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The year 2020 has been one of the most eventful in recent contemporary history, and its legacy for museums throughout Ireland will continue to unfold for at least the next decade.

It has been a time when museums have underlined one particular characteristic by way of describing the way in which the sector has handled such a crisis: flexibility.

This characteristic of flexibility and adaptation has been most notable by way of programming, engagement across a range of online and onsite platforms, a renewed emphasis on our own holdings, i.e., the collection, and the ability of our tangible and intangible culture to connect through the humanity of the stories behind its actual creation and acquisition.

This latter point also led to a much-needed urgent impetus on the question of repatriation and the rights of justice throughout the sector, both through the collections we hold in trust on behalf of all, and also by way of what our staffing and governance says about contemporary Ireland.

Museums across the planet have never been more relevant nor more central to our future as a species.

Audrey Whitty is Chair of the Irish Museums Association and Head of Collections and Learning of the National Museum of Ireland.
On 12 March 2020, the Irish Government issued a directive for museums and cultural institutions in the Republic of Ireland to close from that evening, with other industries following closely behind. Five days later, a similar advisory was issued by the NI Executive. The World Health Organisation had categorised COVID-19 as a global pandemic and the island was to enter its first lockdown in an effort to mitigate the propagation of this contagious disease.

Throughout the remaining nine months in 2020, museums in Dublin reopened for a total of 102 days, with other counties and jurisdictions similarly affected in accordance with the prevailing public health situation in each region. Measures additionally saw major restrictions to ‘normal’ life, including no travel or socialising beyond immediate communities and the closure of all non-essential services. As of May 2021, museums across the island are reopening after a third lockdown, in place since 24 December 2020.

This has certainly been a difficult period for our society as a whole, and museums have not escaped unscathed. Not only has COVID-19 raised questions about our priorities and responsibilities, but political division, social upheaval, and renewed conversations around power dynamics have all set a challenge that museums must address and respond to.

Little did we imagine the extent of what was in store at the Irish Museums Association (IMA)’s
2020 Annual Conference, *Transforming Museums*, held only a week before the announcement of the first case of COVID-19 on Irish shores. Some museums had been preparing to implement measures – at most envisioned as a short period of closure or restrictions – but few fully understood the extent to which we would be affected, and little discussion was yet apparent at this museum gathering. Many of the articles in this journal are from proceedings at this event and, to a certain extent, reflect a pre-COVID era.

During this crisis, museums have been preoccupied with operational issues: repeated closures, re-openings, the adaptation of sites, changes to policies, procedures, priorities, and working schedules. Many staff have been furloughed – some made redundant – and supporting both these and remaining active staff has been of huge concern to the IMA and its members. The financial impact on many museums has been devastating, with on-site audiences (when access has been permitted) dropping to historic lows of 10-20% of the previous year’s footfall and a complete loss of revenue-generating activity. Ironically, many of the worst hit museums were those that had been most successful in diversifying and raising earned income, rather than being fully reliant on public funding.

Government support has been crucial in providing wage subsidies and unemployment payments; as have a range of grants and stimuli aimed at supporting key cultural organisations, arts and cultural infrastructure and digital cultural content. However, this has varied between jurisdictions, and for many museums, it has fallen short of needs. While we do not yet have specific data on financial losses for museums in Ireland, according to the most recent European-wide museum survey conducted by NEMO (the Network of European Museum Organisations), it has been reported that 75% respondents have reported income losses of above €1,000, and up to €30,000 per week. In some larger museums, the weekly losses have exceeded €100,000, even during periods when they were open to the public.

Having been historically underfunded, many museums lack capacity and there is a distinct gap in knowledge and data on the sector itself, exacerbated by the sector’s marginal presence in current national policies and government programmes, including, for example, *Creative Ireland*. While, in Northern Ireland, responsibility for museums, and indeed the cultural sector generally, resides with the Department of Communities, on the rest of the island, museums are distributed across three different ministerial remits, with oversight lying within Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media; Housing, Heritage and Local Government; and – via the Office of Public Works – Public expenditure and Reform. This fragmentation has further eroded their voice, and for the Irish Museums Association as we seek to support their recovery, has proved an additional barrier to establishing core mechanisms to advocate for museums’ relevance and leadership potential. Other than through the presence of the Council of National Cultural Institutions, via which the IMA has been successful in providing museum sector input, the Irish Government’s Arts & Recovery Taskforce has had little representation from organisations within the visual and cultural heritage sectors.

The seismic global effect of COVID-19, the rapid escalation of which has been comparable only to periods of international conflict, has forced us to reimagine and re-frame priorities, strategies and practices. What follows is a summary of how this re-evaluation has taken place.

**A digital transformation**

Structural, financial, and operational concerns aside, introducing alternative ways to continue to engage with their audiences and provide services has occupied the minds of museum staff. As workers within institutions, the civic value of which is widely treasured, these have a deep understanding of the role that museums play in supporting the wellbeing of the nation as we seek to understand, accept, and recover from this collective experience. Yet it is fair to say that it has not been an easy road.

An early move to online activity was curtailed in many cases by a lack of investment in digitalisation and competency. Additional challenges included outdated or non-existent websites, security concerns, restrictive controls imposed on the use of social media platforms, and a lack of coherent national digital strategies for the cultural sector (indeed, in ROI, a lack of any
national policy for museums). For many years, the digitalisation of the Irish museum sector has extended mostly to collection management systems, and although there has been investment in digitising the collections held by the National Cultural Institutions, many of the regional, rural, and independent museums are still undergoing this process.

Given these far from inconsequential issues, it is admirable how swiftly our museums were able to adapt and, in the process, to become both more experimental and refined in their output. There has been a realisation that going digital requires a percolation of activity throughout museums’ management structures, and that, in relation to audience engagement, there are multiple avenues to explore. The rapid progression made is illustrated in a map graphic generated from NEMO survey data:


Early days saw museums being put under considerable pressure to provide online content, and this resulted in an outpouring of educational resources. At first, many were re-developments of those initially designed to be used alongside exhibits, and included, for example, simple PDF scans of hand-outs. Multiple social media posts indicated the availability of existing online collection databases, designed pre-COVID with researchers rather than the average museum-goer in mind. At the other extreme, users were directed to content that had little to do with museums’ core activity and remit.

With audiences clamouring for resources yet finding it difficult to navigate museum websites, the IMA launched a social media campaign, and, by the end of March 2020, had collated most of the available material onto its website. Although initially resulting in links to material long buried in the websites’ archives, this exercise provided a little time for museums to create, learn, explore, and develop content.

Museums that provided virtual, 3D tours that enabled users to ‘access’ museums even while they were closed – such as the National Museum of Ireland’s Natural History Division, National Gallery of Ireland, and National Print Museum – gained an early lead in public engagement. Others developed dedicated portals and campaigns. The Model – Inside Out, the Glucksman’s award-winning #CreativityAtHome, and Chester Beatty Online, for example, were early precursors to ever more sophisticated touchpoints that saw museum websites develop as places of exploration. Easily accessible, one-stop online webpages, that brought together their collections, exhibitions, archives, and educational resources, were soon developed to extend engagement in a greater variety of forms, opening virtual doors to both a national and international audience.

Museum exhibitions, by their nature, evolved a little more slowly, but we have also seen increasing sophistication in how these are being designed and presented in fully digital form. Initially, museums enabled access to existing exhibitions with mixed results; in many cases these replicated the model of an online catalogue. More recently, however, the full potential of virtual engagement has been explored; and has led to a reimagining of museum collections. With touring exhibitions and temporary loans on hold, institutions have looked inwards, revisiting the artefacts they hold in trust. Curators have re-examined the potential of their permanent holdings, redeploying them in response to themes that have risen to prominence during 2020-1. Among these for example has been the National Museum of Ireland’s Reflections on Resilience, which, using objects that told their own stories of ‘resilience, endurance and hope’, examined the national collection through the lens of the shared pandemic experience. A notable further example was the Irish Museum of Modern
Art’s IMMA Screen, a presentation of one video work from its collection per month, accompanied by archival material, including reviews, writings, and current interviews with the artists. This deep delve would have been difficult to present in any other format than digital.

With 20:20 KERRY, Kerry County Museum and Radio Kerry presented a series of short documentaries, taking listeners into the museum’s storerooms where the curator opened a box at random, exploring its contents and sharing a rare glimpse into the curatorial processes – bringing the physical experience to a larger audience through audio. Kilmainham Gaol on Lockdown also invited audiences behind the scenes, with charmingly home-produced videos narrated by the museum curator, exploring parts of the Gaol that are not generally open to the public. National Museums NI at Home encouraged online visitors to delve deeper into their collections, with curators across their sites presenting Collection Stories and Behind the Scenes blogs hosted on its website.

In addition to highlighting their existing collections, museums have recognised the need to collect material to record the pandemic that will reflect this rare moment in history. To name but a few examples, the National Library of Ireland is collecting websites that tell the story of the pandemic in Ireland. The Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum’s COVID-19 and Me, Recording our Experience at Monaghan County Museum, and EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum’s #EPICIrish have all called for their audiences to submit stories, photographs, objects, videos and audio files that capture individual experiences of lockdown. As a result, future generations...
will understand better how it has affected Irish people’s daily lives, be it in work, use of their spare time, connections to friends and family, or the experiences and stories of those who have helped others during the COVID–19 pandemic.

Within the Irish Museum sector, responsibility for community engagement has often been held by education or learning departments, and as a result, it is they who have most had to rethink how they engage with schools. The 2021 Education and Outreach Forum, presented by the IMA in partnership with NI Museums Council, highlighted how museums have rapidly embraced the potential of new technologies, including through adopting fresh approaches to co–production. Many museums have undertaken fresh consultation with their audiences, and have revisited how they assess impact, build relationships, and meet diverse learning needs and styles through their interpretation methods. An IMA exercise to survey teachers across Ireland was carried out in 2020, generating data on the museum experiences of this important group of users.

Given the importance of home learning during the pandemic, and that school visits have been severely curtailed, it is perhaps unsurprising that museums have reassessed how their programmes complement school curricula. Many have created specific teacher and student portals to corral their learning resources. Online engagement has opened the door to using new platforms, ranging from interactive ‘rooms’ in which attendees can manipulate and virtually ‘handle’ artefacts (as for example in The Three Muses’ Virtual Museum Workshops), to downloadable gallery templates (e.g., those offered by Crawford Art Gallery), inviting young adults and teens to create their own exhibitions and explore how juxtaposing images can change the meanings of artworks and speak to different contemporary themes.

We have also seen the potential for digital engagement to improve accessibility. The Book of Kells and Long Room at Trinity College Dublin have enhanced their offerings for preschoolers, through children’s animations with sign language and audio descriptions that serve as both a stand–alone activity and a stepping–stone to deeper future engagement. Another highly accessible example is The National Gallery of Ireland’s Sensory Activities, developed for children who may struggle with their sensory environment, that provides families with activities that can be carried out at home.

Notwithstanding the advantages of the extraordinarily rapid maturation of museums’ digital provision, it must be observed that these have not been without cost, including the risk of staff burn–out. In addition, this learning has also required a process of ‘unlearning’: letting go of legacy values to make room for others that, if more relevant to many, may seem less relevant to some. As a result, and as the period of closure extended, museums became increasingly preoccupied with how in–person, ‘tangible’ engagement could be retained when onsite access could not. Inevitably, this quandary raised questions about the limitations of such engagement, including whether digital access generates inequalities of its own.

In late 2020, efforts redoubled to provide ‘blended’ cultural heritage access and provide live interactions in collaboration with community partners. These included, for example, the Cultural Take–out Service operated by the Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum, and IMMA’s Art & Ageing, which directed resources to care home residents and individuals living in social isolation. Also at IMMA, Armchair Azure has extended its dementia–friendly programme to reach people off–site, as have Mid–Antrim Museum’s Memories, Movement & Museums, the NI War Memorial’s Sing for Victory.
and Reminiscence workshops, and the Tower Museum’s Dementia awareness and Reminiscence programme, held under the umbrella of the NI Museums Council funded pilot project, Love to Move.  

**Overdue conversations**

Much has been published on how this period has allowed museums to re-evaluate their place in and contribution to society. This time of priority re-assessment for all has inevitably affected museums, and many have done so while juggling pressing administrative concerns. I would argue though that, even outside of the extraordinary circumstances since March 2020, this re-evaluation is a constant in the sector: connecting with our communities and audiences means taking the pulse on rising issues, looking towards the future while using the past to provide context, and consistently exploring new avenues and new ways of interpreting our collections to inform and provide clarity.

While much of the past year’s focus has been on digital transformation, social unrest throughout 2020 saw an intensification of conversations around power dynamics and injustice. The pandemic exposed social and public health inequalities, findings not unconnected to the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. What started as protests primarily in the USA soon became global, adding urgency to campaigns that called for removal of public statuary glorifying controversial colonial figures. Many museum and heritage organisations expressed their solidarity with protestors, pledging such expression be backed up through actions to examine the acquisition and display of colonial-era cultural artefacts and address institutional racism, prejudice, and social exclusion.

The Black Lives Matter Charter for the UK Heritage Sector stressed that,

... if decolonisation were to be meaningful, it must necessarily entail a series of actions that aim to redistribute power and open up the museum – as a closed disputed space, as a territory – to a more diverse population.

It expressed concern that the term ‘decolonisation’ was being subjected to revisionism, and the need for an intelligent reassessment of our national heritage, one that goes beyond contested provenance, restitution, and repatriation to address workforce, narratives, interpretation, and public engagement. This reappraisal of our institutions, their history, and the need to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work has also been echoed by the Museums Association UK’s campaign Decolonising Museums. These efforts to address historical inequalities have not come without controversy though, with accusations of activism, impartiality and political bias directed at museums; and approaches by arm’s length bodies to issues of contested heritage being held up as inconsistent with the position of the UK Government.

In Ireland, while both the Ulster Museum and the National Museum of Ireland, in 1990 and 1991 respectively, were among the first museums to return Māori ancestral remains to Aotearoa New Zealand, discussions around decolonisation in the cultural heritage sector have been marginal, partly due to its own historical experiences that lend context to and acknowledge sensitivities.
associated with colonialism. These have only gained traction in the last two to three years, with a growing understanding of a broader interpretation.

In 2020, National Museums NI announced its participation in the ‘Devolving Restitution: African Collections in UK Museums Beyond London’ project, and has subsequently reached out to the Belfast-based African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI) to discuss the potential repatriation of artefacts in its collections. In April 2021, the National Museum of Ireland announced that it has been engaging with colleagues and officials, to progress a restitution process in relation to the Benin Bronzes, and is also participating in the Digital Benin project, which will bring together all Benin holdings worldwide and create an internationally accessible information catalogue. This will be further supported through a comprehensive strategy, which is underway within NMI to fully investigate and adequately resource provenance research of the wider 15,000 object ethnographic collection. The Office of Public Works recently carried out an audit of its collections and heritage properties, investigating links to colonialism and slavery that went beyond museum artefacts, and included plants collected from colonies and now held at the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin.

