

Talking about...Disability and Art Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Birmingham City Council's Museum Service is the largest local authority museum service in the UK. It consists of seven sites across Birmingham, including Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The Museum's collections are extensive, featuring fine and decorative arts, archaeology, ethnography, natural history and social history.

Talking about...Disability and Art focused on the Museum's art collections. It involved the creation of a trail of audio-visual interpretation points around the Museum's permanent art galleries. These eight audio-visual points are located next to paintings that include a representation of disability and are accompanied by new levels of interpretation on this theme about each painting. The interpretation was created through collaborative working with a group of disabled artists. The artists' own voices form the main audio content of the audio-visual points.

Type of Interpretation

The collaborative-working process developed 4-5 new levels of interpretation for eight paintings in the Museum's collection. These interpretations were aimed at creating different levels and methods of engagement for Museum visitors. They can be accessed in both spoken and written form on the audio-visual points next to the paintings in the galleries.

Each audio-visual point includes a collaborative track by the artists which addresses questions such as how the painting is connected with disability and how it relates to contemporary disability experience. These cover a number of key themes including stereotyping and discrimination, use of visual language (for example depicting emotions through artistic technique) and shared and personal experiences.

One of the paintings included in the project is 'The Blind Girl' by John Everett Millais. This painting shows a blind girl playing the accordion as a means of making a living in the countryside. Comments from the group include:

“The blind girl is labelled with a sign around her neck, ‘Pity the blind’. We feel that the label is requesting pity to encourage charity... Today, most people with visual impairments, and other disabilities, certainly don’t want pity. Instead, we want understanding and full access.”

Each of the artists also shares a personal story or anecdote on the audio-visual points inspired by one of the paintings. Artist Zoe Partington-Sollinger relates to ‘The Blind Men of Jericho’, a painting showing Jesus healing two blind men, through her own experiences:

“The painting started to resonate with my own experience of losing my sight and the obsession of the people around me to ‘fix’ me and find a medical miracle to get my sight back... Modern day images still show disabled people as tragic or brave or heroic! You can’t just be Zoe from next door – you are defined as the blind woman or the one-legged man.”

One of the participant artists, Ruth Kaye, is a performance poet so she chose to write three poems as a creative response to a number of the artworks. One of the poems is on ‘The Death of Chatterton’, a painting portraying a young man who has committed suicide:

Shadows walk before Him,
Shallow in no grave,
Believing there’s no heaven
Grieving fills His days.

Locked in His memories,
Shocked in His pain,
Colder than ice
Older than life.

Deep into darkness,
Sleep can’t repair,
Screaming His memories
Dreaming His despair

Remembering a sunny sky,
Screening in His mind
Healing turns to live or die
And He alone decides.

In addition to the collaborative and personal pieces, the audio-visual trail also includes background information on each of the paintings by an art curator. This is important as it gives each painting its proper context and fills in information that is needed when examining the relationship of the work to disability.

Finally, each painting is also audio-described. This is a physical description of all the elements making up the painting, which can be particularly useful for people who are visually impaired.

Consultation and Collaboration

Consultation and collaboration created a rigid backbone for this project, enabling a strong and effective outcome.

The original idea for Birmingham Museum's project came from consultation undertaken with non-visitors (to museums) in Birmingham. This 2004 study of a diverse community aimed to find out what sort of things people would like to find in the Museum. The study highlighted the desire by current non-visitors for personal interaction within the galleries, and the voice of somebody that they could relate to providing information. It was therefore considered essential for this project to focus on integrating 'first person' interpretation into the art galleries.

The Think Tank, set up by the University of Leicester, was also helpful in contributing their ideas about how to go about developing the project. They agreed with Birmingham Museum that the disabled participants recruited to the project should be professionals who had a strong interest in art, a good understanding of disability issues and an ability to articulate issues and questions.

Disabled artists were asked to participate as it was felt they had both the interest and knowledge crucial for a successful project. The group had a range of skills including good communication, listening, problem solving, negotiation and teamwork skills. They were also able to offer practical advice about access needs which was invaluable in developing the design and format of the audio-visual units. The artists expressed many positive comments about being involved. One participant said "I was interested because I was approached by people who were very interested in creating a cultural change in their organisation and I felt that the telling of the story from disabled people's perspective was very refreshing."

The project was fundamentally about collaborative working between the project team at the Museum, the disabled artists and a number of consultants. Consultants were employed to bring additional specialist skills to the group. A language consultant offered advice to the group about how to communicate messages to a broad museum audience. Another consultant helped train the group in reading visual images. Within the organisation, Audience Development staff teamed up with the Museum's art curators who were essential in providing the group with valuable background information about the paintings. The artists also worked collaboratively amongst themselves, discussing issues and expressing shared views.

The Collections

The project focuses on eight paintings in the Museum's permanent collections that show a representation of disability. These include figurative and abstract works ranging from the 17th century until almost the present day. Some of them are by very well known artists but most have not had their connection with disability particularly well highlighted before. They also range from very direct forms of disability representation to paintings that explore the artist's personal experiences.

The paintings are:

'The Blind Fiddler' by Willem Van Herp, 1600/1700
'The Blind Men of Jericho', a copy of a painting by Nicholas Poussin, 1650-1700
'The Death of Chatterton' by Henry Wallis, 1855-56
'The Blind Girl' by John Everett Millais, 1856
'The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple' by William Holman Hunt, 1854-60
'Self Portrait' by David Bomberg, 1937
'Figures in a Landscape' by Francis Bacon, 1956
'Light Gathers', 'Several Pleasures', 'Pastorale', and 'Fields: Distant Sounds' by Barbara Delaney, 1995-97

Project Planning

The planning for the project took place between July and December 2006. The key feature of this phase was to identify an achievable project outcome that would 'fit' within the Museum and also meet the aims of **Rethinking Disability Representation (RDR)**. The project was to be something that would form a permanent feature in the permanent galleries and would also focus on the Museum's existing collections.

