

New light on old bones: novel ways of researching and using natural science collections.

A collaborative project between Renaissance North West and the University of Manchester, January 2010– March 2011

Project description

Context

Renaissance in the Regions is the DCMS £300m programme of investment into regional museums. Each English region has formed a hub of major museums which is responsible for delivering the programme. The lead partner of the Renaissance North West Hub is Manchester Art Gallery, the other partners are Manchester Museum; the Whitworth Art Gallery; Bolton Museum and Archive Service; the Harris Museum and Art Gallery and Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery.

Background to the project

Institutions in the North West hold more than ten million natural science specimens, spread across 60 institutions. Those who have a duty of care for them are committed and energetic but they do not all have expertise in the area; only seven of these institutions have at least one member of staff with natural science training. To capitalize on this enthusiasm, *New light on old bones* will use arts and humanities research to equip staff to interpret natural science objects in new, sustainable ways.

The project follows recent initiatives in the UK and elsewhere that treat natural specimens as cultural heritage. Audience research, both formal and informal, shows that memory of natural science displays is often rooted in local consciousness. Scientific objects can have rich social and historical meanings, and dormant collections can be re-invigorated with interdisciplinary research. Large institutions such as the Natural History Museum (NHM) – and in the region the Manchester Museum (MM) – have devoted resources in this direction (e.g. Centre for Arts and Humanities Research at the NHM and the ‘Afterlife of Animals’ project at the MM) and re-displays across the UK have deployed interdisciplinary approaches to great effect (e.g. Kelvingrove in Glasgow; Weston Park in Sheffield, Leeds Museum, Great North Museum Hancock). There is elsewhere a considerable body of academic cultural analyses of natural science collections (especially taxidermy and colonial collecting) that is remote from displays and audiences but has considerable potential for application in museum practice.

New light on old bones is a pilot study consisting of innovative interdisciplinary research on natural science collections in the region that will demonstrate the efficacy of humanities research to assist the interpretation of these collections. A researcher will spend a short but intense period at two case study institutions gathering historical, cultural and oral evidence about the natural science collections (and in particular key objects therein), much of which is already there but rarely committed to print or otherwise available in a usable form. The research team will then synthesize this material to provide the institutions with a resource for potential displays and programmes and an exemplar for other museums in the region. Although work of this kind often centres on charismatic megafauna – which, like Manchester’s Maharajah the elephant, act as mascots for their institution – there is also rich potential in other zoological, geological and botanical collections.

Aims

- To demonstrate the application of arts and humanities research methods to natural science collections, especially for museum staff who have a duty of care for natural science collections but no scientific training.
- To engage audiences with the historical and cultural meanings of specimens, especially their local significance.
- To build sustainable interdisciplinary relationships and partnerships between humanities researchers and museum practitioners.
- To provide resources for staff at other institutions for researching and preparing displays.

Needs

The project is a response to the need to:

- Assist and increase the use of the extensive natural science collections in North West institutions.
- Meet audience interest in natural science¹.
- Respond to the local meanings and sentiments that natural science collections have for audiences.
- Provide interdisciplinary professional development opportunities.

¹ A recent poll of almost 3,600 people in London shows that natural history is the most popular interest amongst these people. 82% gave natural history as their ‘top area of interest’ (*Museums Journal* January 2010 p13)

Methods

- Archival research: object documentation and institutional records at the case study museums; local history material at library or town archives.
- Ethnography/oral history of users (not only curators but conservators, visitor services and audiences) to record the technical, apocryphal and vernacular histories of key objects.
- Museological research into new ways of displaying or otherwise deploying natural science objects.
- A literature review of cultural analyses of natural science collections.
- A review of recent re-displays in the North of England of natural science collections (e.g. in Newcastle, Sheffield, Leeds and York)

Outputs

- A portfolio of resources and information on which current and future staff at the pilot study museums may base re-displays, public events and education activities.
- A co-authored research report which contains: description and analysis of the case studies; an assessment of current academic work in the area; examples of interdisciplinary interpretation elsewhere; and ways this has been and could be implemented in museums in the region. This will be disseminated across the region in paper form and available online.
- A short academic publication to promote the project nationally and internationally to academics working on similar projects, encouraging them to engage with museum practice and audiences.
- A workshop (or workshops) to share not only the products but, especially, the *processes* of the research and how it might be applied in other institutions. Workshops will include not only the results of the project (whether in-progress or completed) but also examples of good practice in museums elsewhere.
- Groundwork for a major proposal for knowledge transfer funding for a larger HEI-sector project sustaining and expanding the work of the project.

The research team

The research team will meet every two months and will consist of:

- A contracted researcher, with a background in interdisciplinary work on natural science collections. Responsible for on-site research and content of outputs.
- David Craven, Renaissance North West: Collections Development Officer (Natural Sciences). Responsible for advice on case study selection; needs

assessment; liaison and promotion across the region; co-authoring outputs.

- Dr Sam Alberti, University of Manchester (Museum/Museology), author of *Nature and Culture: Objects, Disciplines and the Manchester Museum* (2009). Responsible for the delivery and the quality of the work. This includes: interdisciplinary academic supervision and liaison; editing and co-authoring; access to academic resources.
- Dr Myna Trustram, Research Manager with Renaissance North West. Responsible for the management of the contract with the researcher and ensuring the brief is met and brings benefit to the Renaissance North West programme

In addition, post-graduate students at the Centre for Museology in the University of Manchester may assist with the project through: student projects on specific objects; workshop support; work placements in regional museums for 2010–11 cohort.