These actions are also being supported by research: The IMA, along with National Museums NI, the Northern Ireland Museums Council and the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates at the University of Maynooth, are partners supporting delivery of ‘Museums, Empire and Northern Irish Identity’, led by postdoctoral fellow at Queen’s University Belfast, Dr Briony Widdis, which aims to improve understanding of how colonial collections relate to contemporary social issues impacted by the museum sector.

Furthermore, we are seeing a move towards a sectoral approach to this area of concern, as part of renewed efforts to strengthen ethics within the Irish context.

It is notable also that, after a period of extensions, 2020 saw the United Kingdom leaving the European Union in January, with the Brexit transition period coming to an end in December. While there have been concerns as to how to balance the need for an EU border with the historical arrangements between the British and Irish governments outlined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, a Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland was ultimately contained in the Withdrawal Agreement. To be reviewed by the NI Executive every four years, this guarantees the Common Travel Area between Ireland and the UK and effectively places the onus of moving goods, including cultural material, on those moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The IMA, in partnership with Ulster University, had initiated a collaborative project in 2017, Bridge over Brexit, investigating the implications for museums on the island, and efforts to maintain valued practices, approaches, and relationships intensified in 2020. Building on the foundation of this research, a three-year collaborative doctoral partnership, The EU and the museum: an investigation of cross-border museum activity in Ireland was launched, and awarded to Catherine McCullough. The Association additionally extended Interpreting Museums, which aimed to strengthen cross-border working relationships and public understanding of museum practice.

The Decade of Centenaries (2012–2023), the all-island programme designed to consider and explore some of the most significant events and themes in the history of modern Ireland, was

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Royal Commemorative Head (Benin Bronze), National Museum of Ireland. Accessioned in 1898.
Credit: National Museum of Ireland.
somewhat hampered by the pandemic. However, museums again proved their resourcefulness in addressing the major events of this anniversary year. The GAA Museum’s commemoration programme launched Broody Sunday, inviting the public to remember and interact both on-site and online through methods designed to facilitate peace and reconciliation. Crawford Art Gallery similarly adapted what had been designed as a primarily on-site exhibition exploring the idea of nation, Citizen Nowhere / Citizen Somewhere: The Imagined Nation. Elsewhere, preparations continued on programming for 2021 which will see the anniversaries of the end of the War of Independence, the establishment of Northern Ireland, and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

What’s Next for the Irish Museums Association and the Museum Sector?

It is undeniable that this has been a year of steep learning for museums, and that they have risen to the challenge in an admirable way. The examples mentioned in this article are but a sample of museum practice, cherry-picked in an attempt to summarise and showcase developments. Inevitably many valuable projects have not been mentioned; and this is, in itself, a reflection of the wealth of content and resources that have been developed and extended throughout 2020.

The difficulty of providing context to museum practice throughout this period cannot be overemphasised. Following an invitation by NEMO to present at a recent Directors’ meeting, we were able to reflect on and benchmark the activity carried out by the IMA to support members throughout the pandemic. As an independent organisation, it was able to be fluid and responsive. It also has the advantage of working within a relatively small sector, one where low resources have meant a reliance on input from our members; and the resulting decades of relationships within and across the sector proved to be essential during this time of crisis. This translated into a generous outpouring of expertise and experiences that allowed for continued peer-to-peer engagement and the provision of essential connectivity. In addition, strategic investment by the Association over the past number of years meant that processes for digital engagement were already in place, curtailed only by delivery at endpoint, restrictions that of course changed rapidly during 2020.

Over the past decade, the IMA has been involved in an internal process that has seen its remit grow, its governance strengthened, and its output become more advocacy-led. In 2020, this led to a steep rise in requests to input into both national and regional strategic consultations. Our increasing relevance has been recognised by our funders, seeing a substantial increase in grant-aid for 2021, funding that has been carefully allocated to areas that will further strengthen both the organisation itself and the sector.

As the IMA looks towards the coming years, the document, Museums and the Road to a Resilient Recovery in Ireland, continues to outline the needs of the sector in practical terms; but even this does not address the broader issues that our sector faces. Along with strengthening the resilience of the sector through our programmes and advocacy, we need to increase public recognition of the role of the museum as an anchor in place-
making, community development, and supporting well-being in an integrated civic society. The development of digital infrastructures and skills is vital but also needs to recognise the need for balance between the human factor and technology. Further sectoral diversification, in terms of inclusivity, diversity and equality values, requires a commitment from museums to embed these at institutional level. We need to ensure that existing resourcing commitments by governments to culture are not side-lined. Perhaps most importantly, we must – within this period of turmoil – safeguard ‘thinking time’, so that museums can continue to be informed and proactive in their approaches and can champion sustainability in its three dimensions: social, environmental, and economic.

These are all challenges to which museums have not only proven they are more than capable of rising, but also that they can go beyond. Throughout 2020, we saw how the investments by many of our museums into new thinking, and their embrace of contemporary roles and practices, paid dividends, allowing them to become more flexible, dynamic, and fluid. Inevitably, others have struggled more, but deserve no less recognition of their efforts and impact on their communities and – for many of these – the crisis has brought to the forefront the urgency of addressing legacy structures and values, areas that the Irish Museums Association also looks forward to exploring with its membership over the coming years as we look towards a better future for all.

Gina O’Kelly is the Irish Museums Association’s senior executive and is responsible for leading and delivering the association’s advocacy work and programming.

Notes


17. **#EPICirish** (Dublin: EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum), https://epicchq.com/epic-irish/.


Introduction
It was a pleasure for me to be invited to speak at the Irish Museum Association’s Conference held in Athlone in February 2020, and it is a double pleasure to be asked to formulate my words into this paper. I confess that I am deviating away from my speech in Athlone as I want to use this opportunity to reflect on the current, and possible future role, of the Heritage Council to secure the centrality of the museum sector in national frameworks. This discussion is relevant and timely as the Government continues to develop policies defining future national priorities.

The Heritage Council is a policy advisory agency and any articulation of our work with the museum sector should be contextualised within national policy frameworks. Regrettably, museums appear to be almost invisible in current national policies, as the cursory review included in this paper demonstrates. This raises questions. Is it the case that museums and the wider cultural heritage sector are not considered relevant by policy makers? Or is the voice of the sector not loud enough to be heard above all the white noise that occupies the policy discourse space? I do not have all the answers to these questions, but one answer is clear: there is a requirement to have a national policy for museums to ensure that there is a considered strategic framework which provides clarity, leadership and direction, thus supporting the sector in realising its potential.

The Irish Museum Landscape
The majority of Irish national cultural institutions have their origins in the nineteenth century. The growth of local authority, regional, independent, and voluntary museums is a feature of the late twentieth century, and many of these have only been established since the 1980s and 1990s. The most recent Irish Museums Survey collated data from 2015, with the author of the report, Dr Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, recording the existence of 230 museums across the island. This figure can be broken down into centrally funded museums; local government funded museums; Office of Public Works museums; National Trust museums, university museums, and independent museums including voluntary museums, military museums, commercial museums, local museums and others. The overall picture that emerges is that many museums have been established within the last twenty-five years and the numbers are growing. This growth leads to identification of issues such as the need to safeguard the primary role of museums as repositories and stewards of our national memory, to engender a respect for the role of professionalism within the Irish museum world, and to resource museums and other cultural heritage agencies appropriately.

The Heritage Council’s work with the Irish museum sector
The Heritage Act 1995 established the Heritage Council and charged it with proposing policies...
and priorities for the identification, protection, preservation, and enhancement of national heritage. The resulting scope of the Council’s remit gives it a direct role in the support and development of the museum sector, and it has worked extensively with museums since that date.

Established in 1996 and first chaired by the then Director of the Chester Beatty Library, Dr Michael Ryan, the Heritage Council’s Museums and Archives Committee draws its membership from the Board of the Council and from museums and archives professionals in Ireland; and is responsible for initiating, commissioning, and publishing position papers addressing strategic issues of national concern. Its position papers have included, for example, *Caring for Collections*, *A Policy Framework for the Museums Sector*, *Survey of Archives Collections*, and *Creation of a National Maritime Museum Scoping Study*. Aware that within the sector there was a growing recognition of the need to engender greater professionalism and to raise standards in museum management and operations, the Museums and Archives Committee initially focussed on two priorities of work:

- The development of a standards and accreditation scheme for museums.
- The design and implementation of a training strategy for museum personnel to enable and support the implementation of the scheme.

Following an initial study of the potential for a standards and accreditation scheme for Irish museums, in 2000, the Heritage Council initiated a pilot project involving six museums and commissioned a training strategy and action plan. Led by Museums and Archives Officer Eithne Verling and administered by Project Coordinator Louise Ryan, additionally supported with inputs from national and international professionals, over the ensuing five years the project tested what would work most effectively within the Irish cultural and operational framework. In 2005, the Heritage Council appointed Lesley-Anne Hayden as full-time Coordinator, recruited a panel of qualified and experienced assessors, and established an advisory board of key sectoral representatives. In addition, in partnership with Ulster University, it developed a post-graduate programme to train the next generation of museum professionals.

The Museum Standards Programme of Ireland

Upon the successful completion of the pilot project, the Museum Standards Programme of Ireland (MSPI) was launched in 2006. Significantly, the Programme was designed to ensure that the same standards and assessment criteria would operate across all participating institutions regardless of scale and nature. National cultural institutions are now part of the scheme, as are properties under the care of the Office of Public Works, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, local authorities, private companies, universities, and voluntary and community groups.

Beginning with an initial cohort of fourteen participating sites, the Programme now accommodates museums and collections managed by fifty-nine participating bodies across sixty-five sites throughout Ireland. This figure represents a penetration rate of almost 30% of the total of museums across the island as recorded by the Irish Museums Association. Not all museums have the capacity to undertake the Programme, and a large proportion of participating institutions are as a result national and local authority museums; but the Heritage Council continues to welcome the same broad range of participants to the scheme.

This has all been achieved despite the constraint of very limited resources. The Museum Standards Programme budget is currently €115,000 per annum, of which €20,000 is required for sectoral training. The Programme’s Coordinator, who reports to the Council’s Head of Policy and Research, works on a consultancy basis, as do the nineteen application assessors; and the members of the Advisory Group who support the Programme’s delivery and promotion are unpaid. Since the departure in 2009 of the most recent Museum and Archives Officer, Dr Hugh Maguire, the Heritage Council has regretfully been unable to renew the post.

MSPI Review 2020

As required by the Heritage Council’s Strategic Plan 2018–2022, a review by CHL Consultants provides an independent opinion on the effectiveness of MSPI in raising standards and accreditation of museums; and on its outputs and outcomes, resourcing and the potential for new areas of practice.
In June 2020, the Heritage Council accepted the review’s key findings and adopted its recommendations. These were that:

- The MSPI has considerably advanced the museum sector in Ireland, and as the country’s only vehicle for museum standards, training, and development, has an important future role. The Heritage Council will work to embed the Programme as central to its work and to expand it as a critical national strategic programme.

- The Programme’s success must be consolidated through increased resourcing, including further investment in training and development. Recommendations included making the MSPI Coordinator role a staff position and reactivating the Museums, Archives and Collections Officer role. Under a new Strategic Workforce Plan, the Heritage Council has now developed a range of programme manager roles which will support the MSPI programme, including the permanent post of Cultural and Inclusive Heritage Officer.

- Some required adjustments to the MSPI are being implemented. These include revising some standards, implementing an output and impact evaluation tool; streamlining administration, and developing the scheme’s online presence.

- The Advisory Group is a core strength of the MSPI, and its role will be enhanced. In addition, there will be more strategic collaboration with the Irish Museums Association, ICOM’s Committee for Ireland, and other bodies, to collectively strengthen the voice of the museum sector in national policy discourse.

**National Cultural and Heritage Policies**

In Ireland, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (DTCAGSM) has responsibility for museums within national policy frameworks. Departmental policy documents that reference museums, one of which has expired, are as follows:

- **Culture 2025: A National Cultural Policy Framework to 2025:**
  - three references, including one in relation to the ‘creative industries’; one in relation to ‘cultural heritage’; and one in relation to museums within a wider ‘cultural institutions’ cluster.

- **Statement of Strategy 2018–2020:**
  - two relevant references. The first, in Appendix 2 (under commitments made within the Programme for Partnership Government), undertakes to ‘boost supports to regional museums and facilitate increased loans between our National Cultural Institutions and our network of regional museums’. The second, presented as a High-Level Strategy, although lacking direct reference to the museum sector is salient to the work of the Heritage Council, including MSPI. This refers to ‘building heritage skills capacity to ensure we achieve high standards of planning, management, and protection competencies for heritage decision-makers at all levels’.

**New Minister for Heritage**

In June 2020, following the creation of the coalition government, the DTCAGSM’s Heritage
Division was re-positioned within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), a separation that resulted in the creation of a new position of Minister for State for Heritage and Local Government, currently held by Malcolm Noonan TD.

Although beneficial both to heritage and the Heritage Council in that it supports some areas of cultural heritage, it is important to note that others, including national cultural institutions and support for the arts, lie outside the remit of this new ministerial role, remaining instead within DTCAGSM. The ensuing risks of sectoral fragmentation and poor cohesion could result in missed opportunities, including for the development of cultural tourism and educational engagement.

**Heritage Ireland 2030**

Heritage Ireland 2030, Ireland’s new national heritage plan led by DHLGH, is now at a final draft stage and is due to be published during 2021. Following sectoral meetings hosted by the Heritage Council to discuss the initial consultation document in which many attendees drew attention to the exclusion of museums, the Council responded as follows:

*The definition of heritage as being ‘built and natural’ in Heritage Ireland 2030 does not address the museums and archives sector, digital heritage, or intangible heritage. From a government department structural perspective this may seem logical, but to the general public and for many heritage practitioners this is difficult to reconcile with the idea of a ‘revitalised and refreshed National Heritage Plan’. We recommend a greater consideration of the breadth of heritage which Ireland possesses.*

The Heritage Council in its response further recommended:

- increased investment in the care of collections, museums, and archives in private and institutional ownership as well as the expansion of the Museums Standards Programme of Ireland.
- greater cohesion between government agencies with regard to cultural heritage. (The risks of limited cohesion have since increased through the subsequent departmental separations between the heritage and cultural/arts portfolios).

