CITIZEN CURATORS

A Guide to Museums and Collections for Beginners

MUSEUM OF
CORNISH LIFE
HELSTON

Tehmina Goskar

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INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed for anyone who is new to joining or working with a museum and its collections, for example as a volunteer, trustee, student placement, apprentice, or collaborator. Through six easy-to-follow modules, the Citizen Curators course will introduce students to the fundamentals of museums, such as their purpose in society, their role in different communities, what collections are, effective communication and community engagement, and the different types of work that can be encountered in a museum setting.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You can work through this guide in order, or head straight to the module you are most interested in. This guide is designed to be used for independent and group study. You are encouraged to find a buddy to help you conceptualise and discuss the topics presented and how they relate to your museum. Each section includes quotes to provoke thoughts and ideas, suggestions for assignments and some fun quizzes to help reinforce your learning.

You may come across some terms which are unclear. Do look them up in other places. Accompanying this guide there are links to useful online resources currently available. Please be aware that websites can come and go and all links are correct at the time of publication.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tehmina Goskar is a museum curator and researcher having curated over 30 exhibitions and collections projects from subjects ranging from Viking loot to contentious dolls. She holds a PhD in History (Southampton, 2009) and was awarded the Fellowship of the Museums Association in recognition of her impact on the museum sector in 2018. She was the founder and director of the Curatorial Research Centre 2018-2023 and has worked internationally for museums from Lapland to Aotearoa-New Zealand.

MODULES

Module 1

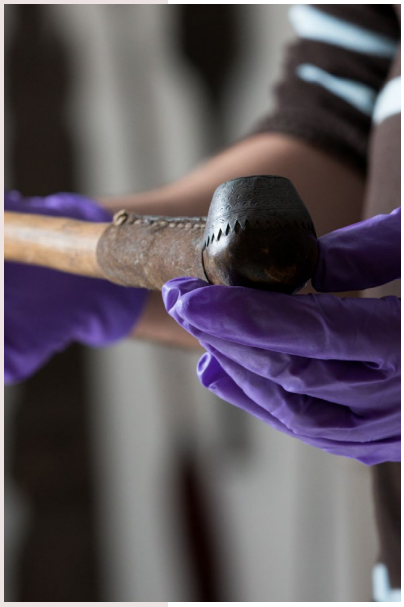
COLLECTIONS, CURATORS AND MUSEUMS

THINK ABOUT IT

"It has been said that the spade cannot lie, but it owes this merit in part to the fact that it cannot speak."

Philip Grierson, archaeologist, 1959.[2]

What does Philip Grierson mean? He wrote this in the context of how archaeological objects are interpreted in order to make sense of them. These interpretations may not resemble the real-world context of those objects from the time they were first made and used, but they help make sense of such objects in today's world.



MUSEUM FUNDAMENTALS

Curators and collections are integral to museums. Without collections museums are just buildings, and without curators there would be no one to find and share the knowledge held in our collections. Most of the UK's museums have no members of staff and are entirely community-run by a volunteer workforce. The work of museums is regularly supported by cultural and artistic agencies, council officers and freelance arts and museum professionals.

WHAT IS A CURATOR?

Anyone can develop the skills of a curator and they do not have to be paid members of staff or have special qualifications.

To curate means, 'to care for' from Latin: curare.

In this course we use the 50% model of a curator developed at the Curatorial Research Centre. This model suggests that a curator needs to be part creator of knowledge, part communicator. In other words, curators should spend as much time researching as they do communicating to different people and diverse audiences. In this course we will explore the skills needed to develop both research and communication skills, and how to identify and use different sources of information.

The 50% model of curation

WHY DO MUSEUMS HAVE COLLECTIONS?

The concept of a museum does not have a single history or origin story, nor does the idea of collecting. The prevailing understanding is that the idea of a museum collection started with cabinets of 'wonder' or curiosity also called wunderkammer in German. In Europe these can date back to the late Middle Ages, and even before if you think about the artefacts collected in church treasuries, including holy relics.

The notion that publicly-accessible collections of objects, specimens and art can teach us things about the past, the environment, ourselves, and about other people, largely originated in European countries from the 18th century and is widely referred to as the Enlightenment.

Many of our museum collections derived from the collecting activities of wealthier individuals and small antiquarian, scientific and philosophical societies who had time and money to pursue their interests. Such collecting of artefacts, art and specimens happened across the UK, particularly as the study of archaeology grew in popularity, and artists could earn a living from wealthy patrons.

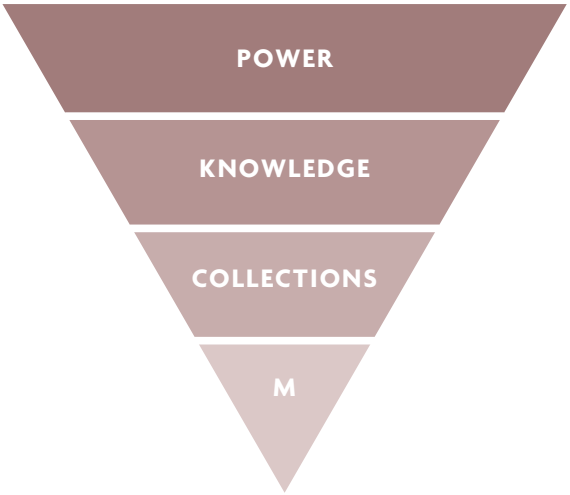
Millions of objects were also purchased, exchanged, looted, gifted, stolen and confiscated from people and countries who were invaded and colonised during the British, Russian, Dutch, Belgian, French and German empires. These collections were eventually constituted in public museums that anyone could visit. From the mid-19th century, the idea of the folk or local town or village museum emerged and these mainly housed collections drawn from local communities especially their domestic lives, customs, trades, occupations and crafts.

"A Museum and Free Library are as necessary for the mental and moral health of the citizens as good sanitary arrangements, water supply and street lighting are for their physical health and comfort."

Thomas Greenwood, 1888.

MUSEUMS AND THEIR POWER

In this guide we will think about collections using the Power Model of Museums. This model suggests that a museum's perceived knowledge is derived from its collections, and that knowledge is the museum's power. This does not mean that the museum always knows much about the things it has, as we shall see.