Disability-related objects across the Museum's collections were identified through both the collections database and curators' specialist knowledge. It was decided that the project would focus on art for a number of reasons. Firstly, because none of the other partner museums were focusing on this type of collection and Birmingham Museum is particularly well known for its art collections. Secondly, it was felt more practical and possible to remove artworks from storage and display them in the art galleries, than it was to try to coherently incorporate quite diverse social history objects into existing history displays.

Project Delivery

The project delivery phase took place between January and November 2007. Six disabled artists were recruited to the project through recommendations from

organisations and individuals including Disability Arts in Shropshire and Birmingham City Council's Arts Access Officer.

Two full-day workshops were held with the group in July 2007. These involved museum staff, consultants and artists and were aimed at developing the main content for the audio-visual points. The participant artists explored the paintings, discussed issues related to disability and the images, and decided what messages they wanted to communicate in their interpretations. A key objective of the workshops was to ensure the participants had a good understanding of the appropriate levels and language needed for the broad museum audience targeted by the audio-visual trail. A consultant had already written audio descriptions of all the paintings and these benefited visually impaired members of the group.

The subsequent editing process involved writing up and editing all the scripts to ensure that they were accessible to a broad museum audience. The process included simplifying language, clarifying uncertain descriptions and ensuring that the intended messages came across clearly. This work was carried out by the language consultant and museum staff, in liaison with the participant artists.

During this period a specialist audio-visual company was also recruited. Their role was to organise the recording of all the audio tracks with the artists and curators, and to develop the design of the audio-visual units. It was important that the audio-visual units were accessible (including both written text and audio being located at an appropriate height for wheelchair users) and also fitted in well with the look of the Museum's galleries.

Launch, Training and Evaluation

The audio-visual interpretation trail was launched in the Museum in November 2007. The trail will remain in the Museum on a permanent basis over at least the next two years. It has been promoted through the exhibition launch event, press releases and leaflet distribution.

The Museum has employed a specialist disability consultancy to provide tailored disability awareness training for Museum staff to increase their awareness and knowledge of the project, and of disability. This has helped build the skills and confidence of over 75 Museum staff in both working with disabled people and understanding access and representation issues.

The project has been evaluated through response cards filled out by Museum visitors between November 2007 and February 2008.

Issues Learnt from the Project

Birmingham Museum's participation in the project has been an effective means of both promoting new learning for Museum staff in relation to disability issues, and also confirming some existing ideas and understanding.

The project has reinforced the benefits of a collaborative interpretation process. The new 'first person' interpretations have created a strong project outcome that would not have been possible if Museum staff had worked alone on the project.

The group's discussions created a personal learning experience for the Museum staff involved. This included learning more about the complexity and sensitivity of certain issues related to disability and art. For example, a number of the participants had negative views about the Christian religion, feeling that it encourages charity and a view of disability as a punishment from God. It was a challenge to represent this view in a way that would not alienate or offend potential Christian audiences. Another issue that arose was the importance of context in exploring historical artworks. For example, a painting showing a blind fiddler drunk in an inn may be 'read' differently, depending on if the viewer knows that raucous inn scenes showing a wide variety of people were popular in 17th century Flemish art.

Discussions within the group helped staff to gain a better knowledge of the correct terminology to use in relation to disabled people. Staff were also unsure whether to explore 'mental health' as part of a disability project but were advised by the participants that this should be included.

Museum staff have gained a better understanding of physical and intellectual access issues from both the group and the consultants involved. Achieving accessible project content was always going to be a challenge in this project, given the complexity of disability themes and ideas arising from the group discussions. However, everyone successfully contributed their skills and knowledge to ensure a positive result.

An important aspect of this project is the creation of a permanent intervention in the Museum's art galleries. However, this format has also raised certain issues. It has been harder to evaluate as it is spread out rather than in one place, like a temporary exhibition. There are also issues as to whether the project and outcome are harder to understand as a whole by visitors – as they may only choose to visit one of the audio-visual points and maybe only access one or two of the new interpretations.

Legacy

The project's legacy has been wide-reaching within the organisation.

One of the most important elements of the project is that it has created an outcome, focused on disability, which is of a permanent nature. Unlike a temporary exhibition, it will not end after three months but will be permanently located in the art galleries.

The project has encouraged research into the Museum's collections and identification of previously unknown or unacknowledged disability-related objects and artworks. Documentation records now highlight objects related to disability in the Museum's collection and identified history objects are going to be worked into the redevelopment of the Museum's history galleries over the next few years.

The project has promoted organisational change by developing staff skills and confidence in relation to disability. This has been felt most by staff working directly on the project but has also included over 70 other staff members through the programme of disability awareness training that was delivered as part of the project. It has led on to a successful funding application for a new interpretation project called 'Sign-story', focusing on Museum collections, new technologies and the deaf community.

The project has also highlighted the fact that the Museum's relationship with disabled communities needs to be far-reaching and stretch across all Museum areas. Disability has now been highlighted more clearly within the Museum's Collections Policy revisions. There have also been links made between disability and other strategies and plans in development including the Museum's Workforce Diversity Action Plan. The Museum is also continuing to develop this broader approach to interpretation and the use of participatory methods to highlight and explore diversity.