In 2019, the Irish Museums Association also commented on the lack of a policy direction for museums, specifically highlighting deficits in both the initial Heritage Ireland 2030 consultation document and in Culture 2025. It noted:

*...in the Republic of Ireland, there is no specific museums policy. Heritage Ireland 2030, the proposed new national heritage plan for Ireland omitted museums in its original consultation document. Meanwhile, Culture 2025, the new cultural strategy proposed by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, is still in draft format having undergone extensive public consultation in 2015-2016. A broad document, it does not specifically address the museum sector,*
alluding solely to these in one instance, in terms of digitisation of collections held in the national cultural institutions.

National Development Policies

References to museums within national development policies are as follows:

The National Development Plan Ireland 2018 – 2027, from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), makes eleven references to museums, all of which refer to specific capital works at national cultural institutions. In relation to more general supports for museums, a single reference states that:

...the arts and culture capital scheme will also be expanded. This scheme supports the maintenance and development of an extensive network of regional arts infrastructure and will provide funding to regional arts centres, theatres, regional museums, galleries, archives, multi-use facilities, artist studios etc. in all parts of Ireland.

Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework, jointly led by DHLGH and DPER, is similarly mute about museums, with only one inclusion of the word ‘museum’ in the document.

Endings and Beginnings

This desktop review of current policy documents suggests that within national policy frameworks, museums are accorded limited importance and a limited role. While it is reasonable to assume that museums are implicitly included in broader terms such as ‘heritage’, ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘culture’, it is of grave concern that national policy planning that is both of critical importance to museums, and that museums are uniquely invested to support, makes scant explicit reference to them.

There is therefore a demonstrable need for collaborative efforts to advocate more vocally for the prominent inclusion of museums, and of cultural heritage more broadly, in national policy discourses and narratives. The separation of the arts, culture and heritage portfolios at government level, and the risk of fragmentation that this presents, require that collaboration be prioritised within the sector and that there is a sense of collective purpose on all our parts.

In February 2021 in the Irish Times, Fintan O’Toole decried our neglect of public history:

One of the great myths of Ireland is that we are a nation obsessed with the past. There is indeed great public interest in at least some aspects of Irish history. But at the level of government and institutions, we are a nation of historical vandals. The pain and grief that has been caused by the confusion over the records of evidence, given by survivors to the mother and baby homes commission, betrays the utter lack of a clear State policy on how to create and curate the public memory of Ireland’s recent past.

The subject of O’Toole’s article is a recent report published by the Royal Irish Academy by Siobhan Fitzpatrick and Mary O’Dowd, which documents the neglect of our documentary heritage. The issues raised in this excellent report can also be applied more broadly to our cultural heritage. Museums, archives, and libraries have stewardship responsibilities to collect and preserve our national patrimony. Our cultural heritage institutions support research and enquiry into and access to our country’s material culture, records, and memory. To enable all our institutions to engage deeply and support the objectives set out in current and emerging national policies, the cultural heritage sector must be adequately acknowledged and resourced, and it must operate within a strategic framework that provides leadership, clarity, and direction.

In 2021, the Heritage Council will fill the long vacant function of Museums and Archives Officer and we will also consolidate the MSPI Programme Manager role. The Council is committed to continuing to collaborate across the museum and heritage sectors. The development of a national policy which, to use O’Toole’s words, clearly states ‘how to create and curate’ Ireland’s public memory, is an essential next step, and is one which the Heritage Council is willing to embrace and progress.

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Notes


8. For transparency I should note that I was privileged to succeed Dr Michael Ryan as chair of the Museums and Archives Committee from 2000 – 2005.


13. From 1996 – 2009 the Heritage Council established a dedicated Museums and Archives grant scheme which provided vital supports to a range of organisations across the country. Although this dedicated scheme was suspended in 2009, in the period 2010 – 2020 the Heritage Council awarded grants totalling €2,780,000 to 505 projects to communities, organisations and others for museums and archives related projects.

14. ‘Heritage Ireland 2030, Heritage Council Submission to Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht’ (Kilkenny, n.d.).


I’m convinced that the pandemic we’re currently living through is both a manifestation of and a mere interruption in the relentless march towards an interconnected world, one in which peoples and cultures can’t help but collide. In that world – of global supply chains, instantaneous capital transfers, social media, transnational terrorist networks, climate change, mass migration, and ever-increasing complexity – we will learn to live together, cooperate with one another, and recognise the dignity of others, or we will perish.


Museums are facing unprecedented challenges in a rapidly changing world. The Irish Museums Association has endeavoured not only to keep pace with these changes, but also to show leadership in debating their implications and navigating a sustainable, relevant future. Now rapid social, economic and political change are accompanied by the impact of a global pandemic. As the sector begins to emerge from what has been the most significant crisis we’ve ever faced, will our post-COVID-19 world be one of bleak austerity, or an opportunity for museums to find a new fulfilment of their role and purpose in society?

When I took on the role of Chair of the Irish Museums Association in 2017, it coincided with my appointment as Director of Collections at National Museums NI. Inevitably, my reflections on the last three years are largely grounded in the transformation agenda within National Museums NI, and my own role in it. That said, it has also been an iterative process. The benefits of being active within a professional body like the Irish Museums Association include the opportunities it offers not only to use one’s own influence but also, just as importantly, to benefit from the influence of others. We are all on a learning journey and we all need critical friends to develop our own theory and practice.

I took on my current role as Director of Collections as part of a new leadership team. We had, like most in the sector, experienced years of cuts as a result of ‘austerity’ measures impacting public finances. But yet, despite these challenges, I looked forward to the future with confidence and optimism. If I was to summarise my dominant considerations over the past three years, they would be ‘role and purpose’, ‘values’, ‘ethics, and unlocking the potential of our collections. In good times and in bad times, values and ethics provide the essential touch point around which judgement can be exercised and decisions taken. For most of my career, values and ethics provided a passive background for my work; now they are my essential pole star.

It seems incredible to think that in his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama argued that the worldwide spread of liberal democracies and free-market capitalism of the West and its lifestyle may signal the end-point of humanity’s sociocultural evolution, and become...
the final form of human government. Instead, since then, we seem to have been subjected to the worst of history’s back catalogue – repackaged for new generations of extremists to consume via social media. (Some, of course, might argue that this is a by-product of free market capitalism.). This new extremism has been accompanied by broader coarsening and polarisation within public and political discourse. Tempers have frayed as the result of the racial injustice highlighted by Black Lives Matter and the fractious debates around ‘Brexit’.

History has always been ‘political’, but recently we have witnessed a more aggressive politicisation that goes beyond the conventional debates around historical method, sources and ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ bias. History has now become weaponised and instrumentalised to serve identity politics both right and left. Trump’s America provided an extreme version of this – a glimpse of a dystopian reality where truth is denounced as ‘fake’, where wild conspiracy theories are embraced if they happen to align with individual preferences and prejudices, and where ‘the other’ is demonised in a manner reminiscent of twentieth century fascism. Whilst undeniably complex, ‘neutrality’ on these societal issues is not an option for museums. As a sector – one in which a common liberal DNA is shared – we are presented with a challenge to be courageous and an opportunity to find our voice. We somehow need to blend careful consideration with a readiness to innovate.

The main catalyst for creative thinking and debate within the Irish Museums Association is our annual conference, so in reflecting on the past three years, I see the themes of our last three conferences as a conceptually integrated triptych. In 2018, our annual conference considered the theme of ‘Collecting the Now’. It considered the question:

*Do we have the objectivity to identify and select the items which will define our society for future generations? ... We live in a period of unparalleled human consumption making the decision about*
what to preserve in institutions, but this is not always reflected in their collections and the way they collect.¹

Collecting the ‘Now’ examined how museums can ensure that their collections capture contemporary cultural changes, diverse voices and shifting perspectives, moving on in some cases from the collected object. Its aim was to explore new, conceptual, collaborative and participatory ways to collect, which will produce more imaginative and diverse museum collections and exhibitions for the future. This certainly reflected my own preoccupations as we were in the middle of a major new collecting initiative ‘Collecting the Troubles and Beyond’, which has underpinned the development of a new ‘Troubles’ gallery at the Ulster Museum.

The importance of enabling multiple perspectives to be heard is a crucial ethical principle. It has guided National Museums NI’s work in recent years on the conflict commonly referred to as ‘the Troubles’. The same underlying principle can be seen in a very different form (and on a much larger scale) in a recent initiative in Germany, ‘Germany Talks’. This has sought to open up a national debate on issues currently polarising German society by encouraging people, often with radically different views, to engage with each other in conversation.²

But where do we draw the boundaries on ‘narrative hospitality’ and ‘radical multi-perspectivity’? An obvious limit is racist or sectarian views, or anything that promotes extremism or hate. Or should extreme views be allowed into museums where they can then be properly challenged? The thought makes me nervous, and I don’t have an answer; but we should certainly not remove views that simply fall outside the liberal consensus and thus become our own censors. I’m confident that the way forward in this will be found through courageous contemporary collecting, accompanied by courageous interpretation and display. National Museums NI’s ethics policy states:

National Museums NI recognises its museums are safe, shared spaces for everyone. For this reason, we will support freedom of speech and provide forums for the respectful sharing of different views and perspectives. Exceptions will be the sharing of views and perspectives that are sectarian, racist, sexist, ageist, ableist or homophobic. Where our collections demonstrate such views and perspectives, we will ensure we curate them in a sensitive and informative manner, providing context and seeking the input of communities.³

The debate about history (‘whose history’) is being played out against a background of accelerating environmental degradation and a climate crisis of our very own making. What does this mean for our own institutions? Can we become exemplars in sustainable development? It should certainly be our aspiration. The environmental agenda and sustainable development, as reflected in the Sustainable Developments Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide an important framework to consider both environmental and human rights, along with a powerful spur for local action in support of a global agenda. They also provide a new framework to re-assess the value and importance of the ‘big data’ reflected in natural sciences collections and the landscapes and biodiversity of our sites.

Collections must never be considered immutable – they must evolve and change over time. And

Posters displayed by local residents on the railings of Ormeau Park, Belfast to show their support for the Black Lives Matter movement.
Credit: National Museums NI
this means an open and informed attitude to disposal, particularly when it means transfer or repatriation. ‘Decolonising the Museum’ has emerged as a key agenda for museums and whilst the term itself is still the subject of debate, there is emerging consensus on the following:

• It is imperative that museums take a proactive stance on ‘decolonisation’.
• Museums can and should be held accountable on matters of colonial legacies.
• The decolonisation of museums can and should be enacted in many areas of our work, including research, interpretation, acquisitions, documentation, training, recruitment, partnerships, engagement, repatriation, and restitution.
• Museums are not neutral spaces. Debates in the museum sector have moved on from querying whether museums are neutral, and instead now centre on what it actually means to not be neutral. It is not about taking sides in party politics, but rather recognising that we have a responsibility to take positive action against prejudice, discrimination, and exclusionary practices.

The collections we hold, particularly our World Cultures collections, require a fundamental re-think. Ethnology has generally been the main focus of this renewed scrutiny, often with its roots in imperial expansion, colonialism and sometimes the violence and appropriation associated with conquest and subjugation. Whilst this is often the case, a distinction must also be drawn between colonialism and the history of globalisation and increased travel and trade, although the latter is often underpinned by exploitation and asymmetrical relationships. The truth lies somewhere within the nexus of these processes and must also take account of the fact that while we can put history in the dock, it can usually muster a better defence than our choices and actions in the present. Is the world any less exploitative now than it was in the past? Is it any less unequal? Is it not still a world of empires masquerading as superpowers and trading blocs?

Rethinking World Cultures must mean more than an apologetic review of ‘ethnological collections’. To genuinely find meaning, relevancy and a new dynamism it must proactively explore global issues, global movements (like Black Lives Matter), and the promotion of mutual understanding and respect across cultures and societies. At the Ulster Museum, we are actively planning a new exhibition on ‘Rethinking World Cultures’ to begin this process, with the aim of creating a dynamic, evolving gallery in which we can explore new ways of working and new ways of thinking.

For museums across the island of Ireland, consideration must also be given to the particular context and sensitivities associated with colonialism in this place. Whilst there are undoubtedly conversations that need to happen across Ireland, we have to consider if
It is wholly appropriate to critically evaluate legacies of colonialism and imperialism – especially since those legacies have seldom been properly debated or are, more often, simply hiding in plain sight. However, surely all the major ‘isms’ in history must be constantly evaluated? The exclusionary nature of nationalism provides its own particular challenges in the present. The legacy of partition and the current uncertainty about our political futures lends additional urgency to this. To live in Ireland and have your roots in Ireland, yet feel excluded from the Irish nation, can be politically and culturally disorientating. For someone with my cultural background, it is never a case of ‘Irish’ versus ‘British’ but rather Irish and British. And the question of where one identity begins and another ends is a false dichotomy. That said, I’m sure this sense of dual identity is one that is shared by many other ethnic minorities on the island, whether their journey began as economic migrants in the seventeenth century or the twenty first century. But is this just semantics: what’s in a name? Quite a lot actually, especially when the terms are ‘colonist’, ‘settler’, ‘migrant’, ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ or ‘citizen’.

In considering these issues, museums must support exploration and public discourse in a way that moves beyond old historical tropes/binaries, and instead challenge stereotypical views of this is best conducted within the framework of decolonisation. A useful guide is to consider if and how we feel British identity has quashed and/or demoted Irish identity and experiences in our museums in the year 2021. Are British voices speaking on behalf of those who are Irish, without their consent or input? In Northern Ireland in particular, concepts of ‘British’ and ‘Irish’ must be explored and considered thoughtfully, given the cross-fertilisation of culture and cultural fusion that underpins our society today. Is it helpful in Northern Ireland to frame cultural diversity in terms of colonisers and colonised? What are the implications of this when it comes to understanding conflict, dealing with the legacy of the past and building social cohesion?
history. Comfortable simplistic narratives need to be constructively disrupted. In looking at issues relating to culture, identity and the legacy of the past within our own communities and experiences, we must be careful not to undermine the core principle of decolonisation, which is to address racism and exclusionary practices, by letting it be hijacked by narrow political agendas.

In 2019, the Irish Museums Association’s conference considered the theme ‘We are all Engagers’:

*Museums are rising to the challenges of increasing and diversifying their audiences and are enthusiastic in their commitment to playing an active role in improving lives and creating a better society. However the ‘relevance’ of the museum is still mostly discussed in relation to sustaining and increasing audiences and social contribution, yet not posing the question of how we can ensure these changing values and aims are embedded in the core of the museum.*

We are all Engagers considered how museums can imbue audience-centred thinking within their organisational culture, and in particular, how we develop and reimagine collections in ways which will actively engage the public: ‘How can we unlock our full potential by becoming more dynamic, agile, and responsive to issues of contemporary relevance?’

