

Museum Studies *connect*

THE LEICESTER GRADUATE NETWORK

The Agile Museum

Preparations are well underway for an international conference – **The Agile Museum: Building Institutions for Continual Change** – to be held in Tokyo in January 2015. Building on the success of previous international collaborations, the conference will explore the notion of the ‘agile museum’ – the museum which acknowledges that expertise is shared, that values innovation and responsiveness, manages collections that are open, is prepared to join as well as initiate conversations, supports staff to build blended roles and portfolios, and frames experiences across multiple platforms and media.

We are planning a reception for members of MS Connect and other alumni who are attending the conference so please contact Suzanne MacLeod (email: sm100@le.ac.uk) if you will be able to attend.

The Agile Museum has been jointly organised by: the University of Leicester; Meiji University; the Museological Society of Japan; Tokyo National Museum; the National Museum of History, Taiwan; Otsuma Women's University Museum; Otsuma Women's University; School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester; and the National Taipei University of Education.

Reconnect 2014 and 2015

Earlier this year we were delighted to host our inaugural Reconnect event for graduates from our programmes. The event took place here in the School, providing a great opportunity for old friends to catch up with each other, a chance for people to tour the Museum Studies building and see the resources and facilities that current students enjoy. The event also allowed network members and current distance learning students to mingle. An evening reception was held at New Walk Museum, hosted by graduates Matthew Constantine and Simon Lake who gave tours of the newly refurbished spaces, a preview of the new German Expressionism gallery and an insight into the

processes behind the development of the new Richard III Visitor centre. 2011 Museum Studies graduate, Katie Ann Smith said: “It has been really great to have the opportunity to come back to campus and catch-up with old friends and lecturers from the School as well as a valuable networking opportunity.”

Building on this success, and a growing membership base that now boasts almost 500 members from 48 countries, Reconnect 2015 promises to be even bigger and better. So, save the date – Wednesday 1st July 2015 – when the School once again throws its doors open and welcomes back graduates from around the UK and beyond.



MS Connect members enjoy discussions with current distance learning students

A little history (and the next big party...)

Professor Simon Knell looks forward to the School's 50th anniversary



© Martine Hamilton Knight Photography

In 2016, the School of Museum Studies will be 50 years old! It was born in the year England won the World Cup and Foucault published *The Order of Things* – though I think the football would have been of more interest to the Department's staff and students than the book at that time. The Department was the brainchild of Raymond Singleton but its establishment was not straightforward. He needed museum directors to buy into the project by employing its graduates. It says a great deal about Raymond that he kept a book in which he listed the names of all his graduates and how they had progressed in their careers. He did this because he really cared that they were successful and he was always there to support them. And, as his wife told me, he would later look at that book and reflect on those students, noting particularly the first student who got a job. He had said at the time, 'she has done it! She has proven we can do it!' Leicester never looked back after that.

The early curriculum was developed by surveying the field of museum practice and then teaching its component parts.

A great deal depended upon the previous experiences of staff, all of whom came from the profession. Slowly knowledge from other fields began to permeate the teaching. Academic staff did publish but their work was aimed directly at the profession. Geoffrey Lewis was very active in ICOM and wrote a number of histories of museums. Geoff Stansfield was a specialist biological curator and a keen advocate of countryside interpretation centres. I was particularly fond of his *Effective Educational Exhibits*, produced for the Countryside Commission, which distilled the latest research on effective communication into a how-to-do-it guide. Gaynor Kavanagh and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill brought a new outlook to the Department when they arrived around 1980, and when Sue Pearce arrived in the mid-1980s so the Department took on a more academic turn. By then there was pressure on the Department to behave like other University departments and produce academic research. At the same time, our focus on the profession and our ambition to support the development of dynamic and innovative museums has never left us.

We have grown considerably since those early days. We have become better at connecting research and practice, particularly with the introduction of the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries. We have become very international in our outlook and in our student profile, very well-travelled and conduct much research in other parts of the world. The introduction of distance learning fundamentally affected the way we think about teaching and the student experience. In 2008, we were at last able to prove the worth of our research, scoring more highly than any other department in any discipline in the national Research Assessment Exercise. Following that success the University invested in a new purpose-designed Museum Studies Building (pictured) of which we are very proud and make full use.

However, even if we continue to change, some things remain as they always were. The School remains student-centred. We recognise, as Raymond Singleton did, that Leicester's reputation is very much down to the achievements of its students. I also think that Leicester is built around sets of values that centre on an inclusive vision for museums – a vision which is shared by staff and students.

In 2016, we will celebrate our birthday with an international conference entitled *Everyday Museums/Museums and the Everyday*. One strand of the conference is concerned with how we can make the museum more central to everyday life. This is an opportunity to discuss innovative practices but also to reflect on community-led museums, and on older practices that were deeply embedded in the community. Another strand will consider how everyday engagement empowers museums in particular ways to shape society. A call for papers will go out shortly. It's a great opportunity to look forward, to think and rethink the museum with renewed optimism. I am pretty sure there will also be a party – that too is something of a Leicester thing.