ASSIGNMENT: MY MUSEUM'S HISTORY

Research your museum's history by looking at documents, files or archives in your museum and elsewhere. How much can you find out about how your museum came about, the people who assembled the collections, the building you are in? Try the British Newspaper Archive or newspaper collections in your country.

This is a self-led assignment. Do not submit anything. Find the opportunity to share your research with your colleagues and visitors such as by giving a talk or discussing it in a meeting.

QUIZ 1: TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Museums originated in Britain.
2. Curators have to have special qualifications.
3. Museum collections only reflect the stories of famous people.
4. Curators should spend all their time doing research.

Answers at the back of the book.

Module 2

RESEARCH IN MUSEUMS

THINK ABOUT IT

"We watch a documentary about beekeepers in Macedonia and think we now understand beekeepers in Macedonia. But all we are doing is interpreting reality through someone else's interpretation of reality."

Jessa Crispin, writer, 2020.[4]

What does Jessa Crispin mean? How might this statement make us think about the role of research and interpretation in museums and our responsibility to do it – and reference it – accurately?

MUSEUM FUNDAMENTALS

Research is an essential curatorial activity and the basis of all museum work, from interpretation in an exhibition, giving talks and tours, running a building properly, and organising fulfilling school and community events. It is how museums can ensure their work remains relevant to ever-changing audiences and their needs. The public places museums in a high position of trust when it comes to knowledge creation. The purpose of sharing good research is to turn one-way conversations into two-way conversations so the museum can learn from wider society as well as the other way around.

HOW SHOULD CURATORS DO RESEARCH?

Using the 50% model of a curator, we should spend roughly half our time generating knowledge, and half our time communicating that knowledge. End-to-end curating demands that we plan our research with outcomes in mind: What do we really know? Could we be wrong? What is hidden? What stories might be told? With whom will we share this information, and how?

Good research is about asking good questions of our sources. The most important source for a museum curator is the collection. In order for our collections to be more than illustrations and props we need to start our research with the objects themselves.

7 WAYS TO DEVELOP YOUR CRITICAL THINKING

1. Find out what's been done before
2. Identify a variety of sources by finding out what other people's references are
3. Formulate your own conclusions from your own research
4. Learn to differentiate between an opinion and a verified fact by checking more than one source on the same topic
5. Analyse the connections between ideas and things, also called systems
6. Be open to viewpoints and opinions you don't share
7. Just because you found it in a catalogue entry or book doesn't mean it is right, always double check and verify.

HOW TO ASK POWERFUL QUESTIONS

The best style of question to ask when you are doing research is an open question. These are questions that do not have a pre-determined answer or just a yes or a no.

EXAMPLES:

What ... is it made of? What don't we know?

How ... was it used? How heavy is it?

Where ... has it travelled? Where is the information about its provenance?

When ... was it restored? When did it enter the museum?

Who ... donated or sold it to the museum? Who else knows about these things?

Why ... would someone from my community be interested in this?
Why have we got this in the collection?

CURATOR'S SHOPPING LIST

Curators can consult a range of sources within the museum, outside the museum and online when conducting a piece of research. Here is a summary. These suggestions are not exhaustive and all research should attempt to use a combination of these sources.

1. Object database

The object database is a digital edition of the museum's registers which might have started in a hand-written book and/or index cards. It forms the most current inventory of the museum's collections and therefore a key source for the history of the museum (also known as corporate memory).

2. History files

Provenance is the story of the object before it came to the museum. History files, if kept by the museum, contain contextual information about the object and related objects, art or specimens elsewhere. They might contain other people's research and copies of exhibition catalogue entries as well as information provided by a donor.

3. Books, journals, newspapers and archives

Use books, articles and unpublished papers to find out more about the cultural, social, political and economic context of the object (or subject) you are researching. Publications like this might also help you understand the makers, materials and construction of an object. Look for the catalogues of local and national libraries and archives online. Many published books and articles are available online.

4. Internet

Use articles, Wikipedia, forums, social media posts to find out more about the cultural, social, political and economic context of an object (or subject) including different people's opinions about them. Be careful to distinguish between personal opinions online and verified facts presented in publications, especially those professionally reviewed.

5. Online collections

Digitised and aggregated collections records can help find comparisons to the objects and art you are researching, for example, for paintings try ArtUK or for recent Cornish history try cornishmemory.com. An effective web search includes your topic and the terms "online collection" or "database." These digital collections can help identify an object, its function, dates, maker, place of manufacture, and materials.

6. Visual sources

Picture research can help find comparisons and online picture libraries and image search results can assist with identifying the object, function, artist, maker and manufacturer, materials, events, places and people. Reverse image search facilities included in many standard web browsers and apps may also help you to identify items. Use with caution as this alone cannot provide a definitive answer to the identity of an object, particularly of natural specimens such as minerals, you should always seek comparisons.

7. Experts

Enthusiasts, people with direct experience of the subject, Subject Specialist Networks or SSNs, special interest groups, mailing lists and online groups based around specific topics are invaluable sources of knowledge especially when you need to corroborate or verify findings, for example, to help identify the function of an agricultural tool, try the Rural Museums Network email-based mailing list. You can also join or ask specialist societies such as the Society of Jewellery Historians and Aviation Heritage UK.

8. Object science or object-centred research

Starting with the object, artwork or specimen itself can be the best way to start a piece of research and is the basis of all cataloguing work. Tasks include measuring, weighing, observing, analysing (with basic and more advanced tools where available), identifying materials and production processes, signatures and makers marks, looking for signs of wear and damage from use and environmental effects (light, pests, humidity). This forensic research can also help establish whether an item is genuinely what it claims to be, or a replica or forgery and will also be the start of any conservation work.

Caution

Handle objects with the utmost care. Consult module 6 for advice and tips on safe handling techniques.

ASSIGNMENT: RESEARCH AN OBJECT

This assignment works well if you complete it before you move onto module 3. Communication in museums.

Instructions:

1. Choose an object in your museum's collection
2. Using the accession number (the unique number given to all museum objects in the collection) find the object record in your catalogue or database if you have one
3. If a photograph does not exist, start by photographing it to make a visual record
4. Pay attention to any details that stand out such as inscriptions, signs of wear and materials
5. Remember, your object record may not necessarily be correct
6. Find out as much as possible about it and make notes, on paper, on your phone or computer
7. Make sure you record the sources of information in your notes, including credits and copyright of any useful images you may reproduce
8. Clearly label and save this information in the museum, in a physical or digital file.