The fundamental question that museums have to address is who’s not coming through our doors, or participating, and why? Competition for public interest and attention is far more than other museums or other organisations in the wider cultural sector. It’s all the other life choices that people make that reflect their interests and values. In truth, we share many of those interests and concerns, but that’s not necessarily how we’re perceived. Breaking through this perception of irrelevance requires a radical shift on our part. These questions now have an even greater urgency as we seek to understand the impact and legacy of the current global pandemic.

In that context, to equip ourselves for this challenge, we must scan the horizon and identify discernable societal and global change. In developing National Museums NI’s ‘Manifesto for Change’ for the Ulster Folk Museum at Cultra, we have highlighted four trends:

- **Trend 1: Identity & Inclusion**
  People across the world are challenging the status quo, moving away from the rigid definitions of race, gender, and sexuality in search for a more self-defined approach to identity. Generation Z, in particular, is leading the charge in changing how they see themselves, their actions and the world. The rights and wellbeing of the individual within all spheres of society is taking concrete form across the globe. However, the search for identity is...
intricately linked with the pursuit of meaning. In a digital society, more than one in three people globally feel that the way they live their lives has become meaningless. There is a sense that the local culture, values and traditions – which make up so much of our identity – are becoming lost. More than half of people globally feel more of a ‘citizen of the world’ than a citizen of their country.

**Trend 2: Environmental Activism**
Heatwaves, forest fires and extreme weather; school strikes organised by Greta Thunberg; and news that the Arctic permafrost is thawing decades earlier than predicted. These are just some of the reasons why 80% globally think we are heading for environmental disaster unless we change our habits quickly, a view steadily on the rise since 2013. The conversation has shifted from climate change to climate emergency, and this trend unites most people in a way little else does. People are also becoming more active in scrutinising what governments and organisations are or are not doing to actively repair our fragile planet. People are increasingly more aware and educated and expect organisations to be transparent in their behaviours.

**Trend 3: Proudly Local, Quietly Nostalgic**
Taking pride in and supporting local communities is an enduring feature of the consumer landscape. Consumers are retreating from globalisation and hyper-consumption and valuing local authenticity and provenance, with 70% more likely to buy products that are locally grown than those that are grown elsewhere. However, there are also deeper ethical value shifts beyond self-expression and consumption driving this desire for localisation. On a more personal and subconscious level, the trend also reflects a fear of the future and a sense of being overwhelmed by the pace of modern society which is causing a desire for roots, traditions and nostalgia. Globally, 63% of us wish our lives were simpler, and more than three in five wish we could slow down the pace of our lives.

**Trend 4: Anxiety & Alienation**
Pessimism is increasingly common. The most recent Gallup Survey, covering 140 countries in 2019, reported a global feeling of anxiety, sadness and anger shared around the world. The paradox is striking. Urbanisation has brought more people together than ever, but loneliness is more likely to be felt within big cities. People are more connected today than ever before, but feelings of loneliness and isolation are on the rise and will reach epidemic proportions by 2030. People are replacing emotional connections with digital ones and losing the sensation of being present and feeling alive. Whatever the future holds, mental health issues – such as anxiety and alienation – seem likely to remain a problem for society to grapple with. The technology may be new, but the need for human beings to have real and genuine connections is as old as time.

In considering all of this, the fundamental challenge then is how to transform our museums, which was the theme of the Irish Museums Association’s conference in 2020. In recent decades, there has been a major shift towards a user-led philosophy within museum practice. The question asked through ‘Transforming Museums’ was:
How can we encourage and drive this culture change from within our institutions, and also adapt to the changing cultural context in which our institutions exist? Is it time to reimagine the place of the museum and its functions and who will shape that vision? More than ever, museums are directly engaging with topics of social change. Does this signal a shift in museums’ identities and roles? ... By exploring what museums can be and what are the barriers to us achieving this, we pose the question: as we look towards ‘Ireland 2040’ what will the museums of twenty years from now look like? 

Complacency has always been the greatest risk to museums; a sense of entitlement born from a belief that the collections and knowledge we hold in themselves offer protection from a hostile world. However, that’s a very risky assumption to make. We all operate within a wider context of accountability and if that means government, whether local or central, that means delivering against outcomes. Framing our value to society in terms of outcomes makes what we do meaningful and comprehensible to our key stakeholders. It might mean investing in a new language Application, but more fundamentally it means continuing to reset our museums from being internally focused (as they were in the past) to being externally focused and embracing the full measure of culture change that comes with that.

Ironically, despite the twin challenges of profound social change and a global public health crisis, I am more confident about the future of museums now than three years ago. That said, not all will survive and thrive. Those who do will have used their own agency and core commitment to humanitarian and environmental causes to negotiate a successful future. At their best, museums can be a rich source of identity, meaning and authenticity for everyone. They can be champions of the environment, sustainability, and biodiversity. They can be an escape from modern society, where people feel connected with place. And they can be places where people and communities come together to connect with the things that matter.

William Blair is Director of Collections at National Museums NI and a former Chair of the Irish Museums Association (2016–2020).

Notes
procedures/Collections/National-Museums-NI-Ethics-Policy.pdf.


Introduction
This article is inspired by discussions within and hosted by the Royal Irish Academy on the past, present and future of Irish museums. These meetings have reflected upon developments, and on structural deficits, that have affected the sector in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and on both sides of the Irish border. Our conversations with current and recent practitioners, with people working in national, regional and local museums, and at Irish Museums Association conferences including that in 2020 in Athlone, confirmed what we already knew: that the Association has been a remarkable source of advice, help and advocacy; that some long-standing processes are well worth re-examining, re-supporting or modifying; and that, from a cultural policy perspective, a more holistic approach to museums is required.

In this paper, we summarise some of the points gathered, with the aim of opening further conversations about improvements that can be made. Our conclusions are quite independent of those of the RIA and are entirely our own. We regard this article as a starting point, and we will clarify in future commentary our suggestions for policy developments.

The nature and role of the museum
Museums are often regarded as simple phenomena. To many, they are primarily warehouses of collected things, which are the archives in kind of natural and human history. In common discourse, they are often misconceived merely as places that contain ‘treasures’ and ‘artefacts’, and present exhibitions and very little else. In contemporary speech, the verb to curate has effectively lost any connection to the work of the curator – the taking care and studying of things deemed worthy of preservation. This constitutes the larger part of the traditional role of museums: care of collections, documentation of material, and compiling information from people with knowledge – either traditionally inherited or developed through experience – of the objects’ intrinsic and historical value. ‘Curated’ has, though, become merely a vernacular way of saying ‘picked’ or ‘selected’. It is often used of playlists on radio shows and even lately, in a newspaper, one could read of a restaurant menu that referred to its carefully curated cheese.¹ This usage ignores the etymology of the word: curare is both a Latin verb meaning ‘to care for’ and is also, in English, the name of a dangerous vegetable poison. ‘Curate’, in religious usage, belongs to the same family of meanings, but we can perhaps leave the ‘cure of souls’ out of our considerations. Museums have enough to do.

As places that collect, preserve and interpret the evidence of the past and present, museums are simple constructs, but what they do is complex. Care of collections is not mere warehousing. Collecting, and the recording and conservation that are central to collections care, can give rise to significant ethical and legal dilemmas – as
has been evidenced by recent debates over the
new definition of the museum proposed by the
International Council of Museums.

ICOM’s Museum Definition
At its Kyoto Triennial Conference in 2019,
ICOM looked forward to the adoption of a new
definition of the museum, which would reflect
more than seventy years of change. Instead
of a new revelatory statement of meaning, the
wording drafted was – in our view – overloaded
with ideological statements and inferences and
contained some odd phrasing that made little
sense. It became, as a result, the cause of a proxy
skirmish in a cultural war for the souls of ICOM
and of the museum profession. A new draft is in
the works, and ICOM Committees have begun to
survey members using a methodology which, in
one case (Intercom’s survey, which is open as we
write) is somewhat odd. It proposes whole phrases
to be included/excluded in the definition without
any obvious notion of what the drafters are
currently considering.

One criticism of the initial drafting of the new
definition was that it did not translate easily into
English. By comparison, the old definition had
been direct and clear, providing a framework
within which to work; although it had not sought
to give the profession ethical direction. While,
in practical terms, a definition can hardly hold
a moral dissertation, it can be a basis for a fuller
code of ethics. Such codes, as have been those of
ICOM and the Museum Association in the UK, are
creatures of temporary circumstances and as such
are subject to updates and revisions. Intended to
promote ethical practice, the proposed definition
should have included a short statement referring
to the ICOM Code of Ethics, and to any revisions to
that code in which the new definition, if adopted,
might result.

Getting agreement on such a statement might
be very difficult to obtain. So how does one use a
revised definition to shape an enduring statement
of ethical and practical guidance? We believe that
this is impossible. A code of ethics is much more
extensive than a definition. It is more than merely
an elegant institutional ornament. It must be a
guide to the practical management of museums
and their collections and to engagement with the
societies and circumstances within which
museums work. It deals with the pressing need
to respect the sources from which a museum has
drawn its collections and the essential associated
knowledge, and the historical sensitivities
associated with them.

Cultural Policy and Museums
Most museums cannot sustain themselves through
earnings and donations, and so must depend on
government, local and national, for essential
support. Museums are not one-off investments:
they require constant support, maintenance,
display and security upgrades. Their visitors and
other users expect a comprehensive programme
of activities, including exhibitions, outreach and
education, talks, lectures, music, films and events
of many kinds.

As has been evidenced by the museum definition
debate, there is a strong current of opinion that
museums should work to heal the ills of society
by direct interventions. Some attempts at this are
the object of concern for colleagues who reflect
on the importance of supporting and taking risks
on complex, pioneering work, which may result
in limited social benefit. Others believe that by
following traditional good practice within their
disciplines and communicating well with their
audiences, supporting adult and schools-level
education, and promoting enjoyment, museums
do good in the world.

Museums in liberal democracies need an
equivalent standing with that of public
broadcasting; requiring the freedom to speak
without governmental ventriloquism. Because
of their capacity to affect the present, they
also need freedom to reflect in a non-partisan
manner on current as well as historical events
and processes. And as with public broadcasting,
museums throughout the world are increasingly
under pressure from politicians who wish to
control social discourse and influence national and
personal public image. For this reason, to continue
to provide a public service, museums must remain
vigilant and alert to the dangers of imposed bias.

Museum collections have always had the effect
of boosting national and local pride and are
increasingly, and rightly, identified and valued as
tourism attractions. In addition, through to their
roles in signposting communal values, museums
as cultural enterprises on both modest and large scales provide a diverse patchwork of artforms, including contemporary performance and visual arts in addition to the curation and exhibition of works inherited from the past.

Now that they are mostly unavailable during the pandemic, the cultural industries, which are critical investments in services and jobs with the purpose of providing rich experiences and entertainment, have been clearly shown by the lockdown to have significant social as well as economic value to our towns, cities and rural communities. As writers searching for models of cultural provision that stimulate confident citizenship, the following 2007 statement from the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Culture is of interest:

Norwegian cultural policy shall contribute to providing people with the opportunity to participate in and enjoy a rich diversity of arts and cultural expressions. It recognises the intrinsic value of arts, culture and cultural heritage for the individual human being as well as for society as a whole. The Norwegian Government recognises the intrinsic value of a strong and independent civil society and local and community engagement. Acknowledging the arm’s length principle as an important premise, Norwegian cultural policy aims to provide both the arts and cultural sector as well as civil society organisations with a framework that enables them to thrive.8

Museums can be just such a stimulus by providing exhibitions, which reflect on important issues in our lives and in our history: science museums can enhance the effects of active citizenship in the care of the environment, and of learning about technological, biological and medical development or safe building and manufacturing processes; history museums enable understanding of the processes of economics and politics and the development of public and civic institutions.

Loans
Smaller museums often rely on external institutions to create and lend temporary exhibitions, but the unique importance of museums lies in their distinctive rather than in generic offerings. Museums that create partnerships with like-minded institutions often thrive; but reliance on large, national-level institutions to provide more than occasional exhibits is risky if a museum does not also have its own staff resources and collections to maintain a constant stream of events. Furthermore, for even a national cultural institution, the expenditure of effort in lending a single valuable object or work of art is significant. Substantial loan exhibitions are especially labour-intensive: selection, creation of information, packing and shipment, installation and deinstallation are expensive in staff time and financial cost, and security is often a serious risk.

Collections–sharing therefore demands a willingness for extensive co-operative effort, and a commitment to financial investment. Above all, it requires planning and credible timescales and an appreciation of the significant staff time required. Museums also need to possess sufficient curatorial and conservation staff to take on significant loan–work without detriment to already extensive responsibilities inherent in their day–to–day duties. National and regional museum co–operation is therefore essential but relies heavily on effective resourcing on the part of both borrowers and lenders.

Communication, Learning and Outreach
A good public profile is essential, and a museum that lacks competence in digital and conventional communication, or is not especially active in education, both in–person and online, will lose contact with its audiences – not just in times of crisis such as the COVID–19 pandemic, but permanently. Skilful educational programmes and a scrupulous neutrality of approach can enhance all this work. In every aspect of what they do, museums enrich and inspire audiences who use them. We do, though, have to reflect that museums do not substitute for the work of schools in providing national education programmes, or of government agencies in supporting social welfare. A little modesty in our profession would be welcome.

In terms of outreach, the record of museums on both sides of the Irish border has been good. Some have been especially effective in reaching out to recently established communities, both from within and outside the EU; and these invaluable programmes need to be expanded and adequately resourced. Engaging audiences is hard work, but it is central to the success and value of any museum.
Looking back and the future of Irish museums
With a view to supporting the future of Irish museums, we have consulted informally within the sector on cultural policy and support needs on both sides of the border. We have consulted with museum professionals and academics. We have also spoken to colleagues in our respective disciplines and practices, and to those who have experience of, and commitment to, public education and encouragement of the public, young and old, to enjoy and learn from our museums. We have considered the scientific and scholarly knowledge compiled by colleagues and the potential knowledge which material can yield from careful interrogation. The material collected and preserved in our museums is a precious inheritance of already gleaned and potential understanding.

Our enquiries prompt us to be optimistic. With a vision of public service, enhanced participation, and security for the publicly owned and managed museums of Ireland, the future is bright. An overview of the progress our consultations has recorded, can be summarised as follows.