Advisory group

An advisory group will be formed to consist of:

Henry McGhie (Head of Natural Environments, Manchester Museum)

Julie Harvey (Natural History Museum)

Steve Baker (University of Central Lancashire)

Adrian Norris (Leeds City Museum / ICOM)

Budget

Manchester Museum (supervision, editing, writing)	3000
Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery (incidental costs of hosting research)	500
Second case study museum (incidental costs of hosting research)	500
Researcher	18000
Researcher expenses (including travel)	2000
Total	£24,000

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Tender for a project researcher

Introduction

Renaissance North West wishes to award a freelance contract to a researcher to carry out research for the *New light on old bones* project. Please see the project description (above) for an outline of the project.

Researchers' duties

The researcher will be required to:

1. Research the history and potential use of the natural science collections in two museums in the North West of England (Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery and another tbc).
2. Use a range of research methods (including archival, ethnographic, oral history, museological) in order to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of the two collections.
3. Prepare a portfolio of resources and information on which current and future staff at the pilot study museums may base re-displays and a programme of public events and education activities.
4. Co-author a research report which contains: description and analysis of the case studies; an assessment of current academic work in the area; examples of interdisciplinary interpretation elsewhere; and ways this has been and could be implemented in museums in the region.
5. Contribute to the preparation of resources to be used in the dissemination of the results of the research.
6. Contribute to a workshop (or workshops) to share not only the products but, especially, the *processes* of the research and how it might be applied in other institutions. Sessions/presentations will include not only the results of the project (whether in-progress or

completed) but also examples of good practice in museums elsewhere.

7. Work closely with the case study museum staff in order to encourage a reflective stance about the work and to share learning and insight as it develops and to encourage the immediate application of findings.

Researcher specification

1. Research experience with natural science collections at post-graduate level or above.
2. Familiarity with one or more of the following research methods: archival; ethnographic; oral history; museological.
3. An ability to work collaboratively with people i.e. within the research team, with museum staff and with members of the public.
4. Ability to write for a range of audiences.
5. Familiarity with museum collection documentation systems, including Revisiting Collections, would be desirable.
6. Experience of developing exhibitions or public programmes is desirable.

Programme timetable

Advertising of contract	January – February 2010
Appointment of researcher	March
Research and preparation of portfolio	April – August
Workshop	21 July
Portfolio completed	30 September
Report completed	31 December
Dissemination	October – March 2011
Academic paper completed	31 March

Day to day reporting requirements

Myna Trustram, Research Manager for Renaissance NW is responsible for the management of this contract and is the first point of contact for contractual issues.

Sam Alberti is responsible for the delivery and quality of the project and is the first point of contact for academic issues. He is the researcher's academic supervisor.

Research team

The research team will meet every two months. A schedule of meetings will be agreed on commissioning the researcher.

Review

The responsibilities of this contract brief may not be entirely comprehensive. It is envisaged that responsibilities and processes may need to be reviewed and revised over the course of the programme.

Future extension of the work

The development of a research base is key to the Renaissance programme. Research is a long-term endeavour and we envisage that it will require on-going support. Renaissance NW is unable to make any commitment to extending this work beyond 31st March 2011 but if resources do become available, Renaissance NW may wish to extend the contract.

Fee

This is offered as a freelance contract with Manchester City Council. The total fee is £18,000. The researcher is required to work a minimum of 90 days (i.e. at a rate of £200 a day). The bulk of the work will take place between April and September 2010 when the researcher will spend a minimum of 60 days carrying out research in the two museums and preparing the portfolio, doing the literature review, and assessing recent re-displays in the north of England. The remaining 20–30 days will be spent between September 2010 and March 2011 on the dissemination of the research including writing the report.

Expenses

£2,000 is offered to cover all expenses including travel and subsistence.

Payment schedule

On signing of contract	5000
1st payment of expenses on signing of contract	666
30 June	4000
2 nd payment of expenses	666
On receipt of portfolio 30 Sept	4000
On receipt of report 31 December	3000
Final payment of expenses 31 December	668
On completion of project	2000
Total (fee and expenses)	20,000

Application process

Please respond in writing to Alex Bird, Support Officer, Renaissance NW, Manchester Art Gallery, Mosley Street, Manchester M2 3JL or by email: a.bird@manchester.gov.uk

Your application should include

1. How your knowledge and experience enables you to fulfil the researcher's duties
2. How your knowledge and experience enables you to meet the researcher's specifications
3. Brief CV
4. A short sample (one page) of your writing which demonstrates your ability to write clearly.
5. Names and addresses (including email) of two referees.
6. When you could start the work.

Deadline for receipt of applications is noon on Monday 22 February 2010

Interviews will be held at Manchester Art Gallery on Friday 5 March 2010

Further information

To discuss this brief please contact Myna Trustram

(m.trustram@manchester.gov.uk or 0161 235 8849) or Sam Alberti

(Samuel.alberti@manchester.ac.uk or 0161 275 8879 / 7751

Myna Trustram January 2010

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