This is a self-led assignment. Do not submit anything.
Find the opportunity to share your research with your colleagues or publish it on your website. Keep this research handy for your next assignment to write a label.

QUIZ 2: FILL IN THE GAPS

Choose an item from the curator's shopping list.

1. To find out the provenance of an object I would first check the _____ _____.
2. To find out who made the object I would first check for _____ and _____.
3. To find an old book about the subject I would go to a _____.
4. To verify my hypothesis or conclusion I would ask an _____.
5. To find something that looks like my object I would try a _____ _____ _____.
6. To find comparative objects I will try and find an _____ _____.
7. To find out when the object came into the museum, I would consult the _____ _____.
8. To canvas the opinions of others I will consult _____ _____.

Answers at the back of the book.

Module 3

COMMUNICATION IN MUSEUMS

THINK ABOUT IT

"The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it. We have talked enough; but we have not listened. And by not listening we have failed to concede the immense complexity of our society–and thus the great gaps between ourselves and those with whom we seek understanding."

William H. Whyte, sociologist, 1950.[5]

Why does William Whyte think communication is an illusion?

Which aspect of communication is most important, according to him?

MUSEUM FUNDAMENTALS

Communication happens in a variety of ways, not all of it is in words. Using the 50% model of a curator, we should spend around half our time communicating the knowledge and stories we have created through our research.

Clarity of purpose and good timing are critical. Effective curating happens when your collections-inspired theme resonates with your audiences. Will your selected modes of communication be able to achieve your goals? How might your message be received and understood? Is there more to communicating with collections than exhibitions?

Good communication is also at the heart of generating social and cultural value in our museums. By sharing knowledge honestly in a variety of ways, we can generate new knowledge and conversations resulting in new communities of interest forming around our collections.

HOW DO MUSEUMS COMMUNICATE?

Human communication is complex. Curators and museums use the full spectrum of communication in their work.

There are verbal modes of communication such as speaking, writing and singing. There are also non-verbal modes of communication such as sign-language, graphics and symbols. There are external and indirect methods of communication such as conveyed by the architecture of the museum, the style of its interiors, colours used, the arrangements and displays.

Curators can choose to communicate as an individual or on behalf of the museum as a whole, often referred to as the 'museum voice'. The way curators communicate with colleagues and the public at large is also important. Body language, facial expressions and gestures affect how your message is received, not providing a response will be received in different ways. The tone of voice you use when speaking and writing also affects how your message is carried.

Most of all, listening is the most important aspect of museum communication. Creating opportunities to listen to your visitors and those you encounter online will help turn one-way conversations into much more valuable two-way conversations.

WHERE CAN MUSEUMS COMMUNICATE?

Inside your museum you can communicate in these ways:

- Exhibitions, galleries and labels
- Signage
- Environment in the building, e.g. lighting, temperature, seating, smell
- Publications
- Press releases for radio, TV and other media
- Print marketing and advertising such as leaflets
- Branding
- Word of mouth
- Front of House welcome
- Events, workshops, tours and talks
- Role-play, living history, storytelling, performance
- Interactive experiences e.g. trails, games
- Surveys and comments books
- Multiple languages

Questions

- Which of these methods of communication does your museum use?
- What other ways can you think of?

Outside your museum and online, your museum can communicate in these ways:

- Online collections
- Websites and blogs
- Social media
- Podcasts
- Events in other places (outreach) such as care homes and schools
- Loan boxes of educational items
- Displays in other places for special events
- Surveys
- Publishing elsewhere online e.g. Wikipedia
- Digital marketing and advertising
- Branding
- Interactive experiences e.g. trails, games, quizzes, polls, surveys
- Asking for feedback

Questions

- What other methods does your museum use to communicate online and outside the museum?
- Which methods encourage listening?

ASSIGNMENT: WRITE A MUSEUM LABEL

In this assignment you will practice writing a museum label. There is no right or wrong way to write a good museum label. You will need to refer to the notes you made for the previous assignment in module 2. Research in Museums.

1. First decide on the style of label you would like to write: short and informative or slightly longer; different writing styles are discussed in module 5. Interpretation in museums
2. Do include the accession number on the label. Donor information is optional and depends on the preferences of the donor if they have made any
3. Choose a title that helps the reader identify the right object
4. Decide where to present your label, in the gallery, online or both. If posting online remember to include at least one photograph or video (best practice is to include descriptive tags for images online and audio description for videos so blind and visually impaired people can understand visual material)
5. Choose the format and placement of your label such as the size and clarity of the font and how readable it will be when it is in place
6. Acrylic label holders are cheap and easy to purchase and can be reused. Labels may also be mounted on the wall, such as next to a painting
7. Only include QR codes if they are easy for visitors to scan and your building has a good data or WiFi signal
8. Think about providing an alternative format for your label, such as an audio recording.

This is a self-led assignment. Do not submit anything. You can print your label and place it with your chosen object in the museum, or post it online with a photograph or illustration of the item you have written about.

QUIZ 3: TRUE OR FALSE

1. Museums only communicate through object labels.
2. Curators can use gestures, poses and emojis when communicating.
3. Museum exhibitions are forms of communication.
4. Curators don't need to listen to feedback.
5. Museums should avoid communicating online.

Answers at the back of the book.

Module 4

CURATORS IN THE COMMUNITY

THINK ABOUT IT

"When you are sitting in your own house, you don't learn anything. You must get out of your house to learn."

Proverbs from Ghana, Boston University African Studies Centre.[6]

What does this proverb mean?

How might it apply to your social role as a museum and a curator?

MUSEUM FUNDAMENTALS

The word community is used a lot in museums. What does it mean?

A community is a group of people which share particular interests, characteristics or experiences. They may be defined by the group or by others outside the group.

Other words museums use are audiences, visitors, users and followers.

Essentially museum communities are people who want to engage with the museum in some way. It might be to send in an enquiry, to ask for information about an object or a topic related to the museum's themes, to come to a children's activity, ask about the local area, request work experience, or to collaborate on a project.

Museum communities can be members of the public, schools, societies and groups, as well as stakeholders such as funders, local councils, government officers, and anyone else who you rely on to keep the museum open.