Museums in Ireland have come a long way since the 1970s, with the development of a strong regional museum sector supported by local authorities, north and south. Largely to the credit of the Irish Museums Association, information-sharing and practical cooperation has become more effective. Long-standing deficits in staffing and buildings, especially in the national museums, north and south, are slowly but surely being put to rights. There is still a long way to go, and we have to get past the economic problems which dealing with the pandemic poses to both parts of the island. The deficits in the establishment - in the public service sense – of national-level institutions still have some ground to make up, but much work of value is being done.

In our review, we have received a great deal of encouragement from colleagues, and we have drafted outline proposals for policy development on which we have been advised and have come to tentative conclusions following discussion. We have prepared outlines on deficits in museum provision and policy, on which we shall be writing in greater detail in the near future.

The list of issues which require attention is substantial, but in this paper, we start with initiatives to strengthen cooperation. We would propose:

1. That the Irish Museums Association should foster the framing of a definition of a museum which would be fit for purpose.

2. That the Heritage Council should transform its Standards Programme for museums by addition of the words ‘and Accreditation’ and working towards parity with the programme of the Northern Ireland Museums Council.

3. That in the Republic, a Museums Council with Heritage Council support be established to promote standards, and training of museum professionals and foster parity of standards in museums. (The object of these suggestions is to enhance co-operation and development of lending for exhibitions and the creation of joint exhibitions.)

4. We note that there are deficits in resources both in staffing and physical spaces, in national and regional museums, which are in need of remedy.

5. The legal framework of museums requires inspection and where necessary improvement is required. This is an initiative that requires government support.

6. The absence of a science museum in Ireland is a noticeable deficit in national cultural provision that could, if established, underpin the country’s ability to provide learning outside the classroom on scientific subjects. While there is some provision in scientific disciplines in existing national museums, with especially important work taking place in the National Museum of Natural History, and in important aspects of Natural Sciences and Technology (geology, transport, industrial exhibits) in National Museums NI, there remains the lack of a serious, and enjoyable, museum of science.

Finally, the spirit of cooperation between museum colleagues in Ireland, north and south, heartens us. Much has been done, and there is much to look forward to.
George Sevastopolu is Emeritus Professor of Geology in Trinity College Dublin. He has published widely in scientific literature internationally. He has taken a particular interest in the National Museum (Natural History) as well as museums generally. He is notable for his interdisciplinary collaboration and active work in the field.

Michael Ryan is an archaeologist who has served as Keeper of Irish Antiquities in the National Museum, as Director of the Chester Beatty and as member of a number of cultural boards and international bodies such as ASEMUS and ICOM. He writes mostly about Ireland’s early-medieval archaeology and art and occasionally on museums and governance. He is a past President of the Royal Irish Academy.

Notes
Introduction
At its 25th General Conference in Kyoto in 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) proposed a new museum definition. Its purpose was to signal the values required for museums to respond to and make the transformations required by twenty-first century challenges. It was designed to enable them to incorporate diverse world views, address deep social inequalities, and acknowledge climate and biodiversity crises. While acknowledging museums’ ‘unique, defining and essential unity’, the definition presented them as ‘democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures’. It defined museums as ‘participatory and transparent’, working ‘in active partnership with and for diverse communities’, and ‘aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing’.¹

Although the new definition was produced through ICOM’s worldwide consultation, its outcome was rejected by multiple national branches, whose objections can be summarised as an opposition to what they regard as an uncertain amalgam of political correctness and trendy posturing that would be of limited legal value. Some have also expressed alarm at the omission of words such as ‘collection’ and ‘education’ which they consider essential to a museum’s mission.

Through a discussion of a twenty-first century museum’s boundaries, this paper addresses some of the issues raised by the difficulty of achieving consensus on the museum definition. Using the National Museum of Afro American History and Culture as a case study, it will explore how user-led philosophy has helped to reimagine the place of the museum, its functions and identities.

Museums and an Identity Crisis
Duncan Cameron, a Canadian museologist, argued in 1971 that museums were unable to figure out who or what they were. This identity crisis was leading to widespread confusion about their societal roles. Should museums be ‘temples of the muses’, focusing on the collection, preservation, interpretation, and display of objects? Or should they be ‘museums of ideas’, focusing not on things, but instead on enabling public debate on pressing social, political, and moral issues of the day? He argued that many museums were more reminiscent of churches than of schools, being...created (spaces) that were the temples within which they enshrined those things they held to be significant and valuable. The public generally accepted the idea that if it was in the museum, it was not only real but represented a standard of excellence. If the museum said that this and that was so, then that was a statement of truth.

Beyond the objects and artefacts it preserves, Cameron’s temple-like museum both projects and protects the dominant values of society
and is a site of official, as opposed to popular, culture. Henry L. Harrison argues that this conceptualisation presents museums as altars, where audiences come to worship timeless treasures of enduring value. In her discussion of museums as ‘ritual sites’, Carol Duncan progresses this idea: purposefully emulating ceremonial monuments, ‘the museum stands as a symbol of the state, and those who pass through its door enact a ritual that equates state authority with the idea of civilization’.

To counter these hegemonic effects, Cameron suggests an alternative model:

While our bona fide museums seek to become relevant, maintaining their role as temples, there must be concurrent creation of forums for confrontation, experimentation, and debate.

Cameron’s imagined forum–museum provides space for open, alternative cultural sites, where the values of the temple can be interrogated and contested. Rather than protecting dominant societal values, these spaces safeguard diversity, allowing authority and dialogue to coexist.

ICOM and Museums as Forums
The antagonism of the current debate around ICOM’s museum definition suggests that the identity crisis Cameron identified fifty years ago has yet to be resolved, and corresponds to the tension he identified in his philosophical discussion of museums as temples and forums. In recent years however, the scales have tipped towards a conceptualisation of contemporary museums as places where plural values can be represented, and positive social change progressed. The Prado, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Rijksmuseum, for example, have all transformed their programming through enabling broader interpretations, the generative potential of which continues nonetheless to depend on the outstanding strength of their collections.

Social Change: The National Museum of African American History and Culture
To illustrate how museums can be transformative in generating social change, this paper now turns to consider The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Opening in 2016, the Museum was the culmination of a century-long campaign initiated in the early 1900s by Civil War veterans seeking a federally authorised building to honour African American contributions to the United States. Although initially unsuccessful, with federal government and museum allies, black activists resurrected the movement in the 1960s and again in the 1980s, with the result that it was approved by the George W. Bush administration in 2003.

The NMAAHC is not the first ‘national’ museum, nor the first Smithsonian Institution (SI), to be identified with African American history: the Anacostia Community Museum (ACM) has that honour. Since its 1967 opening, in an unusual rebuke to the museum establishment, the ACM has emphasised black experience at home and abroad, with a focus on the stories and immediate needs of African Americans in the Anacostia neighbourhood.

Opened in 2004, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) also deliberately subverts Eurocentric curatorship as represented by explanatory labels and linear narratives in other Smithsonian museums. Designed and programmed in consultation with American Indian communities, its main access faces east, its storage is planned in such a way that collections are accessible to source communities, rituals, ceremony and beliefs are observed, and its collecting policy favours repatriation.

NMAAHC follows in these unconventional ideological footprints. Its ethos is purposely decolonial. By actively enabling donations from African Americans, it elevates, and in so doing contributes to, the cultural memories of these communities. The development of participative partnerships in the creation of tangible museum narratives that speak for, and to, the people whom the museum serves, dignifies the conceptual and physical spaces of their artefacts.

This collaborative approach is a manifestation of Cameron’s model of the museum as both a temple and a forum. In the case of NMAAHC, the museum is authoritative because it is a place for dialogue. A grassroots telling of history results in an inclusive and diverse forum where a sense of pride and rediscovery co-exist with the welcome possibility of contention, and the combination invests the
museum with the power to produce transformative change.

**Conclusion**

What can we learn from ACM, NMAI and NMAAHC that might help us to transform the institutions in which we work? One further concept that might help us to redefine museums is that of ‘open access’. According to Elizabeth Bollwerk and Natalye Tate, this is,

> ... a mixing of institutional expertise with the discussions, experiences, and insights of broad audiences, and on a global platform can increase points of view and establish a more complete representation of knowledge."\(^6\)

According to them, open authority is about the co-production of user-generated content, in which interpretation is iteratively enhanced through the application of multiple perspectives, leading to the creation of co-curated knowledge.\(^7\) Significantly, ‘open authority’ does not diminish that of disciplinary experts, but in this model, museums are in-between spaces that mediate rather than design. Museum practitioners are no longer keepers, but are users of information that is widely and easily available. They use their expertise to facilitate experiences of purposeful exploration, helping to integrate newfound knowledge into the preexisting corpus and so to exponentially increase the amount of information available.

The process of opening authority introduces new challenges for museums and their staff. Becoming ‘open’ requires practitioners to intimately know their collections and to deeply understand their interpretative potential in a polysemic world. In the open authority model, experts consider, invite and engage with competing viewpoints.\(^8\) Opening authority comprises the utilization of specialist knowledge to help communities attain self-directed goals.

As museums increasingly become forums for the plural expression of contemporary values, user-led approaches of this kind have helped to reimagine the functions and identities, and therefore the very definition of museums. The challenge is to ensure that their public programmes are more than simply gestures, more long-term than driven by funding opportunities. To bring about social change and truly tackle injustice, these transformative approaches need to become embedded, to be comprehensively integrated and to be sustained.

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**Notes**


5. Coincidentally in his 1971 essay Cameron cited the ACM as an example of a forum museum.


Across Northern Ireland, the COVID-19 crisis has brought about vast change to our domestic and working lives. The first lockdown period, beginning in March 2020, and each further lockdown period since, dramatically impacted the museum sector, including closures across the region. During this time, the capacity of museums to change has been an important measure of their resilience. In many cases, the adaptation of existing online platforms has enabled new forms of creative audience engagement and triggered the rapid development of completely new approaches to programming. There are examples of museums which have reassessed their collecting and exhibition activities and revised their planned outputs for new forms of learning, audience engagement and community outreach. In many cases, they have expanded their online provision, including through the digitisation and provision of online collections data, and providing virtual learning activities and exhibitions.

Ulster University researchers are leading *Museums, Crisis and Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities*, a new project funded as part of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) £550 million COVID-19 rapid investment programme. This funding scheme is enabling research that will help us understand and mitigate the impact of the pandemic. *Museums, Crisis and Covid-19* is focusing on three areas: Museum Pedagogy and Practice, Digital Innovation and the Museum, and Community Resilience at a time of crisis. This article is the outcome of initial tracking of how museums have responded to the impact of COVID-19, covering the period March 2020–January 2021. The activity of the sector is mapped for that period, but because the full impact of COVID-19 is yet to be revealed, we expect the picture to change again in the longer term.

**New learning and engagement opportunities online**

Between March 2020 and January 2021, when
physical access to museum sites was prohibited, many museums began to engage communities through developing new online learning activities. Video has become a significant tool for museums across Northern Ireland in providing virtual experiences, with potential for both adult and child learning, which will undoubtedly continue to see growth during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

During the pandemic, museums across Northern Ireland rapidly updated online collections information. Ballymoney Museum now offers an online user-friendly ‘Explore the History of the Collection’ resource, through which fourteen objects from the collection have been highlighted, with information on the origin and purpose of each provided. The online collections resource of Green Lane Museum in Limavady lists and provides an album of images on its ‘Core Collections’ alongside its ‘Supporting Collections’. Only a small range of objects from the museum’s holdings is digitally available so far. Nevertheless, this is a valuable resource, especially for those with a special interest in the collections.

A further trend has been to increase the learning materials offered via museum websites. Coleraine Museum, for example, renewed its interactive archaeological resource for children focusing on the prehistoric environment at Mountsandel, covering life during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, and describing how archaeologists find out about the past. Intended for use at home and within schools, this includes activities for small groups and individual pupils, as well as suggestions for offline activities in the classroom. A separate online resource for teachers guides them on how to use the programme to fulfil the requirements of Key Stages 2 and 3 curricula, and to use the activities to provide opportunities for pupils to develop their observation, communication, investigation, and creative thinking skills. This innovative interactive website is both user-friendly for school groups and entertaining for younger audiences. During 2020, Fermanagh County Museum provided downloadable ‘Factsheets’ and ‘Family Worksheets’, linked with online exhibitions. Amongst these are the ‘Medieval banquet worksheet’, the ‘Granny Worksheet’ and the ‘Castle Under Attack Worksheet’. Here, a familiar resource for young visitors is being offered to download at home.

Researchers on the *Museums, Crisis and Covid-19* project will be working with museum colleagues in Northern Ireland to find out more about the uptake and impact of learning resources put online during 2020. We are keen to learn if the resources were combined with informal home learning or if they enhanced what was provided by schools and colleges. If you have gathered such feedback for your museum, we would be delighted to know more about what you have learned.

**Museum YouTube Channels**

With many families spending more time in the home, museums branched out into using YouTube as an effective means of entertaining children. The F.E. McWilliam Gallery developed a series of virtual children’s workshops titled ‘Mini Crafts for Little Hands’. This is a free digital craft series for children aged 4–11 years using basic art materials, broadcast over 25 weeks commencing in July 2020, with a new 5-minute craft video posted online each week. Another notable example is the Northern Ireland War Memorial (NIWM) YouTube channel, established in December 2020. This
offers short (each under 10 minutes) craft tutorials and storytelling sessions aimed at children aged under 5. The museum also offers ‘Second World War Stories for Kids’ educational videos, for Key Stage 1 and 2 learning, available through the museum’s website, YouTube, and on the C2K Newsdesk available to all schools.

The use of YouTube by museums as an engagement, learning and entertainment tool is not restricted to children. The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum has, in partnership with BBC Northern Ireland, established a series of cooking-related ‘Afternoon Club’ videos aimed at adults exploring museum-linked topics such as how to make traditional soda bread. The ‘NationalMuseumsNI’ YouTube channel, for both adult and child learners, hosts educational videos on science and craft. In August 2020, the Siege Museum (Derry/Londonderry) began a YouTube channel titled ‘Ulster History Project’ aimed at adult learners: so far, it has posted a two-part series during periods of museum closure: ‘The Formation of Northern Ireland’ and ‘Securing Northern Ireland’.

Virtual Tours
For the exhibition-starved visitor, virtual visits whet the appetite for when we might be able to return to gallery spaces. These online visits closely resemble the house tour that is becoming familiar on estate agent websites. You can move around the interior of the building and get a general impression of the exhibition layout and contents. Depending on the tour, if you are adept at handling a mouse or trackpad, you may be able to get in closer to read exhibition panel text or click on selected objects to read more.

