

## Presentation to conference in Brazil 2015

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The V&A Museum in London, founded after the Great Exhibition in 1851, holds a world-class collection of art and design. The V&A's present mission statement is, 'To enrich people's lives, inspire individuals and creative industries, make V&A matter to more people & provide diverse audiences with a quality experience physically and digitally.'

When I first went to the V&A in 1998 my job was to develop programmes based on the Asian galleries with a focus on working particularly, but not exclusively, with British Chinese and South Asian audiences. The UK is an ethnically diverse country – Black, Asian and ethnic minorities in England and Wales make up about 14% of the population but in London the figure is about 40%. Initially I worked on such programmes as Diwali, the Hindu festival of Light and the temporary exhibition, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* in 1999, where over 60% of almost 120,000 visitors were of Sikh origin. Many had never visited a museum before, never mind the V&A.

But various questions arose. What are the links between communities and collections? Were the Sikh community only interested in Sikh related exhibitions and objects? How do we sustain relationships with communities after such an exhibition ends? What about other equalities such as class, disability and gender and how do they intersect? And what about communities where there is no collection – there is no Africa gallery for example and yet there is a high proportion of people of African descent in the UK?

To explore some of these questions I secured funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a three-year project, *Capacity Building and Cultural Ownership - working with culturally diverse communities*.

### **Collections and Programmes related to the African Diaspora**

Through employing a researcher into the V&A collections we ‘uncovered’ over 4000 objects related to the African diaspora. No longer could the V&A say that we, ‘do not collect Africa,’ meaning art south of the Sahara, and as was reflected in the V&A’s Collecting Policy. Alongside this research we developed a public programme that brought in significant black audiences for the first time to the V&A. The research and related programme eventually led to a change in the V&A’s collecting policy and the V&A now actively collects objects related to the African diaspora. There are also plans for an African gallery.

### **Interculturalism and Interfaith Dialogue**

The second strand of the *Capacity Building and Cultural Ownership Programme* focussed on interculturalism and interfaith dialogue. First we set up different faith groups – Jewish, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Sikh, Hindu and Islam. From visuals we asked members of the groups to select objects important to them. Their responses were integrated into the V&A website.

Alongside this research we ran a programme of events that attracted diverse faith communities such as religious festivals and tied to events such as the opening of the refurbished Jameel Gallery of Middle Eastern Islamic Art.

The Museum can sometimes be uncomfortable with this explicit religious purpose. It is primarily a museum of art and design, a secular space and indeed we ran secular intercultural programmes. But art and faith are often intertwined and people do not leave their spiritual beliefs or cultural background at the door of the Museum.

### **World in the East End**

A third aspect of the *Capacity Building and Cultural Ownership Programme* was based at the V&A Museum of Childhood in the East End of London. My colleague Teresa Hare Duke and I developed a gallery, *World in the East End*, the aim of which was to reflect the cultural diversity of the area. As the museum collections did not reflect that diversity we turned to the local community to help us, selecting and training people from different communities – African Caribbean, Turkish, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, East European etc to collect objects and photographs (tangible heritage) with oral histories (intangible heritage) from people locally. This material was used to develop cases, multi-media and gallery installations along several themes – journeys, arrivals, play, leisure, festivals, school, work etc, showcasing both commonalities and differences between communities.

After some years the gallery space for the *World in the East End* was withdrawn. However staff at the Museum developed new material based on three families from diverse backgrounds – embedding the work into the Families Gallery but also broadening the concept of diversity. The Museum tackled some sensitive issues – like the relationship between some religions and lesbian and gay communities for example.

### **Evaluation of the Capacity Building and Cultural Ownership Programme**

The evaluation acknowledged that much had been achieved in three years for such a complex project in such a sophisticated international institution. However the evaluation also underlined the need for this work to be at the core, rather than at the margins, of the Museum. It suggested that a whole museum approach should be adopted where equality and diversity were integrated into policy priorities.