Curators that are themselves active in different communities will find it easier to understand them and what they might like from the museum.

A Girl Guides group is an example of a community that shares characteristics around their activities and membership of an organisation. The Jewish community is an example of a community that shares characteristics around faith, heritage and culture.

WHAT IS PUBLIC OR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Curators should be careful not to lump large groups of people together under one label. Take time to get to know your visitors and followers. Even if they share the same characteristics, for example, are all women, or are all D/deaf, doesn't mean they all think in the same way or want the same thing. Turn those one-way conversations into two-way conversations.

Governments and funders often want museums to demonstrate how their work benefits different sections of the public. This is called audience development or community engagement or participation. Museums are duty-bound by public funders to collect data via surveys relating to the diversity of their workforces and visitors.

A major aspect of community engagement - also referred to as public engagement - in museums is being able to demonstrate that your work is inclusive of all those who might like to take part. Some museums have policies that outline how their work might benefit various people. These are variously called Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies, and variations on those words.

A particular concern for UK museums is ensuring they are aware of the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and the nine protected characteristics. This means it is illegal for someone to discriminate against someone else on the basis of age, sex, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, religion and belief, ethnicity, nationality and race, pregnancy and maternity, and marriage or civil partnership.

An example of community engagement is providing remote digital (livestreamed) visits of the museum to local care homes or those experiencing isolation.

WHAT IS ACCESS AND INCLUSION?

Access means physical access to museum buildings as well as digital access to online services and material, as well as intellectual access that ensures information from the museum is communicated in a variety of ways, such as not expecting visitors to just rely on a lot of reading.

Good access is particularly important for blind and visually impaired communities, and D/deaf and hard of hearing communities and those who are neurodiverse (conditions like dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, AD(H)D, ASD, autism, Tourettes).

An example of access is ensuring the size, colour and fonts of print in your museum are clear and readable, such as on exhibition panels and labels.

An example of access for neurodivergent visitors is providing photographs and information about what your museum is like on your website so they can familiarise themselves and know what to expect before they visit. This includes describing the building, places and times which might be noisy and spaces that are quieter. This is sometimes called an Access Statement.

Inclusion or inclusivity means that you are aware of the barriers that exist to your museum, whether physical, digital or intellectual, and you invest resources in mitigating or removing them. It might also include working with partners to support people in need.

An example of inclusivity is offering free entry to your museum and some of its events.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EQUALITY AND EQUITY?

Equality, equal opportunities and equity are commonly used in discussions about broadening the appeal and social value of museums. Many funders prefer to support museum work that has a major component of public engagement - also called socially-engaged practice.

Equality means ensuring that every individual has the same opportunity to participate in your organisation or activity, from applying for a job or volunteering, to reading your website.

Equity is about giving people what they need to make things fair. It is a term often used to highlight the barriers faced by people marginalised in society. This means that you acknowledge that some people are more disadvantaged than others and for them to experience equality of opportunity they may need more help or resources.

An example of equity is ensuring you have appropriate toilet and changing facilities for people who have profound mental and learning disabilities (PMLD) and their carers.

WHAT ARE CO-CURATION AND PARTICIPATION?

Co-curation is about collaborating with other people in decision-making and developing new ideas and projects. These may be people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Participation is similar and shows a commitment to including the widest range of people in the way the museum operates, what it does, and how.

Cultural democracy is also a term that is used to demonstrate that your museum understands the importance of doing things with people, rather than to them. “Nothing about us, without us” is a phrase used to highlight the importance of considerate decision-making.

An example of co-curation is working with a theatre company to make a production that interprets stories based on your collections research. An example of participation is training up a small group of volunteers in basic conservation techniques.

WHAT IS DIVERSITY?

Diversity refers to the make-up of the museum organisation and audiences. All organisations thrive with well-functioning teams that comprise people from different backgrounds, different ages, experiences and specialisms.

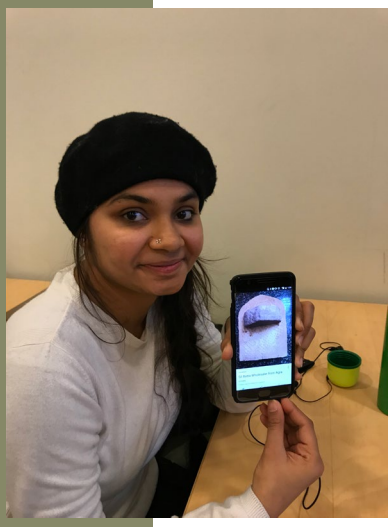
This includes involving people who think differently to you in your decisions, but also who have life stories that are different to yours - often called lived experiences - such as people from different ethnicities, faiths, ages, occupations, genders.

Museums look for diversity in the following areas:

- **Workforce and governance** (volunteers, staff, trustees, decision-makers)
- **Representation and activity** (subjects, stories, ways to experience the museum)
- **Audiences and communities** (segmentation and monitoring surveys)
- **Co-producers and partners** (who you work with to deliver programmes, services and products)
- **Public sector equality duty** (Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics)
- **Beyond the labels and numbers** (creating understanding through dialogue and relationships)

Museums often monitor the diversity of their organisation, visitors and followers through staff and audience data monitoring surveys. They can show which groups of people tend not to visit, follow or use the museum. This might help the museum plan activities to attract new audiences. These should never be forced upon people who do not wish to participate.

ASSIGNMENT: IDENTIFY A MUSEUM COMMUNITY



You may already have survey results and digital engagement statistics and other ways of telling who visits your museum or follows you online, such as where in the world they come from, their age and their gender and family or friend group.

For this assignment you can either use this information to summarise the communities or groups of people who already visit or follow your museum, and share this with your colleagues, or, you can plan a hypothetical or real event aimed at attracting a new group or community to your museum.

1. Identify a community or group you would like to attract, e.g. a local charity supporting adults with learning disabilities
2. Contact the organisation's responsible adult to discuss what your museum does and what the group might be interested in doing at the museum
3. Organise an online or in-person meeting to discuss further, or, invite some members of the group on a guided visit to help them get to know the museum at their own speed and on their own terms; remember to offer a warm welcome and for groups who struggle with travel expenses consider offering these
4. If your museum offers volunteering activities that can help, you can discuss these with the responsible adult representing or leading the group.

