

PROJECT UPDATE 1

SEPTEMBER 2007

Rethinking Disability Representation

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What role might museums and galleries play in challenging disablism by informing the ways in which people think about disability and understand disabled people's lives?

Rethinking Disability Representation is a large scale, experimental project which is developing new approaches to the interpretation of disability and the representation of disabled people's lives and experiences in museums and galleries in the UK. It aims to develop politically aware approaches to interpretation drawing on the social model of disability.

Rethinking Disability Representation was initiated and is managed by RCMG (the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries in the University of Leicester's Department of Museum Studies) and is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, NESTA (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), with contributions from the University and the nine partner museums involved.

This is the first of a series of project updates designed to share the outcomes and learning experiences of the project with interested parties – practitioners, policy makers and researchers working across a number of different areas; principally museums, heritage and culture but also the field of disability rights and equality.



Changing perceptions?

The project will result in 9 interpretive projects – exhibitions, displays and educational programmes – which each aim to offer visitors and, indeed, society more broadly, alternative (non-prejudiced) ways of thinking about disability. Although each of the projects is very distinct in content, themes, style and format, they nonetheless share a philosophy and approach which has been shaped by a ‘think tank’ of disabled activists, artists and cultural practitioners as well as representatives from the museum and gallery world. In addition, many of the projects have been developed through consultation and partnership with disabled communities local to the museum.

The project builds on recent research which found that museums of all kinds held material in their collections which related to disability but that this was rarely displayed. Although few museums had sought to purposefully include disability-related narratives or representations within their displays, many curators expressed an openness to exploring the hidden history of disability through their collections. However, the research

also identified considerable anxiety amongst museum practitioners about the field of disability representation and identified a number of dilemmas which had operated to restrict experimentation in this field. *Rethinking Disability Representation* also draws on related research which explores the role that museums and galleries can play in shaping and framing the conversations which visitors have about difference. Taken together, the 9 projects will seek to address the cultural invisibility of disabled people in current museum displays and offer alternative ways of understanding disability which challenge negative stereotypical representations prevalent in many media.

By equipping the 9 partner museums involved with an understanding of disability issues and contemporary disability politics and enabling them to develop and share ideas and existing good practice, a new confidence in the ways disability can be addressed within museum and gallery interpretation is emerging. The development of innovation in interpretive strategy and method is an integral part of the project and is designed to open up new ways of engaging audiences and challenging their expectations and attitudes.



Project aims

The project aims to create a lasting change in the way museums and galleries approach the representation and interpretation of disability. In particular *Rethinking Disability Representation* seeks to:-

- **Uncover material evidence held within wide-ranging collections that can contribute to a broader public understanding of disability.**
- **Develop narratives that draw on historical and contemporary material to engage audiences in rethinking attitudes towards disability and open up possibilities for engaging with contemporary disability-related issues and debates**
- **Develop innovative approaches to display, interpretation and audience engagement**

A key part of the project is an evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative methods which will investigate the ways in which visitors – disabled and non-disabled – respond to the exhibits and educational programmes they encounter.

The projects

The nine projects in development are set out on the following pages. Please note that, at this stage, some project titles and opening dates remain subject to confirmation (we will keep you informed as each project opens).

Making Known: Disabled People and Art

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

From October 2007

Making Known: Disabled People and Art interrogates and explores images of disability in paintings from Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery's displays of fine art. It invites a range of interpretations and responses to the paintings from disabled professionals and artists which visitors can listen to alongside curatorial commentaries. The result is an innovative series of audio descriptions and interpretations on audio points woven throughout the existing painting galleries, which encourage audiences to connect with the art in a different way.

'The Blind Girl' painted by John Everett Millais showing a blind girl with a rainbow in the background, a child on her knee and a sign around her neck saying 'pity the blind.'



Image of Millais' Blind Girl courtesy of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery



Life Beyond the Label

Colchester Castle Museum

October 17th 2007 – March 2008

Life Beyond the Label is a temporary exhibition which explores current and historic perceptions of and attitudes towards disability. The many images, objects, oral histories and signed histories uncovered and collected through the project will be used to move visitors' understandings of disability beyond stereotypes and labels to focus on individual experiences and reveal the personalities, lives and stories of disabled people living in Colchester both past and present.

Lives in Motion

Glasgow Museum of Transport

October 19th 2007 – January 2008

Society can both enable and disable people's lives and whilst transport has played a major part in making society more accessible it can also create barriers to access for disabled people. This exhibition will explore a selection of transport-related objects from Glasgow Museums' collections to tell stories of how these objects have influenced and affected different peoples' lives. When the temporary exhibition finishes, elements will be incorporated into the new Riverside Museum project, opening in January 2010.