While most of the Fermanagh County Museum’s online exhibitions follow traditional formats (presenting images alongside text), since March 2020 it has also built in new components, an example being ‘Maguire Story’ which includes a 360° virtual tour of the exhibition. In June 2020, North Down Museum launched its museum website, sharing its costume collection through a virtual walk of the galleries alongside images and information. Visitors to the Mid-Antrim Museum Service online can get a virtual tour of the US Rangers Museum. The Tower Museum in Derry/Londonderry launched its new website, including virtual visits to the galleries, in summer 2020.

The Ulster Museum placed the majority of its 2020–2021 exhibitions online as a substitute to visiting the museum’s galleries. Particularly timely was the Florence Nightingale Nursing and Midwifery virtual exhibition (May 2020), in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Committee of the Florence Nightingale Foundation, which explores 200 years of nursing. Images of the exhibition in the museum galleries were accompanied by a 17-minute tour, available via Smartify, a global platform that enables museums and galleries to share collection images and content. The tour opens with direct reference to ‘these uncertain times’, when nurses ‘are stepping forward … to see us through this global pandemic’, reminding us that now, more than ever, the health community ‘deserve(s) our gratitude and admiration’.

Through the virtual tour, museums in Northern Ireland are providing a tantalising glimpse of the exhibition spaces currently closed. Layering online exhibitions with additional offers, such as a podcast and film, combines sound, stories, and content with the potential for more visitor-connectivity. The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project invites Northern Ireland museums to join us to evaluate the virtual exhibition offer and to explore new forms of digital engagement.

Engaging with the lived experience of COVID-19
Identified as the most significant global event for generations, museums have recognised the importance of capturing lived experiences of the pandemic. Three museums have emerged as frontrunners in initiating new collecting practices since March 2020. The Tower Museum (Derry/Londonderry) has been collating a digital collection, titled ‘A Day in the Life…Your Stories’, in which people of all ages are invited to describe and illustrate their lives during the pandemic. Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum has also run a contemporary collecting project, ‘COVID-19 and Me’, asking individuals to share their stories, thoughts, photos and memories in digital form as part of its ‘Virtual Museum’. A third notable example is Newry and Mourne Museum’s ‘Living in Lockdown’ which collects stories, pictures, diaries, and journals capturing the pandemic experience.

During this time of isolation and social distancing, Fermanagh County Museum engaged with lived experiences by providing its audiences with
solace through photography. Located on the shores of Lough Erne, the museum has built significant following via social media, with its weekly ‘calming waters’ photograph, found at #FermanaghCalmWater. These images are stimulating conversations between the museum and its followers, and are leading to further engagement with other aspects of the museum’s work.

Together, these projects are capturing a composite image of daily life during the pandemic in Northern Ireland. As the COVID–19 crisis continues, it is likely that we will see more museums using community-based projects to document and collect personal experiences of this historical period.

Conclusion
During the period of March 2020–January 2021, museums have endured unprecedented challenges to their purpose, role and function. The examples of new practice documented here demonstrate their resilience and capacity to adapt. Museums have revisited their values for community provision, embraced new forms of collaborative practice and reached wider audiences. Across Northern Ireland, the sector has rapidly responded to the crisis by initiating new forms of online engagement. Following on from the initial adaptations in the first year of the pandemic, there is scope for us to come together to evaluate, to build on what we now know, and to innovate. Museums, Crisis and Covid–19 looks forward to collaborating with and supporting the museum sector as it does so.

Examples of museum practice cited in this paper
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• Siege Museum, 2020. Ulster History Project. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5nZlhJ4D2JANfU2-TmiZYw.

Stephanie Harper has recently completed her Doctoral Research at Ulster University considering East Asian collections in Irish Museums. In early 2021, she was employed as Research Assistant on the Museums, Crisis and Covid–19 project.

Led by Professor Elizabeth Crooke, Museums, Crisis and Covid–19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of UKRI’s COVID–19 funding [AH/V012819/1]. For more information see: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19 and follow us on twitter @ UlsterResMuseum
Since the mid-1990s, cross-border museum projects on the island of Ireland have been driven by European Union (EU) intervention and support. The rationale, methods and working practices of these projects, which have focused on exploring histories, identities and cultural expressions on both sides of the border, have shaped creativity and impacted audiences, stimulating new thinking about the purposes, activities and intrinsic value of museums.

This paper documents a Collaborative Doctoral Award based at Ulster University, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council within the Northern Bridge Consortium. Working with the Irish Museums Association, the project started in October 2020 and will run until March 2024. It will provide insights into how EU cultural and peacebuilding strategies have impacted museum practice. It will garner new appreciation of how EU projects have shaped workforce skills, project development and audience engagement in the museum sector. It will also look to the future, at how the best of such projects can be nurtured and fostered, ensuring that cross-border cooperation can continue to grow and develop.

EU funding and the PEACE Programme 1995–2020

As the Troubles were beginning in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, both Ireland and Britain were negotiating to join the EU. Their achievement of membership of the European Economic Community in 1973 not only affected the constitutional and legal positions of both states, but also ensured their participation in EU institutions, altering their relationships with each other. This new dynamic encouraged local representatives to work together on the European stage, outside their habitual domestic platforms, allowing new alignments and partnerships to develop. The collaborative work of the Members of the European Parliament focused attention on Northern Ireland in a way that had never happened before, and was to the ultimate advantage of everyone on the island.

As a result of the IRA’s declaration of a permanent ceasefire in the summer of 1994, and with the strong support of President of the Commission Jacques Delors, the EU affirmed its ‘support for the ongoing peace process’, indicating that it was willing to provide additional funding. In December that year, at a European Council meeting in Germany, ‘the EU voted to prepare and fund a special programme to facilitate peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland’. This programme, now known as PEACE I–IV and not replicated in any other country of the Community, was a unique cross-border initiative with the avowed aim of embedding the peace process after the paramilitary ceasefires were confirmed. Since 1995 under the four iterations of EU PEACE funding, combined with European Regional Development Funds, INTERREG and match-funding from the
two governments, a total of €1.57 billion has been allocated to the border region. A proportion of this substantial sum has been allocated to cross-border museum programmes.

This Doctoral research project is investigating funded activity where border museums were the lead bodies or were beneficiaries, considering capital and programme funding, community engagement, programming activity and evidence of resulting creativity and further investment in the cross-border area. The level of funding demonstrates that the EU is a significant driver of cross-border museum projects between Northern Ireland and Ireland. However, the processes, character and rationale of these projects have not been fully investigated. Often associated with peacebuilding, these project and infrastructure monies have been vital to new cultural explorations and the sustenance of the peace process. In addition, whilst we are unsure as a sector of the final impact of the Brexit process on movement of people, collections, loan agreements, touring exhibitions, insurance and workforce diversity, we must take this opportunity to record and analyse the stimulus given to museum working practices by a quarter of a century of EU funding.

**Sectoral reports from the Irish Museums Association and Ulster University**

In 2018, the urgency of this research was flagged by the Irish Museums Association–Ulster University report Brexit and the Museum Sector in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This report, based on open meetings of museum staff and guided by their input, made a number of important suggestions. It concluded that the sector must gather and evaluate data on cross-border funding, planning and practice, and on workforce, training and partnerships in order to understand more deeply the processes that have shaped museum practice, and should map pathways for the future.

**Bridges Over Brexit**, produced by the Irish Museums Association in 2019, examined eight cross-border projects and highlighted the ‘enormous potential to bring our communities together and discover commonalities, strengthening our society in the process’. However, the study also revealed a dearth of understanding of the character, content, working practices and legacy of cross-border museum-based projects. It is imperative that this information is captured and considered, so that the sector can continue to innovate and flourish regardless of the outcomes of Brexit. This project will therefore address a significant gap in our knowledge and understanding as we move into a changed political and policy environment.

**Exiting the EU: Brexit impacts in early 2021**

After much delay, the UK–EU trade agreement was finally agreed on Christmas Eve 2020, and the trade implications of exiting the European Union are currently playing out on the international stage. Major transport problems and significant food supply issues are currently impacting not just the business sector and hauliers, but also individuals in both Northern Ireland and the UK. The EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement now affects freedom of movement, fisheries, judicial cooperation, state aid, energy and data protection, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, will undoubtedly affect the funding of EU programmes.
It is clear that, after almost half a century of membership, the impact of the UK leaving the European Union will continue to have an effect for some time to come, and in many areas of our lives. It is therefore vital that the museum sector considers the future of cross-border working in terms of peacebuilding, community cohesion, institutional partnerships, cultural relationships, workforce training and diversity. This study will ensure that the powerful body of work completed since the introduction of the PEACE funds in the mid-1990s is not forgotten.

Project aims
Recent work has examined the role of the EU in Northern Ireland since 1981, with particular emphasis on the evolution of the peace process, but the impact of cross-border museum working has not been considered. The primary aim of the project is therefore to get a deeper understanding of the past, present and future relationships between the EU and the museum sector in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The study will place the history of museums in context and provide a comprehensive background to the development of collections, buildings and people. It will also, for the first time, examine and reflect on the impact of cultural programmes in the border area, providing new insights into the strategies, processes, rationale, character and working practices used to develop and deliver innovative and collaborative cross-community programming.

A further project aim is to significantly advance our understanding of the social and political dimensions of cultural policy and practice in a cross-border context. Working with museum staff, the study will consider the character, value and impact of EU funded museum projects, to ascertain their impact on community cohesion in the border region. This will include evaluation of how the workforce was equipped to undertake the delivery of these challenging programmes. Discussions with audiences who participated in museum projects may take place, allowing us to examine the lasting outcomes of these collaborative programmes. The intention is that the study will make recommendations on how museums can continue to deepen and sustain
cross-border creativity as we move into the new PEACE PLUS programme period (European Territorial Co-operation 2021–2027), currently under development.

**Project approach: methods and rationale**
Using a combination of policy analysis, data collection and case studies, the research will evaluate EU policy, examining the connections between the desired social and cultural outcomes and resultant museum practice in Northern Ireland and Ireland. By examining cultural heritage policy including collections care, management and movement of cultural goods; diversity and heritage integration procedures and cultural policy relevant to the peace process, the research will prioritise the areas which had the greatest impact on museum practice.

Through desk-based research, and in close collaboration with the museum sector, this project will gather qualitative and quantitative data relating to EU funded projects to museums and the voluntary and community sectors with whom they collaborate, including capital projects and project funding. Where possible, this data will include project documentation, such as funding applications, reports, and evaluation. It will document and assess the value of EU and linked funding; rationale and desired outcomes; working methods and priorities; partners and collaborations; and types of activity, such as audiences, collections, and exhibitions. Beginning with the period of SEUPB-funded PEACE IV (2014–2020) and PEACE III (2007–2013), the project will then review its methods and may collect data on earlier PEACE funding and other EU projects such as INTERREG.

A thematic case study analysis will be undertaken considering museums, culture and identity formation; cultural programming and peacebuilding and political and social dimensions of cultural policy. The detailed investigation of selected case studies will include material on project intent, rationale, methods, activities and evaluation. Interviews and workshops will be undertaken with museum and project staff. In partnership with the museums, workshops will, if possible, be held with collaborators and community groups who participated in the projects. This project will reach policy makers, through interviews, data collection and dissemination.

**The voice of the sector**
How often has the comment ‘Oh, I didn’t know that museums did that sort of thing’ been heard in reply to discussions about health and wellbeing interventions, public engagement projects, working with young people and dynamic digital programming? This new research project will deepen understanding of museum’s contributions in those areas. To this end, contributions are sought from those working on EU-funded projects in the museum sector on the island in relation to cross-border programming, case studies, workforce development and innovative approaches to developing links and cross-community ties. This is your chance to draw attention to all the
EU–funded work your museum has carried out over the last 25 years and ensure that these efforts are recorded and recognized. As we deal with the outworking of Brexit, the segregation of the COVID–19 pandemic means that in–person meetings are currently impossible. It is hoped that future workshops can be organised to enable the collection of data, to reflect on policy and to disseminate the work of the project.

All information in relation to your projects is welcome – please contact Catherine at McCullough–C36@ulster.ac.uk.

Catherine McCullough is a Doctoral Researcher on the Ulster University–Irish Museums Association Collaborative Doctoral project ‘The EU and the museum: an investigation of cross–border museum projects in Ireland’ funded by the AHRC through the Northern Bridge Consortium. Supervisors are Gina O’Kelly, Irish Museums Association; Professor Elizabeth Crooke, Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies and Dr Philip McDermott, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Ulster University.

Notes


5. Elizabeth Crooke and Gina O’Kelly, Brexit and the Museum Sector in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Dublin and Derry: Irish Museums Association and Ulster University, 2018).


This article follows on from a talk I did at the Irish Museums Association conference in late February 2020. A short flight through a storm took me from the UK to Ireland (I didn’t have time to take the ferry). An even more stormy train ride took me from Dublin to Athlone. The wind blew dark clouds across the sky. In Athlone, the river was very swollen by recent storms, and looked rather dangerously high. All of these things make me think of climate change, a topic I work with a lot. At that time, none of us really appreciated the way that COVID-19 was beginning to spread far and wide, and the extent to which life was about to change.

What a difference a year makes! The idea that I could hop on a plane to attend a conference, and hop back soon afterwards, seems very alien now. Meeting people face to face – some familiar faces and many new ones – in new, and very interesting, settings has been replaced by Zoom meetings and more screen time than I really care for. Change has been forced upon us, although that change has been more or less painful depending on people’s and museums’ circumstances.

These are some of the concerns of sustainability and sustainable development. Although there are no universally agreed definitions, sustainability is usually considered through some form of the statement from the 1987 Brundtland report, as ‘development [activity] that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ That concept has developed over time, so that sustainability is taken as a state in which society, the economy and the environment develop in harmony with one another. It is not about ‘doing less damage’, although people often think of it that way. Sustainability is the ability to last, to persist, to develop, to continue; topics that are now very much in the forefront of many museums’ plans and futures. Sustainability is not necessarily about staying the same, but about growing and changing in positive ways to keep pace in a rapidly changing world. Sustainable development is focused activity that helps us to achieve that rosy future that we want to secure. Sustainable development is focused activity that helps attain the state of sustainability.

The main programme to support sustainable development is called Agenda 2030 and was agreed by the world’s governments in 2015. The Agenda is achieved through 17 Sustainable Development Goals backed up by 169 targets (which are actually the more practical aspect of the whole Agenda). At the conference, I talked about the roles of museums in sustainable development, and how thinking about sustainability can help them to have a strong purpose in society. Not only that, thinking with the future in mind helps museums to have a future themselves. These are ideas I set out in a guide, *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals*, that you can get for free (see link in Notes).
In Athlone, I gave the example of how museums have been contributing to addressing climate change, to show that the sustainability challenges facing society need a different approach, where museums strengthen their connections with social, economic and environmental challenges. Attending to real-world issues is also, arguably, one of the best ways for museums to demonstrate their relevance and contribution, which can help museums have a future themselves. I proposed that the Sustainable Development Goals (or SDGs for short) are a powerful blueprint for museums and those who work in them to focus their attention on creating a sustainable future.