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A view from the field

Leicester graduate and Assistant Curator of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, Helen Trompeteler, reflects on her studies and career highlights to date



Sharing collections with students visiting the National Portrait Gallery, London

I originally studied Greek and Roman Studies at Exeter, before establishing my career at Retna, a leading picture agency. I joined the National Portrait Gallery as a Picture Librarian in 2002. After working in image licensing for seven years, I knew I wanted to move into a more creative curatorial role, and the MA in Museum Studies (which I studied for by distance learning whilst continuing in my job) helped me to make this transition. In 2009, I was appointed Assistant Curator of Photographs, and completed the course in 2010. Being appointed to this exciting post and learning a demanding new job was challenging, not least because I was working on my Masters dissertation at the same time. However the experience of my studies informing my daily work (and vice versa) – a key feature of the distance learning programmes – proved to be invaluable and the course was the best foundation for my future career as a curator.

My many current duties include liaising with photographers regarding new acquisitions for the Collection, preparing displays and exhibitions, answering public enquiries, and providing study sessions. Each day involves managing

a wide range of individual tasks. A regular challenge is balancing the needs of short-term and long-term projects simultaneously. Many of our exhibitions are three-five years in the making, and we also work on smaller displays one-two years in advance. Therefore the ability to prioritize and stay organized under pressure is key, in order to develop such long term research projects alongside daily and weekly deadlines.

One of the most rewarding projects I've worked on was the exhibition *Man Ray Portraits* (2013). I worked with curator Terence Pepper for several years, researching national and international public and private collections. It was very special throughout this project, to work with Stephanie Browner, the niece of Juliet Man Ray. Producing exhibitions is a highly collaborative process, and such creative working relationships with photographers or artist estates are very rewarding. Most recently I have worked with Frances von Hofmannsthal, on a display of her father Lord Snowdon's work. During 2013, I greatly enjoyed collaborating with the University of Dundee on a series of displays celebrating the work of photojournalist Michael Peto. Creative

Connections is also a very interesting four year Gallery project, for which I've regularly provided study sessions and advised on the photographic content. This project connects young people with contemporary artists to create new series of artworks inspired by the National Portrait Gallery's Collection.

I am also passionate about championing photographers who have been overlooked more widely by photographic history. Displays which were informed by this aim have included one on *Format Photographers*, the first women only photography collective in Britain. Since graduating, Leicester is regularly a point of shared connection with new contacts in the industry. More personally the MA gave me confidence at a crucial turning point in my career, and taught me to positively question gallery practices. Combining full time work with postgraduate study resulted in a personal drive which I endeavour to continue now in my writing on photography. My MA experiences remain a special part of my career, and my best friend from the course is a wonderful mutually supportive sounding board as our careers continue. It's great to be part of this much wider community of alumni.

Mind, Body Spirit

The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries has recently produced a publication that makes a powerful and compelling case for the role that museums can play in relation to health and wellbeing. The report (and all other RCMG publications) can be downloaded, free of charge, from the RCMG website (www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg).



Photo by Julian Anderson

100 Stories of Migration

Visitors to the Museum Studies Building are currently enjoying *100 Stories of Migration* – an ambitious exhibition curated and developed by the School's PhD students in collaboration with university staff and in partnership with the Migration Museum Project. The exhibition features a selection of striking photographs that speak to different aspects of migration and explore the ways in which migration affects us all. These images can be accessed through the exhibition website and seen in the Museum Studies Building until 23 February 2015.



Kajal Nisha Patel, *Muslim Shaadi*, 2010

New research helps Leicester Castle tells its story



The new academic year has brought many new, exciting research projects to the School. One of these is the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts project Leicester Castle tells its story, a digital research and development project funded by NESTA, the Arts & Humanities Research Council and the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

Leicester Castle is one of the oldest and most historically fascinating buildings in the city. Richard III, Edward I, Edward II and Henry IV all stayed there; Parliament met there in the 14th & 15th centuries; it was the scene of some infamous trials in the 19th and 20th centuries; and the author JM Barrie was a reporter there. But at the moment, many visitors to the castle leave without knowing this history.

The medieval origins of Leicester Castle's Great Hall are only evident now in its

architectural features – by looking up at its huge timber roof beams, stonework and window arches. It is difficult to imagine what the Hall would once have looked like before it was divided in two and the courtrooms added in 1821.

The building stimulates lots of visitor questions – why are there courtrooms in a castle? What did the medieval Great Hall and Castle look like originally? What is the connection of the building to Richard III? What happened in the cells? Who was tried here? Limited sessional staffing, courtroom layout restrictions, and the limited practical use of printed information leaflets are not enough to engage, excite and satisfy visitors' curiosity.

With this project we are venturing to test a digital solution to this problem. A mobile app will enable visitors to explore the building following their own natural curiosity and discover the Castle's stories. Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) beacons, placed at selected points of interest throughout the castle, will pinpoint visitors as they walk by and trigger the delivery of multimedia stories to their

mobile phone or tablet. By tracking visitors and collecting information about dwell times at different locations, features and stories, the app will be able to deliver content of interest to visitors, while at the same time allowing us to understand how the site is used and how we can better catch and hold visitors' attention.

The project team is led by Leicester graduate Sally Coleman, Heritage Manager at Leicester City Council's Arts and Museums Service working with Leicester-based Metro-Boulot-Dodo (who will be producing the multimedia narratives), Giasemi Vavoula from the School of Museum Studies (who is leading the visitor research and evaluation) and Caecus Ltd (who are developing the technology behind the project).

The 'Leicester Castle Tells Its Story' project is expected to be up and running in time for summer 2015. One of the first concerted studies of Beacons in sites like Leicester Castle, this project may well transform how we experience and understand historic buildings – in Leicester and beyond.



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