Top: Image of blue three wheeler disabled car



Below: Image of poster showing wheelchair user with flask and sandwiches. The poster title above the image reads 'Mary has been waiting years for the bus.' Underneath the image it reads, 'Discrimination - there ought to be a law against it. Ask your MP to vote for the civil rights (disabled persons) bill on Friday 11th March'. Between 1982 and 1994, 15 bills for Disability Rights had been rejected by Parliament. The poster was distributed by the 'Rights for Disabled People Now' campaign before what we now know as the Disability Discrimination Act was passed.



Conflict and Disability

Imperial War Museum, London

School seminars from September 2007

Conflict and Disability is a series of educational resources designed for secondary schools which explore attitudes towards disability in the twentieth century through the prism of conflict, utilising the collections and teaching expertise of the Imperial War Museum. The programmes will consider themes such as war time employment, policy and home coming experiences and issues ranging from WWII disability rights to the ways in which political leaders are presented to the public. The programmes will be used to question how far past and present converge on issues of disability. On-line educational resources will also be available to view on the Imperial War museum web-site from March 2008

Top: Poster from WW1 showing a group of men against the backdrop of a factory. The text reads 'Don't Pity a Disabled Man – Find Him a Job'. Phone the Red triangle employment bureau for ex-service men or your local employment exchange'. It is one of the images being used within the 'welcome home' theme of the Imperial War Museum's project.

Below: Image of the original Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial statue, unveiled in 1997. Two tiny wheels in the back of the chair are barely visible beneath Roosevelt's large cloak. American disability rights protesters said that the statue disguised Roosevelt's mobility impairment.



I Stand Corrected?

Northampton Museum and Art Gallery

July 14th - 16th September 2007

This temporary exhibition considers fashion and footwear in relation to disability through the renowned collections of Northampton Museum and specially collected first hand testimonies of orthopaedic shoe wearers. *I Stand Corrected?* encourages visitors to consider their own experiences and opinions on footwear fashions and function and engage them in debating issues of identity, choice and control. When the temporary exhibition finishes, elements will be incorporated into the museum's existing permanent displays.

Left: Image of orthopaedic shoe from 1920s.

Right: Image of bright red fetish designer boots.





Behind the Shadow of Merrick

Royal London Hospital Museum and Archives

From November 2007

Behind the Shadow of Merrick is a ten minute film in which historical disabled figures linked with the Royal London Hospital will connect with one another, tell visitors their stories and explore how they relate to each other across time and from behind the more famous presence of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. The film will be available to view in the museum alongside existing displays which feature a wide variety of exhibits linked to disability and will also be more widely available over the internet.

Daniel Lambert; an 'Exalted and Convivial Mind'

Stamford Museum

From September 2007

This small redisplay of part of Stamford's Museum's existing galleries reinterprets the fascinating story of Daniel Lambert. The project focuses difference and will allow visitors to engage with issues of representation, perception, voyeurism and stigma.

One in Four

Tyne and Wear Museums

Discovery Museum: Peoples' Gallery
September 25th- November 18th 2007

South Shields Museum and Art Gallery
December 15th 2007 - 1st March 2008

This temporary touring exhibition will explore how society's attitudes towards disability have impacted on the everyday lives of local disabled people through history and up to the current day and highlights how independence and prejudice can coexist.

Left: Image of 'Tommy on the bridge'. Tommy had a visual impairment and lived in the eighteen hundreds. He would stand on the old bridge which was positioned within both the Newcastle and Gateshead boundaries while hopping from foot to foot. In this way he cleverly avoided arrest for begging. Tommy's image was later used as an emblem for the local socialist group.



Right: An image of a house key by the side of a tape measure. This object is used to illustrate the significance and impact of independent living for disabled people and was donated to the museum by somebody who had recently moved into their own home. They said 'I never thought I would move into my own place. It's great to look at it now that I've got it the way I want it. Thanks to 'Starting Point' for moving me. I now have my own key to my front door'.

A Whitby Fisherman's life - 'Stumper' Dryden through the lens of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe

Whitby Museum

From August 2007

This small, permanent display focuses on the life of one man – Robert 'Stumper' Dryden – a nineteenth century fisherman and leg amputee, examining his working life and role in the local community.

The display uses a few of Sutcliffe's photographs and related historical documents to detail Stumper's community life and experiences in the fishing trade. In doing so, it aims to challenge contemporary perceptions of disabled peoples' economic role and status and to reveal new perspectives on the power of the historical image to enable a rethinking of disability.

Top: Image of one of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe's nineteenth century photographs of Robert 'Stumper' Dryden showing Stumper sitting on Tate Pier with fellow fisherman, Tom Languard.

Below: Image of one of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe's photographs of the fishing boats in the harbour.



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For further information on

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