Caution

Treat the development of new audiences and relationships with new communities carefully. Take time to listen to their needs first and do not make assumptions about what kinds of activities they may or may not be interested in. If you are not experienced in Safeguarding or accommodating vulnerable adults or children, please do not undertake this assignment on your own. Seek advice from experienced or qualified colleagues at another museum or elsewhere.

This is a self-led assignment. Do not submit anything. If you have them at your museum, work closely with your community engagement or education colleagues.

QUIZ 4: ODD ONE OUT

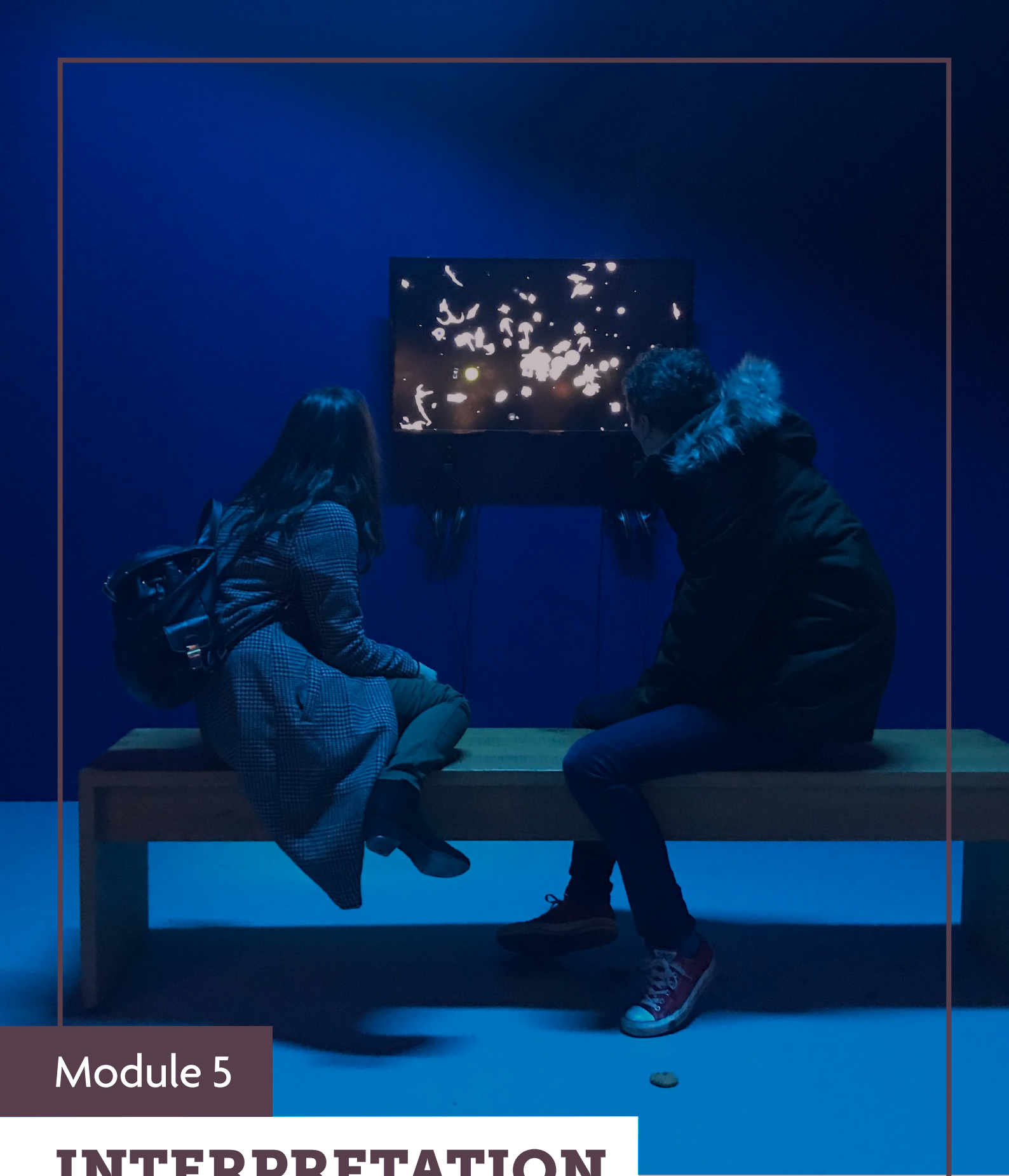
1. **Which of these is not a museum community?**
   - **a.** Cats
   - **b.** Methodist congregation
   - **c.** Young Farmers Club
   - **d.** Local primary school
2. **Which of these might help a blind or visually impaired visitor?**
   - **a.** Large print labels with high contrast letters
   - **b.** Audio descriptions of artworks
   - **c.** Being able to touch an object
   - **d.** Photo of the object
3. **Which of these is not an example of co-curation?**
   - **a.** Working with an artist on a new exhibition
   - **b.** Cataloguing photographs with an online community
   - **c.** Meeting your friends for lunch
   - **d.** Assisting a student placement to research an object

Answers at the back of the book.

QUIZ 5: TRUE OR FALSE

1. Low income is a Protected Characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.
2. Equality means every individual has the same opportunities at your museum.
3. A board of trustees with only men but who have different opinions is diverse.

Answers at the back of the book.



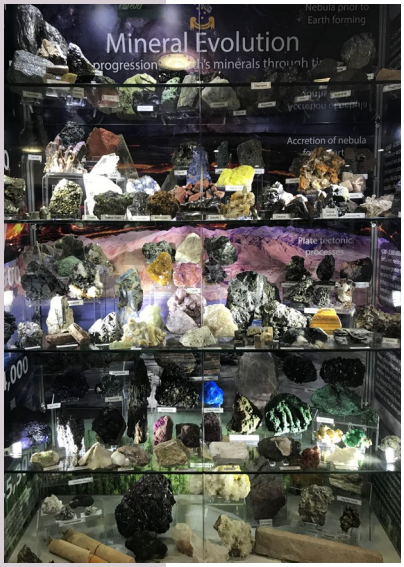
Module 5

INTERPRETATION IN MUSEUMS

THINK ABOUT IT

"Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is. The world-as-it-is is more than pure objective fact, it includes consciousness. Out of true with the present, these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify."