Museums have a lot to offer to the Sustainable Development Goals, and the goals can help museums to:
- Provide relevant activities for people in terms of exhibitions, events, dialogues.
- Help them put their unique resources to good use.
- Play a significant and distinctive part in an ambitious local–global agenda.
- Help them build partnerships and collaborations.
- Help them create and demonstrate positive social and environmental impact.
- Use Agenda 2030 as a shared vision, and the SDGs as a framework and shared language to foster collaboration and partnership.

Museums are strongly linked with many of these targets, and in the guide, *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals*, I set out seven key activities that can help achieve a third of all of the SDG targets:

1. Protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, both in museums and more generally.
2. Support and provide learning opportunities in support of the SDGs.
3. Enable cultural participation for all.
4. Support sustainable tourism.
5. Enable research in support of the SDGs.
6. Direct internal leadership, management, and operations towards the SDGs.
7. Direct external leadership, collaboration, and partnerships towards the SDGs.

These headings can also be used to ensure that museums keep hold of important functions, as they have to make difficult funding decisions in the months and years ahead.

**Sustainable development and the COVID–19 pandemic**

One year on from Athlone, I would like to add a few words on the COVID–19 pandemic and sustainable development. The pandemic, which one could reasonably imagine to be a health crisis, quickly revealed that social problems cause economic problems, and the pandemic was itself linked to environmental problems caused by degrading nature and mixing species together in close proximity in markets. This is exactly the point that a sustainability mind-set considers: society, economy and environment are interconnected and interlinked; it is not acceptable to just grow the economy at the expense of the environment, as that creates new problems.

Sustainability and sustainable development are, in many ways, the opposite of disasters and disaster risk. Disasters and disaster risk can be seen as failures of sustainable development. If we can think that sustainable development is supported when communities have lots of skills, resources (financial and otherwise) and opportunities, and they face few threats, few groups are close to those threats, and there is little inequality. Disaster risk is the opposite: where there are lots of hazards, that people are close to, that there is lots of inequality, and where people have few skills and resources to meet the challenge presented by hazards. All of those elements are what turn...
hazards (potential threats) into full-blown disasters. COVID-19 is, of course, a hazard – not a disaster by itself, but having the potential to cause one.

What has COVID–19 revealed about the world of museums?

• COVID–19 has highlighted the great inequality that exists between museums, with underfunded museums caught in a ‘poverty trap’ where they don’t have the resources – staff or staff time – to access funding that was offered to support them.

• Museums, thought of as long-term institutions, turned out to have few resources for a rainy day. That is no basis for a sector that is charged with preserving society’s cultural and natural heritage for present and future generations.

• COVID–19 has highlighted the weakness among museums in terms of their digital offer. Museums have largely focused on a model of a site-based offer, that people experience directly in person. We can contrast that with how libraries, perhaps most notably university libraries, have been providing access to resources digitally.

• COVID–19 highlights how reliant many museums have become on mass travel linked to mass consumerism. This sounds dangerously like ‘unsustainable tourism’: an over-reliance on tourism that creates a lot of risk.

• One of the main points to consider in terms of COVID–19 and sustainability perspectives, is that COVID–19 really highlights the unsustainable situation that existed in museums before the pandemic.

A set of proposed priorities for recovery could be reworded so that:

1. The COVID–19 recovery must address the inequality between communities to ensure all of society has fair access to its cultural and natural heritage that is contained within museums.

2. Funding should protect the long-term future and purpose of museums and collections.

3. An expanded digital offer will help more people to access museums in some way but should also not be seen as a ‘silver bullet’ that diverts much-needed funding away from physical collections or venues: it should complement them.

4. Dependency on revenue streams from tourism needs to be addressed, to reduce economic disaster risk facing museums.

5. The recovery period should resist the temptation to try to return to ‘life as before’, as it was riddled with problems as set out above, but it should be seen as an opportunity to get the sector on a firmer footing.

6. And a last one to add, that museums and collections are resources that support society’s development processes – they can help support people and communities through challenging times, bring people together, provide creative opportunities to shape a better future together, and to come through disasters more resilient and better prepared for the future. Museums and collections are one of society’s greatest assets during and after difficult challenges. Use them.

Disaster Risk Reduction

Sustainable development perspectives enable us to focus on what can be done differently to ensure society and museums are resilient to hazards of all kinds. While I spoke in Athlone about the SDGs, there is another excellent framework.

Henry’s third guide, Museums and Disaster Risk Reduction
that museums can use to help build their own resilience and that of local communities. This is called Disaster Risk Reduction, which is an active approach that helps to reduce the likelihood of disasters happening in the first place; it is an important component of sustainable development.

I wrote about this in another guide, published in 2020, that takes a widely used model for building resilience and applies it to museums. This should be helpful to all museums to strengthen and build relationships, and contribute to society’s development before, during and after disasters.

As society comes to grips with the consequences of the pandemic, we have an opportunity to unlearn and abandon some of those practices that put museums at such risk. Let us not forget that people have basic rights to participate in cultural life, to take part in public affairs, and to have opportunities to understand their own culture, that of other people, and to contribute to the cultural life of their community.

These are really very basic functions that a society should provide. These are rights that go right back to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which sprang from the ruins of the Second World War. As we rebuild from our own challenged circumstances, let us get back to brass tacks, and remember that museums perform basic functions in society. As society ‘builds back better’, let us make sure that museums are part of that reconstruction, ensuring that no person, no community, no town, nor any museum, is ‘left behind’.

Notes
2. For background information on the SDGs, Agenda 2030, and resources to support them, see https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/

Henry McGhie runs the museum consultancy Curating Tomorrow, founded in 2019 to help museums, the heritage sector, and their partners contribute to sustainable development agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals, climate action and nature conservation. He has a background as an ecologist, museum curator and senior manager.
Local authorities across Ireland provide resilient, creative and imaginative museum services that underpin local identities, inspire local pride of place, create social cohesion, and support sustainable economic activity. These museums play a significant role as engines of tourism, attracting over half a million direct visitors each year, including from overseas.

The Local Authority Museums Network (LAMN) represents the 12 Local Authority Museums: Carlow County Museum, Cavan County Museum, Clare Museum, Cork Public Museum, the County Museum, Dundalk, Donegal County Museum, Galway City Museum, Kerry County Museum, Limerick Museum, Monaghan County Museum, Tipperary Museum of Hidden History and the Waterford Museum of Treasures.

Local Authority Museums contribute to ensuring the best possible quality of life in their areas. They do so by preserving and promoting rich historical and archaeological collections; and by providing events, exhibitions, and education and outreach activities with far-reaching and catalytic impacts. Firmly rooted in local communities, the museums work in partnership with other services within their local authorities, and with other organisations in their respective regions, government departments, schools and voluntary groups.

With the aim of providing the widest possible access and strengthening local communities, Local Authority Museums are continually developing their engagement practices. As a group of like-minded professionals, one of the Network’s unique strengths is the ability for its members to work as collaborative pioneers. At the 2019 Irish Museums Conference, Cavan, Galway, Tipperary, and Monaghan County Museums presented on transformations brought about through major capital projects. Through the prism of their own experiences, they reflected on what these changes have meant for their services, for their visitors and for themselves. These developments, they concluded, have both changed the physical structures and accessibility of their museum services, and have altered ideological understandings of what local authority museums can be.

Monaghan County Museum
Monaghan County Museum opened to the public in September 1974, becoming the first local authority museum in the state with full-time professional staff. This was a time of great sorrow and hardship for the people of Monaghan: just four months previously, in May, a bomb had gone off just yards from the courthouse in Monaghan Town, killing seven people. The Troubles were ravaging communities all over Northern Ireland and the border counties, and this was the world to which the Museum first opened its doors. It quickly grew to become a focal point for the community, reaching out to all sectors to develop links and
build a collection that reflected the history and heritage of the area.

In 1980, this commitment to community was recognised at an international level through receipt of the Council of Europe Prize. However, celebration swiftly turned to tragedy when in 1981, the courthouse was burnt to the ground, although thankfully, without loss of life. Thanks to the valiant work of the Monaghan Fire Brigade, much of the museum collection was saved, and the museum community from across Ireland then came to Monaghan’s aid to support and help with the mammoth restoration process that the small number of museum staff now faced. In 1990, the Museum eventually reopened in Monaghan Town.

In 2020, Monaghan County Museum began another move, to a new purpose-built Peace Campus in the town centre, made possible by a Peace IV Shared Spaces Programme grant of over €8m from the Special EU Programmes Body. Alongside the Museum, the Monaghan Library, a youth café, and several community-focused shared spaces will be housed there, and there will be a large public realm space around the building to facilitate open-air events.

Opening in 2023, the new Monaghan County Museum will utilise its nationally renowned collections to explore the shared history and heritage of the border region. To help build a more cohesive society, the Museum is working in partnership with Northern Ireland-based bodies (including for example, the Ulster Scots Agency) to tell the story of the entire community. Keeping the collection at the centre of the service, the Museum will deliver a wide-ranging programme of displays and events, aimed at catalysing conversation and debate. Within a new building and service, the Museum remains true to its mission: through collections, to promote the historical richness and cultural diversity of the region; and to bring that diversity and richness to as wide an audience as possible.

Galway City Museum
Established in 1971, Galway City Museum was originally located, adjacent to the iconic Spanish Arch, in Comerford House. From 1947–52, this had been the home of the artist and sculptor, Clare Sheridan, whose medieval stones, acquired from the city, formed the founding collection. In April 2007, the museum reopened on Spanish Parade, in a new building commissioned by Galway City Council and designed by the Office of Public

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Architect’s visualisation of the new Peace Campus, Monaghan Town.
Credit: Monaghan County Council
Works. Comprising three floors of exhibitions on the archaeology, history, heritage, culture, and sea science of Galway, the Museum is one of the city’s most popular cultural hotspots, attracting over 250,000 visitors in 2019.

In 2021, through a budget of €10 million secured from Fáilte Ireland and Galway City Council, the Museum is being transformed into the Atlantic Museum, Galway. With an enhanced public realm, the Museum footprint will be substantially extended to encompass the fully refurbished Comerford House, the Wall Walk across the Spanish Arch, a courtyard area, and a new, three-storey, state-of-the-art building on the adjacent medieval ‘Sea Gate’ site. Designed as an exciting, uniquely memorable, and more coherent visitor attraction, the museum will provide a significantly expanded and improved offer for visitors.

The Museum’s Atlantic theme describes a people, a living culture, a history, and a way of life that is as distinct and dramatic as Ireland’s western edge where the museum is situated. It envisions complete visitor immersion, creating a dynamic, inspiring, and interactive experience where everyone has an opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the people, culture, history, and creativity of Galway, and of life on Ireland’s Atlantic Coast. In concert with its Atlantic theme, among the biggest challenges that the newly expanded museum will face is that of climate change. Situated on the confluence of the River Corrib and Galway Bay, the museum site is on the ‘front row’ of an area of the city affected by extreme weather events, including Atlantic storms, floods, and sea surges, that can only be partially mitigated through flood intervention strategies. The Museum’s forthcoming Climate Change exhibition, to be situated in Atlantic Futures galleries on the top floor, will help the people of Galway to understand the adjustments that everyone, including the Museum, needs to make to reduce carbon emissions.

Cavan County Museum

Cavan County Museum is in a magnificent nineteenth century building, beautifully situated in extensive grounds amid the lakes and drumlins of East Cavan. Its unique exhibits include the 1,000-year-old Lough Errill dug-out boat; Killycluggin Stone; three-faced pre-Christian Corleck Head, and medieval Sheela-na-Gigs. Documenting, conserving, displaying, and interpreting its extensive collections are at the
heart of the Museum’s programmes and are central to the public benefits that it provides. The galleries trace the stories of the Gaelic Athletic Association and camogie in Cavan, and – alongside Cavan folklife – explore women of influence and the Barons Farnham and examine experiences within the county of the great famine, emigration, First World War, and War of Independence.

Since 2004, Cavan County Museum has delivered the cross-border, cross-community project, ‘Connecting People, Places and Heritage’. Through exhibitions, workshops, publications, and educational programmes, the project aims to promote greater understanding and awareness of the cultural heritage of the border region: to provide opportunities to address potentially divisive themes within a safe environment, to increase appreciation for the identities of diverse communities, and to contribute to conflict resolution within the wider community. Its direct physical legacies can be viewed, in the Museum’s award-winning Peace Garden, in the form of commemorative exhibitions on First World War trench experience, the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme, Road to War – Path to Reflection and the War of Independence. In addition, ‘Connecting People, Places and Heritage’ provided a foundation of expertise and demonstrable impact that enabled the Museum to secure €317,000 in capital funding from the Peace IV Programme. The result is a large new exhibition space with facilities to host peace-related events and exhibitions, and to welcome schools and cross community groups. Now complete, this permanent shared space allows the Museum to commit on a more long-term basis to its goal of promoting peace and reconciliation.
Tipperary Museum of Hidden History
Tipperary South Riding Museum’s art collection was first founded in the 1940s by the South Tipperary Fine Art Club, and in the ensuing five decades, moved between a variety of buildings. Closed for a long period before reopening in the 1980s, between 1983 and 1999 it collected over twenty thousand artefacts of national and local significance. During this time, the Museum’s successful integration into the local community led to a shift in understanding of its essential contribution to the preservation of the community’s heritage and the commemoration of its history. As a result, in 2000, the first purpose-built local authority museum opened, in the heart of Clonmel’s civic centre. Funded by South Tipperary County Council and the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, this new space enabled the development of unique collaborations with marginalised groups, schools, arts and heritage festivals and the wider community.

In 2014, as a result of a council merger, Tipperary County Council was established, creating unprecedented opportunities for South Tipperary County Museum, the collection of which had previously represented only the southern region of the county. In 2018, Tipperary County Council in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland secured a capital grant of €500,000 to embark on a visionary plan to develop an attraction of significant scale that would attract visitors and increase revenue in the town of Clonmel.

