North East Museums has been shortlisted for the Power In Practice Award, hosted by Curious Minds as part of the the National Arts and Cultural Education Awards 2026.

Bath Spa University and Fashion Museum Bath have announced a new five-year partnership from 2026 to 2030, which will support development of the museum's digital platform as well as research into collections.



The Royal College of Music Museum's clavicytherium, recently dated to the mid-1460s.

Collections Feature: Clavicytherium, Royal College of Music Museum - Professor Gabriele Rossi Rognoni

The Royal College of Music in London preserves a clavicytherium – a type of upright harpsichord – which is generally considered to be the earliest surviving keyboard instrument with strings in the world. This assumption has been repeated and reinforced since the late 19th century, when it was brought to London from the Venetian collection of the Count Correr and was popularised through publications and exhibitions. Technical and stylistic considerations all pointed to a late 15th century date, but several attempts at dendrochronological analysis and dating of pigments undertaken since the 1970s had proven unsuccessful.

As part of a new research campaign on the clavicytherium, revised tree ring measurements were taken by the principal author of this article from photographs of the soundboard and back of the instrument. A dendrochronological analysis was carried out on seven tree-ring sequences representing three sections of the back and four sections of the soundboard, which from its appearance were assumed to be made of spruce. The sequences from the clavicytherium were then compared with established reference chronologies of instrument and non-instrument origin and dated instrument sequences.

The results show that the most significant cross-matching dates obtained for the youngest rings measured on the back were 1354, 1461 and 1453 CE, and on the soundboard were 1413, 1406, 1409 and 1411 CE. These are compatible with a construction date just or shortly after the mid 1460s. The chronologies that show the most significant correlation all relate to an area between Innsbruck, Nurnberg and Oetztal, suggesting a provenance of the wood from the area of today's South-East Germany.

Co-Chairs' Report

Jenny Powell (The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham) will be representing the UMG on a committee of experts for Art UK, who will be supporting planning and governance for the organisation's developing digital infrastructure. This follows an invitation from Art UK for the UMG to help shape the direction of continuing platform developments.

At the request of DCMS, UMG members have collated a list of recommended reading on the social impact of museums, including a range of books spanning creative aging, wellbeing, creative health and more. Further suggestions for reading material to be shared more widely on the UMG website are always welcome: send to umg@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk.

On 29 September 2026, DCMS issued a press release that national museums, which add £1 billion per year to the UK economy, would not start charging admission to visitors. The decision to remain free of charge was made in consultation with a number of sector groups, including the UMG. The help of all colleagues who contributed their voices to this project has been much appreciated, thank you for your support with this work!

Susie Biller (Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge) will be contributing her expert guidance to an advisory group for a research project conducted by the Association of Independent Museums funded by DCMS and Arts Council England, exploring museum finances from 2010-2025. This project aims to build financial resilience for museums and will make policy recommendations for the future.

The UMG was represented by Esme Ward (Manchester Museum) in an afternoon with the Creative Education Coalition on 28 September at a Labour Party Conference in Liverpool. The day featured a welcome by Vanessa Wilson, CEO of University Alliance, and a panel discussion led by Dr. Miriam Firth, Chair of the Graduate Futures Institute Creative Industries Task Group.



Opportunities

The University of Cambridge invites applications for the Directorship of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Professorship of Material Culture. Applications are due on or before 17 December 2026, with the post beginning 1 October 2027. More information is available on the university jobs website.



Collections image supplied by Durham University's Oriental Museum.

Reminders and upcoming events

There will be a university museum session at the upcoming MA conference on 3 November, featuring UMG Co-Chair Malavika Anderson (Great North Museums: Hancock) and Ciaron Wilkinson (Manchester Museum) along with James Christen Steward (Princeton Art Museum). The panel will be chaired by. UMG's own Jago Cooper and Jenny Powell.

Also on 3 November, there will also be a UMG social during the MA conference's end-of-day drinks session. Find the blue UMG logo (at the top of this newsletter) and come meet your university museum colleagues. If you are available to join for dinner as well, colleagues will be gathering at Dishoom. Email umg@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk to indicate your availability so numbers are available for a table booking.

Get in touch!

Do you have news to share with the UMG? Please get in touch via umg@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk with any news to include in the next newsletter: this can include everything from new acquisitions, collections updates, reports published, consultations and discussion topics. Send in your news by 30 November to make sure it gets into the next newsletter.