John Berger, Ways of Seeing, 1972.[7]



MUSEUM FUNDAMENTALS

Interpretation and presentation are the ultimate responsibility of curators. It is the stuff that makes sense of objects and presents facts and stories about them. The function of interpretation makes meaning out of our collections and why we have them in the first place. It creates connections between people, things and ideas.

Document your interpretation in your catalogue records. Find the hidden stories, key messages and calls to action that will resonate with your audiences. You can change the mood and meaning by altering what comes before, after and alongside your interpretation. This is called framing and will be perceived differently depending on your audience's own contexts, their own world views, and their own immediate and long-term experiences. The physical and digital environment you create for your interpretation will influence the thoughts people leave with, and the lasting feeling they may take away.

HOW ARE MUSEUM OBJECTS REPRESENTED?

In the quote above, John Berger was talking about art and its 20th-century representation in photography and on TV. Although writing about the 1970s, the idea that the way art is represented skews its meanings still applies today. Objects acquire impressiveness in museums.

Some audiences will be self-aware of their learned assumptions absorbed from their families, friends and school education, while others will be less aware. Good museum interpretation is well-researched and represents collections honestly, particularly when something is not known. At all points avoid mystifying. Represent assumptions as opinions, not facts. Our aim for good interpretation and representation is to turn one-way conversations (with the museum as authority) into two-way conversations (where an audience member may know more).

CATALOGUING: THE STARTING POINT FOR INTERPRETATION

The museum catalogue, commonly in the form of a database, is the first place you will create a record of an object and its interpretation.

While the provenance of an object is important when researching collections, it is also the basis of most object interpretation. The catalogue is where you will add new information or edit information that comes to light as a result of new research, enquiries or exhibitions. This information is considered additional to basic inventory records which only record the type of object, a brief description, acquisition information, location and condition.

The catalogue record is a good place to capture the history of interpretation of an object, for example, it may have been interpreted differently by different people and you may wish to document different descriptions. These descriptions should capture as much information as possible, including references and names of people providing new information. In descriptions avoid value-laden language like 'pretty', 'large lady', 'old man'. Avoid assumptions that other people may not understand such as colloquialisms and abbreviations as these can distract people from your interpretation and they can quickly get dated.

STORYTELLING: KEY MESSAGES AND CALLS TO ACTION

Key messages are thoughts, information, feelings you would like your audience to take away with them after a tour, exhibition, talk, online or in the museum.

Calls to action are the things you want your audience to do or think about and can be questions directed at them.

Key messages and calls to action can be **implicit** - implied by your interpretation - or **explicit** - specifically included in your interpretation.

Museum objects should be centre-stage in any story told by a museum. Their role in an exhibition should not be as props but should have a clear purpose. Elements of an object story may include:

1. The biography or the life story of the object before it came into the museum (creation, ownership, use)
2. New or unexpected knowledge about the object, the people associated with it in its cultural contexts
3. The relevance of the object to diverse people
4. Invoking a mood, memory or emotion, for example, using empathy or humour.

A note on AI-generated museum interpretation

Some museums have begun programming Artificial Intelligence (AI) on their object information and catalogues to provide playful ways of encouraging audiences to engage with an object. Others have been using ready-made generative AI, for example, ChatGPT and Google's Gemini to assist with research. The quality of the responses is highly dependent on the quality of the information that the machine has been trained on and is therefore susceptible to providing inaccurate or misleading information that is nonetheless convincing. Like all research sources, AI generated material should have its sources checked. AI image generators should be avoided if you are uncertain of the sources of images used in the machine learning as these derive from the intellectual property of unidentified individuals and organisations who are not compensated or credited. Any content produced using AI should be clearly labelled.

7 IDEAS ON HOW TO CONVEY DIFFERENT MOODS AND MEANINGS

Curators can use many different media for their interpretation. While the informative label is the most used format, there are many other ways you can talk to your audiences:

1. **Museum label or caption.** A short description, usually factual, about the object or exhibit displayed next to it
2. **Punditry or expert view.** A long piece of interpretation intended for a specialist audience usually published in an article, book or website
3. **Personalisation.** Opportunity for visitor to take on a role in an event or exhibition such as dressing up
4. **Poetry and creative writing.** Using a literary style to convey an idea or story (fictional information should be clearly labelled)
5. **Playful.** Providing an in-gallery or online activity to interpret an idea or story, such as a piece of theatre or dance
6. **Musical and theatrical.** Using sound, audio, acting or music to carry interpretation
7. **Funny.** Humorous exhibits or interpretation (use with caution, be sensitive to the subject and the people it represents).

ASSIGNMENT: MAKE A MUSEUM VIDEO

In this assignment you will plan and produce a short video. You can use a smartphone, tablet or a digital camera. Ensure you have access to a computer to help you edit footage if necessary. Consider using a tripod and additional microphone for better quality outputs.

1. Write down your **key messages** and **calls to action**
2. Give it a **title** e.g. Curator's Talk: Cornish Turquoise Ring
3. Decide its **purpose** e.g. instructional (how to), educational (learn something), entertaining (evoke mood and feelings), trailer (for an exhibition or reopening)
4. Target an **audience:** who are your primary viewers? Hard question but worth thinking about
5. Gather your **content** in one place: images (stills), interviews, talking heads, scenes, close-ups, soundtrack, branding
6. Who are your **actors**? Who is in front of and behind the camera, will you record a separate voice-over? If featuring members of the public you should ask them to complete release forms; avoid footage of children without explicit planning and permission
7. **Structure** the video. Consider the order (beginnings and endings) editing, audio quality, lighting
8. **Produce the video.** Consider its length (attention span of viewer, purpose), access (subtitles, audio description), look, sound and feel, titles, credits, description, how it will be discovered.

This is a self-led assignment. Do not submit anything. Try and get someone else to watch it and provide feedback before you upload it online or feature it in a gallery.

QUIZ 6: ODD ONE OUT

1. **The purpose of cataloguing museum objects is to:**
   - **a.** add to basic inventory information
   - **b.** capture provenance and references useful for interpretation
   - **c.** make your boss happy
   - **d.** create a record of the history of how the object has been interpreted.
2. **The catalogue record is relevant to interpretation because:**
   - **a.** it is the starting point for interpretation
   - **b.** it can contain references useful for interpretation
   - **c.** multiple points of view may be recorded in the catalogue
   - **d.** it is the only source of information you have.
3. **Good interpretation can be:**
   - **a.** hard to understand
   - **b.** written by AI
   - **c.** funny
   - **d.** informative.