### **Strategy and Policy on Equality and Diversity**

We had not been idle on this front. In 2003, under a Labour Government, I, with my colleagues, developed an Access, Inclusion and Diversity Policy that looked at all aspects of the Museum – research, collections, conservation, temporary exhibitions, marketing, education, staffing, training etc. For example under ‘Collections’ the policy stated that they should reflect the diversity of people’s social and cultural heritage and include work by diverse practitioners. The policy for ‘Galleries’ made reference to making things accessible for people with disabilities, included strict guidelines on the number of words in gallery text and that it should be understandable for those with no experience in art. ‘Exhibitions’ were cited as an important way of bringing in new audiences. We already knew this as we regularly collected data on visitors to temporary exhibitions such as the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*. ‘Marketing’ was another important area and included the need to collect data. not only on temporary exhibitions. but on general visitors on a three monthly basis e.g. according to gender, age, socio-economic status, frequency of visits to the V&A. Through this collection of statistics we found that the V&A increased the ethnic diversity of its visitors significantly from 11% in 2007/8 to 17% in 2011/12. ‘Staffing’ too has to be central to any equality and diversity policy. A museum is far more able to transform itself if it has a diverse staff at all levels of the organisation but it is also important that all staff take on responsibility for equality and diversity.

So what did we learn from trying to integrate equality and diversity into every area of the Museum? Equality and diversity must not be an afterthought. It needs to be integrated into the initial stages of planning of any policy or programme.. We learnt about the importance of partnerships, the need to take risks and that leadership is crucial. And specific equality objectives need to be established and monitored

## Can Museums Change Lives?

But is this enough? The Museums Association, a body that represents museum professionals, seems to think not. In its document, *Museums Change Lives*, it sets out its vision for the increased social impact of museums. Liverpool Museums also believes, 'in the power of the museums to help promote good and active citizenship and to act as agents of social change.'

But whose lives are we changing? How do we change the lives of migrants and refugees, including those risking their lives across the Mediterranean for example? As part of my PhD into children, migration and diaspora I have been looking at how museums across the world are representing migration. So far I have visited museums in Australia, New Zealand, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Germany, Denmark, Russia, Netherlands and Belgium. What have I learnt? I have learnt that the national discourse can influence how migration is represented. In Australia museums do not talk about migration to the continent without reference to the impact on the indigenous community. In Italy museums do not talk about emigration without talking about immigration, often referring to 1973 as the tipping point when immigration surpassed emigration. I have learnt that the nature of funding, particularly from national governments, can influence, even restrict, the story that is told; that interactivity, role play and new technology can be powerful tools in encouraging visitors to empathise with the position of the migrant, the immigration officer or the bystander; that all museums, whether they are dedicated to art, history, childhood, migration or war can incorporate migration into their displays and programmes; that inclusive approaches, which do not position the migrant 'as other,' are important, perhaps through focussing on place within a city or migration within a country as well as to a country; that partnerships or collaborative approaches with migrants and refugees are challenging but important as is risk taking; that some of the most powerful impacts can take place during education programmes. But where is the robust evidence that museums change lives, in what way, for who and how? The Museum of Melbourne in Australia is doing some interesting work in this area in collaboration with a university but I have come across little other work on this.

In my job as Policy Advisor on Intangible Heritage at the Heritage Lottery Fund, however, I have been looking at some of the research on the impact of different heritage programmes. I have been struck by the aspirations of applicants, not only to transmit culture and skills, but to increase intercultural and intergenerational understanding; to raise awareness of environmental issues; to address difficult and controversial heritage and contribute to social cohesion.

These reports have not distinguished between the impacts of tangible and intangible heritage but I have been struck by the real and potential impact programmes where communities, at a grass roots level, have defined what is important to them, often outside the authorised heritage discourse and often focussing on intangible heritage.

We need to look at the impact of all aspects of museums and heritage, at activity both within and outside museums and at both tangible and intangible heritage to establish if and how we can change lives, and for who – for the migrants risking their lives across the Mediterranean, those living on our social housing estates in East London or in the favelas in Rio. But we also need more reflection and robust research into how far we as museum professionals and our museums, as institutions, are able to transform ourselves from top to bottom and from side to side; to be relevant, inspiring and to contribute to a more just society on a local, national and global level.