Answers at the back of the book.

QUIZ 7: FILL IN THE GAPS (KEY MESSAGE OR CALL TO ACTION)

1. "Some of our collections were looted during the battle" is a _____.
2. "Ecologists in the late 18th century were already concerned about environmental degradation" is a _____.
3. "Discover the people who protested against the government" is a _____.
4. "How do dolls make you feel?" is a _____.

Answers at the back of the book.

Module 6

CARING FOR COLLECTIONS

MUSEUM FUNDAMENTALS

The traditional role of a museum curator has always included knowledge of the safe and sensitive handling, display and storage of objects. This module provides some useful advice and tips on ensuring the physical safety of your collections so that your audiences, visitors and followers can get the most out of them.

SENSITIVE CARE

Be aware of how you manage and interpret objects made of materials that are now illegal to trade such as all types of ivory and other materials historically made from endangered wild animals. The international convention called CITES can help guide you. If your collection holds human remains you should seek further specialist training before handling, storing or displaying them. Some human remains from non-British cultures have historically been poorly handled and stored in museums. Get to know your collection thoroughly to help inform ethical and sensitive care of human remains.

SAFE HANDLING AND MOVING

- Know your materials and look at the construction
- Is it hazardous to you? E.g. contains harmful dust like asbestos or heavy metal minerals, unknown chemical/organic composition, treated with an unknown substance
- Follow protocols of your museum or ask an expert such as an accredited conservator
- Use thin gloves such as nitrile gloves (not cotton gloves) except when loss of sensitivity may risk damage, e.g. documents, books, some large/working objects (except paintwork), small coins, fragile textiles
- Plan accessing difficult to reach objects such as those on display before attempting to reach them
- Clear the route before you move an object to a new location or for packing for loan.

OBSERVE, INVESTIGATE AND RECORD

- Magnifying glasses of different powers enlarge writing and patterns and can show you more about the object's construction
- Loupes are powerful magnifiers used close to the eye. Bring the object to the centre of the loupe to focus
- Use a (LED) torch/lamp to illuminate object work
- Long Wave UV (black light) torches and spectral imaging can show up hidden details such as watermarks, palimpsests (writing that has been erased off a document), water or chemical damage and make fluorescent minerals glow
- Use digital callipers, a soft measuring tape and a sensitive weighing scale to measure and record dimensions
- Always make a photographic record of any conservation work and ensure this information is added to the object's catalogue record.

10 TIPS FOR EXAMINING MUSEUM OBJECTS AND ARCHIVES

1. Clean and dry hands, free of items that might drag or snag. Check jewellery and clothing
2. Gloves for most objects except paper and books. Long nails can damage ink on paper and may compromise your grip
3. Clear your workspace
4. Use acid free tissue or a protective clean lint-free sheet before examining
5. Gather your tools for measuring, looking, capturing, making notes and object supports where needed, e.g. book supports
6. No food or drink on your workspace
7. When making notes keep pens separate or use a pencil
8. Avoid pointing at objects with pens
9. Assess the safest way of holding the object first, especially those with frames, handles, hinges, moving parts and attachments
10. Examine smaller objects over a table or worktop that has a soft covering or padding — be careful removing items from bespoke mounts and packaging or avoid if unnecessary.

KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENT

- What are the features of your climate? Dry, damp, sunny, shady?
- What environment is created in your museum building?
- Big fluctuations in temperature (T) and relative humidity (RH) particularly over 24hrs are most damaging e.g. +/-10-20% and +/-5 degrees
- Sudden fluctuations may cause damage e.g. moving a painting hanging in a cold damp room suddenly into a hot dry gallery. Acclimatise slowly e.g. by keeping the painting in its packaging in the new climate
- Use a digital thermohygrometer to monitor fluctuations in T and RH
- Constant high damp over 65-70% may cause mould and warmer temperatures can encourage pests on organic materials like paper, textiles, canvas, books, wood
- Wet is bad for metals but some wooden and biological artefacts, especially archaeological items made of paper, wood and bone need some moisture to avoid drying out and cracking; film reels and negatives can suffer from an irreversible problem called vinegar syndrome where the acetate starts breaking down on its own—consult an accredited conservator immediately.

LIGHT AND UV

- Natural and artificial light (measured in lux) are sources of heat (infra-red) and UV radiation (usually measured in micro watts). LED lights emit considerably less than other types such as halogens
- UV exposure causes fading of dyes and pigments, prompts changes in the materials e.g. can make some paper, silk, artificial fabrics and many plastics go brittle
- Photographic emulsion on old photographs can react and crack particularly when exposure is also associated with heat
- Mitigate with blackout blinds, UV films or coatings on windows and display cases
- Smart glass cases with polarising effects considerably reduce heat, light and UV exposure.

YOUR OBJECTS MIGHT BE SOMEONE'S LUNCH

- Pests, insects such as woodworm, carpet beetle, clothes moths, silverfish, bookworm eat wool, silk, paper, wood and other organic materials
- Signs pests are active: insect casings, holes, light coloured circles around bore holes in wood, and insect poo called frass which looks like brown/grey dust, piles of fresh sawdust
- Pests come inside to lay their eggs when it is warm and damp enough mainly in the spring and early summer. Ask to see your museum's pest traps
- Shrink-wrapping and deep-freezing objects is a method used to kill pests nesting in objects before they are put on display or in store.

Module 7

MUSEUM ETHICS AND APPLYING YOUR LEARNING

Now you have learned the basics of what museums, collections and curating are it's time to bring it all together and apply your learning in a broader context. Before you do this, take a moment to consider the ethics of museum work.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF A MUSEUM

What sets museums apart from auction houses, curio shops, charity shops and arts centres is the purpose and ethics of a modern museum. The simplest idea of a public-serving museum is one that develops collections (physical and digital) in trust for the public and values, interprets and preserves the knowledge generated from those collections and the people to which they relate.

The wider role of your museum in your community will vary.

Some operate predominantly as visitor attractions and service the tourist industry while others exist to serve their locality and provide amenity and facilities which may not relate to heritage and culture at all.

Example

The Museum of Cornish Life, managed by independent charity South Kerrier Heritage Trust, has official charitable objectives to "manage, maintain and develop The Museum of Cornish Life, Helston for the benefit of the public and to advance education in the heritage, arts and crafts of the South Kerrier area." Remaining free to enter is also part of this mission. The workforce that delivers the mission is a blend of over 60 volunteers supported by 4-5 mainly part-time staff. Volunteers, some of whom also lead special projects, are integrated into every aspect of museum work from front of house to digitisation.

To support these objectives the museum doesn't just research and develop its collections. It provides a programme of free and low-cost events and activities. Two annual craft fairs, alongside the museum shop, support many crafts people to sell their products. The museum's Training and Vocation programme provides employment skill opportunities for people of all ages. Cultural collaborations support small theatre companies to use research and interpretation from the museum for new productions.

The museum also provides amenities to be useful to people, such as a free venue for community groups, printing and copying, seating and self-service refreshments, First Aid and mental health first aid, free toilet facilities and toiletries, and basic tourist information. The impulse to be a helpful organisation extends to the museum's enquiry and research service, which also serves the museum's mission to provide knowledge as a public service.

THINK ABOUT IT

"Museums are public-facing, collections-based institutions that preserve and transmit knowledge, culture and history for past, present and future generations. This places museums in an important position of trust in relation to their audiences, local communities, donors, source communities, partner organisations, sponsors and funders. Museums must make sound ethical judgements in all areas of work in order to maintain this trust."

Museums Association, UK definition of a museum, 2015.[8]

"A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."

International Council of Museums, definition of a museum, 2022.[9]

What do you think of these definitions? Do you recognise your museum in them or is your museum's mission different? What role does your museum play in its local and other communities?

CODES OF ETHICS

In the UK, the Museums Association (MA) governs the country's Code of Ethics which gets reviewed from time to time. This set of key overarching principles suggests ethical attitudes and behaviours museums should follow. All Accredited museums must abide by the Code of Ethics.

Ethics are not a substitute for following the Law and they may also challenge your personal morals from time to time. The Code of Ethics is not a manual either. It exists to make you think carefully especially when you find you and your museum navigating a knotty issue or potentially embarrassing problem.

NAVIGATING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

In all ethical dilemmas whether they relate to your communities, workforce, funders or collections, you should seek discussion with experienced colleagues, whether independent or at another museum. Discussions should be confidential to enable sound decisions to be made that take into account the effect of that decision on others. When considering, for example, the ethics of deaccessioning an item from the collection, it is essential these decisions are not made on your own.

If you cannot find an experienced person to talk to, consider contacting the Ethics Committee at the Museums Association.

7 WAYS TO APPLY YOUR LEARNING TO YOUR MUSEUM

1. What are the charitable objectives or mission of my organisation?
2. What is my role within the organisation?
3. What are my responsibilities?
4. What are our legal obligations?
5. What are our financial obligations?
6. What are our ethical obligations?
7. What is our role within our wider community, and the museum community?

A FINAL THOUGHT

There is no manual for running a museum or being a curator, whether of collections or communities. This guide has been developed to help you think creatively, methodically and with dedication to the communities you serve. You should develop your own style and see how it is reflected within your organisation. Listen to others especially those with whom you might disagree. Most museum people are generous and eager to help with advice, information and cooperation. You are not on your own. Turn those one-way conversations into two-way conversations in all you do.

QUIZ ANSWERS

Quiz 1 Answers: Collections, Curators and Museums

1. **False.** The idea of the museum originated in several European countries. The oldest public museum still in existence is the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford established in 1683.
2. **False.** Anyone can develop the skills to be a good museum curator. It requires lifelong learning and practice.
3. **False.** While many museums have collections that came from wealthy patrons or famous people, many folk museums reflect the stories of working class people, the everyday and special interests.
4. **False.** A good museum curator should balance generating new knowledge through research and communicating that knowledge to different audiences.

Quiz 2 Answers: Research in Museums

1. To find out the provenance of an object I would first check the History Files.
2. To find out who made the object I would first check for signatures and makers marks.
3. To find an old book about the subject I would go to a library.
4. To verify my hypothesis or conclusion I would ask an expert.
5. To find something that looks like my object I would try a reverse image search.
6. To find comparative objects I will try and find an online database.
7. To find out when the object came into the museum I would consult the object database.
8. To canvas the opinions of others I will consult social media.

Quiz 3 Answers: Communication in Museums

1. **False.** Museums can communicate verbally by writing or speaking, non-verbally by using sign language or symbols, and indirectly through their building.
2. **True.** Gestures, facial expressions and emojis convey a mood when communicating a message.
3. **True.** Museum exhibitions are common forms of communication, but they are not the only places they communicate.
4. **False.** Curators do need to develop their skills in listening, including asking for feedback and comments in the museum and online.
5. **False.** Museums must communicate online via their websites and social media to ensure the widest group of people have the opportunity to connect with the museum.

Quiz 4 Answers: Curators in the Community

1. **a.** Nearly any group of people might be thought of as a museum community, but not usually cats.

2. **d.** All of these except photographs can be useful to blind and visually-impaired people. Photographs posted online can be informative if accompanied by an alt tag (hidden image description).

3. **c.** All of these except meeting your friends for lunch are examples of co-curation.

Quiz 5 Answers: Curators in the Community

1. **False.** Many museums are aware of the barriers caused by poverty and a low income but it is not a Protected Characteristic.

2. **True.** By contrast, equity means you give people who face more barriers than others a helping hand to overcome them.

3. **False.** This board is partially diverse. The lack of women on the board is a cause for concern. Women make up 51% of the population and should be represented in all museum decision-making.

Quiz 6 Answers: Interpretation in Museums

1. **c.** It will probably make your boss or colleagues happy too!

2. **d.** Refer to module 2 for other sources of information useful in interpretation.

3. **a.** Good interpretation should not be hard to understand. Museums should avoid mystifying people unless disorientation (done deliberately and well) is a key part of your message or call to action. Always label AI-generated content.

Quiz 7 Answers: Interpretation in Museums

1. Key message, explicit.

2. Key message, implicit or explicit.

3. Call to action, explicit.

4. Call to action, implicit or explicit.

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