The development of the new Tipperary Museum of Hidden History, which opened in 2019, involved a complete re-imagining of its spaces around the theme of ‘Our Identity’, and an expansion upon those of Life, Death, Power, Sport, Entertainment, and the River Suir. Artefacts from the Museum’s extensive collections are now juxtaposed with loans from the National Museum of Ireland, prompting a re-evaluation of their meanings; and visitors are encouraged to handle objects, thereby stimulating sensory perceptions beyond those, customary to museums, of sight and sound. The layout of the existing gallery has been transformed into a series of discrete spaces, encouraging longer dwell-time, and allowing for more interactive exhibits. It is hoped that with further investment,
the museum’s collection will extend into other sites across Clonmel, including the Westgate, Dowd’s Lane, and VAT House Buildings (Bulmer’s Site), along with the provision of interpretation along the River Suir.

Tipperary Museum of Hidden History’s partnership with Tipperary Tourism and Fáilte Ireland, and its participation in the Ireland’s Ancient East brand, have been significant game changers. The Museum has however retained its core function and ethos to collect, record and display the history of Tipperary. The unique stories that the Museum tells, and its dedication to education, lifelong learning, and inspiring appreciation of cultural diversity, through a programme of exhibitions, workshops, community projects and festivals, and by encouraging new and loyal visitors to the region, are its primary focus. Expansive online and in-house programming has widened the Museum’s reach into, and engagement with, new audiences.

In Summary
Through the above examples of Monaghan, Galway, Cavan, and Tipperary Museums, it is possible to see how capital projects can transform museum services. This transformation can be both physical and ideological, and such developments also change our understanding of what a local authority museum service is and what it could be. As these examples also show, at the core of every museum lie its collections; and each Local Authority Museum utilises them to enhance the lives of the communities it serves.

Liam Bradley is Curator of Monaghan County Museum and Chair of the Local Authority Museums Network; and is leading the development of the Museum on the new site at the Peace Campus in Monaghan Town.

Eithne Verling is Director of Galway City Museum and is leading on a major museum expansion project for the redevelopment and extension of the museum site.

Savina Donohoe is Curator of Cavan County Museum, leads the Connecting Peoples, Places and Heritage programme and recently led the completion of a new Shared Space at the Museum.

Marie McMahon is Curator of Tipperary Museum and led the recent re-development and re-imagining of the Museum’s collection gallery; and is Board Member of the Irish Museums Association and Secretary to the Irish Museums Designation Committee.
**Introduction**

The National Museum of Ireland – Natural History is known to many visitors as ‘The Dead Zoo’, which is just one indicator of the affection and interest in this historic museum for generations of locals. As detailed in a previous article in this journal, it was due to see major refurbishment in 2007. At that time, there was a strong economy to support this state-funded museum, but as with the financial situation worldwide, that was to change before the building project could start in earnest. The project was reactivated in recent years by the National Museum of Ireland (NMI); with initial success in recognising that state funding should be made available. Under the National Development Plan for the period 2018–2027, the NMI was noted with an overall allocation earmarked under Project Ireland 2040. The Project 2040 allocation will also be supplemented by an
additional allocation through the Office of Public Works, which will address the design and build of a new roof for this historic building – one of the many critical areas to address.

**Project planning**
The management of public finances has changed since 2007 and projects of this scale must go through a rigorous Public Spending Code process. While the core aims of the project have not changed significantly, because a decade had passed since the first plans were put in place, it was necessary to submit a very detailed appraisal of the project to secure funding approval. A Preliminary Appraisal was approved by the Minister in late 2019, following a year of preparation and a 21,000-word report submitted by the NMI.

The next stage in the Public Spending Code process is to have a Business Case prepared that must examine the project in detail and in particular the costs and how any funding may be used to get the desired results. This is not just in relation to the physical fabric of the building but must also ensure that general goals are met in terms of delivering for the public, who ultimately are the funders of the project.

The primary objectives of this project are all centred on securing a significant historic building which is still in its original use as a museum yet making it fit for the twenty-first century as a continuing major visitor attraction. The eight objectives fall under three critical goals. These combine restoration of a much-loved building in a sensitive way, with important interventions and improvements to allow it to continue to function effectively as a contemporary museum, placing the visitor at the heart of the experience. The project has three primary goals:

**Goal 1: Public Engagement and Visitor Experience**
- A revamped and compelling Natural History Museum experience, that leads as Ireland’s only National Cultural Institution with a remit covering science, culture and our natural heritage.
- Presenting our visitors with a 21st century visitor experience based on a contemporary and engaging interpretation of our collections, a dynamic education and learning programme, and excellent visitor facilities.
- Increase the diversity of our visitors ensuring the Natural History Museum continues to grow and engage with diverse audiences across socioeconomic and regional backgrounds.

**Goal 2: Collections Care and Stewardship**
- Providing an environmentally sound, sustainable, and safe building for the display and interpretation of the Natural History collections of the National Museum of Ireland.
- Interpreting the collections in a manner sympathetic with the history of the building, while giving a 21st century understanding of science, nature and biodiversity both locally and globally.

**Goal 3: Building Refurbishment and Renovation**
- Securing the building fabric, with replacement of much of the roof structure in a style sympathetic to the original.
- Achieving universal access to all floors of the public spaces.
- Sensitive restoration of the interior, with improvements in visitor services and exhibitions.

**Challenges to be addressed**
As explored in 2007, the overall task of NMI is to conserve the ‘museum of a museum’ while improving the building in terms of collections care. Compare the two images below to see how little the interior has changed in a century. The essence of the interpretive plan can be articulated as:
- It has a high density of objects on display, a major strength that should be retained.
- The furnishings are part of the interior and must remain.
- The taxonomic layout is a key element of a Victorian approach.
- There is a sense of discovery as visitors find their way about.

Detailed discussions will take place during the next phase of planning, and these elements will be debated at length. Engagement needs to be broadened, beyond the staff involved to date, to include a range of perspectives across stakeholders, audiences, and relevant
communities. There are key challenges in any interpretive plan for the restored museum, however:
- Because of the display case and exhibit density, there is limited space for standard graphics.
- This also means there is limited space for diverse languages to reach our increasingly diverse audiences.
- There is so much we could say about the subject matter (general nature themes such as biodiversity, the stories behind individual exhibits, the stories behind each species).
- There is so much that our visitors want to ask, that we will have to work out what is realistic to deliver in the gallery.

Interpretation and technology
With 10,000 exhibits in the current arrangement, even if there is some thinning of object numbers in future, space for basic labels will still be a challenge. Interpretive panels can only do so much, and staff are watching with interest as various digital and online products develop that could play a role in deepening the engagement on visitors’ own mobile devices. There is of course the eternal concern that older technologies have all gone out of date faster than museums can introduce them. The rise in smartphones indicates to us that there may be some hope in standard products that are widely used being populated with museum information. In the meantime, we will be focused on production of content and researching
of stories, so that we have the information and imagery ready for whatever solutions emerge. We are painfully aware that by the time we get there, ‘there’ could be somewhere else! The nature of the museum is partly a ‘stately home’ if not a ‘stately home of death’ as it has been termed in-house at times. There is much to learn from historic house experiences and discussions with Irish Museums Association colleagues has helped to identify the following:

- New technology is as boring as old technology if the content is no good.
- Menus of stories are required, providing variety and freshness.
- Stories turn historic houses to historic homes.
- Personal stories work – the animal’s life, the hunter’s view, the taxidermist’s skill.
- Science stories work – what is this animal, or special about it? How is this species doing now?

**Project development**

This is a much-loved public museum, and our visitors are watching closely what we do. The most common fear expressed in reaction to news reports of funding has been ‘I hope they don’t change anything’, which is sometimes quite forcefully expressed! While the 1856 structure needs full conservation, the NMI staff are well aware that this is a listed building, and that level of preservation applies to the use and interior fittings as much as it does to the envelope of the building itself. The reality is that in its present state, the building is not in good repair, is not accessible, and is not providing the environment required for the important collections housed within.

Staff have done a significant amount of historic research over the years and are continuing to dig through reports and in the archives of the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) to understand the stages of development from the original design discussions around the Museum of the RDS, to the 1856 structure, to 1860s adaptations, and subsequent history. From 1877 this history continued when the Museum became part of the newly formed Museum of Science and Art, Dublin which was run and funded by the state. This research is an ongoing activity, which is key to appreciating this historic property, as for some reason, no original 1850–1860s drawings have been located in the Office of Public Works archives or in others. RDS archives hold the manuscript minute books of the Natural History Committee (NHC) of the RDS. These are preserved for the years 1831–1877 and include many details of activities not covered in published sources. The NHC oversaw expenditure and met monthly. Its minute books document major developments and payments that allow tracking of purchases of display cases, glass for cases, and ironmongery. The main building construction is not detailed, but it is recorded that several drafts of plans were presented by the Board of Works (as predecessor of the OPW) and the minute books record later alterations and connections to neighbouring buildings.

The minute books in the RDS also record major acquisitions and allowed the story behind the twenty-metre-long fin whale skeleton to be uncovered.

Work commenced in 2020 to clear access for work on the roof of the museum. Despite limitations caused by the COVID–19 pandemic restrictions, two whale skeletons were dismantled and removed. A work platform is to be installed in 2021 to close off the construction works on the roof from the museum galleries below. This is driving the project to decant all exhibits from the balcony levels, which have been closed since 2007 due to access limitations. Virtual access allows visitors to experience the interior while works are ongoing.

Coming years will see conservation of the roof, to be followed by other major works to install lift access to upper floors and restore the museum. These aim to address all goals listed above and should future proof this significant Irish museum for many generations to come.

*Nigel T. Monaghan is Keeper of the Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, Merrion Street, Dublin.*
Notes


What lessons can we learn from a 200-year-old skeleton in a closet? What can a broken wax model tell us about medical teaching? How did medical education practice evolve from body-snatching to body donation? These are some of the questions we are called upon to address, as we embark on a project to establish a medical heritage centre around a collection that spans 300 years of medical education in Ireland, and includes human remains, anatomical models, medical illustrations, and striking portraits of patients and physicians. We are challenged with striking a balance between the sensitive nature of human remains and the scientific, historical, and personal lessons we can learn from them.

To address these challenges, we must devise ways to interact with the memories of the individuals represented as remains, collectors, or creators in our collections. Doing so depends on asking the right questions and piecing together the resulting narratives. Some of these narratives are not convenient or easy to discuss, entwined as they are with attitudes and practices of a classist and colonialist past. Others complicate our understanding of human diversity, ability, and consent, and invite us to bridge the gap between specimen and visitor. However, it is our duty as custodians of medical history to give voice to the dead and tell their stories unflinchingly and honestly.

**History of the Collection**

Medical students today enjoy an array of remote means of learning human anatomy: they can rotate skeletons, peel back skin and muscle, and reveal structures that were only knowable to their predecessors after hours of labour over cadavers, all with a click of the mouse. They have access to digital databases that contain the culmination of centuries of collected anatomical knowledge.

Before such means were available, medical educators complemented their lectures and dissection demonstrations with anatomical atlases, drawings, and specimens. Anatomists carefully dissected and prepared each specimen to highlight a specific structure of the body in typical presentation. These masterfully created and displayed organic specimens were essential to medical teaching, and their collections reflected the standing of a medical school. The practice of collecting medical specimens spread along with the study of western medicine from Europe to Asia and the Americas. Many medical schools today still use osteological and visceral specimens to assist their students with each lesson.

The artefacts of the Old Anatomy Museum at Trinity College Dublin are the amalgam of three such collections that were used throughout the history of the School of Medicine to aid medical education, dating back to its founding in 1700. As the reputation of the school rose in the nineteenth century, so did the number of student admissions,
leading to the erection of new buildings for the Medical School in 1825, including a lecture theatre, a dissection hall, labs and classrooms, and a museum gallery and mezzanine built exclusively to house the growing medical education collection. A string of influential anatomy professors drove its curation and development efforts, and the new buildings were completed in 1876.¹

In 1881, Dr Daniel John Cunningham assumed the office of Professor of Anatomy, which he occupied for twenty years. During his tenure, Cunningham dissected and prepared the potted specimens that make up the bulk of the wet specimen collection. In 1891, he established an anthropometric laboratory with the help of the Royal Irish Academy to study the Irish peoples and find ‘the origins of the race.’ Alfred Haddon and Charles Browne joined Cunningham in his travels and study of the people of the west of Ireland and the islands. The laboratory closed in 1898, but its collection remained in situ.

The museum as shown in the above photo was packed away in the 1950s when Dr. Cecil Erskine became Professor of Anatomy, in favour of a more modernist museum aesthetic. The next professor of anatomy was not as interested in the collection and more changes ensued, but the museum continued to be available to students in a more diminished capacity up to 2011, when the Anatomy department moved to the new Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute, built to mark 300 years of medical education at TCD. Following this move, Anatomy department staff began an earnest and time-consuming effort to dust it off, unpack it, catalogue, and conserve it.²

**Asking the Right Questions**

Why is it important to preserve and restore such a collection? As modern ideas about anatomy and medicine evolve, the study of medical history provides insight into the methodologies and theories that gave rise to contemporary discoveries, as well as the changing attitudes toward health and medicine. Human remains presented in an educational context serve as a tangible link to our technological and cultural past.

In addition, pathological specimens can teach us a great deal about the variability and vulnerability of the human condition. The Old Anatomy Collection
in particular can shed light on unfamiliar aspects of Irish history. The history of Irish medical advances is celebrated in the country’s medical societies and hospitals. Trinity College claims the legacies of physicians William Stokes, John Cheyne, William Wilde, and many others whose accomplishments have been well-studied and established. However, the individuals whose health and bodies made their contributions possible are largely absent from the country’s consciousness.

The 1824 catalogue of the collection states its principal function in no uncertain terms:

_The Museum in the Medical School of Trinity College, Dublin, contains several Preparations, Models, and Casts, principally designed to assist the Student in acquiring a knowledge of animal structure and function, as well as of the several morbid changes to which the human frame is most subject._

From its inception and throughout its history, as is reflected by its provenance, interpretation and organisation, the collection was solely intended for use by medical educators, students, and researchers. Each specimen and artefact represents a diagnosis, an anatomical structure, or a pathology. Thus, we are tasked to re-interpret it from the ground up by looking beyond the medicine. Asking the right questions and following the chain of custody of each specimen, from its original owner to its placement behind glass, becomes imperative. Who did this femur belong to? Who collected it, how, and from where? For what purpose? Who studied and who learned from it? What can we learn from it today? Through our findings, we can uncover the radiating connections that culminate in the collection and display of a specimen, tracking the historical medical framework that surrounds it; we can also incorporate memorialisation practices within its interpretation to honour the individual from whom the specimen came.

Some of the narratives we uncover in this process are bound to be steeped in controversies surrounding questionable practices that characterised facets of eighteenth and nineteenth century medicine. These include, for example, how bodies for dissection classes were procured. The increased admissions to medical schools in the 1800s meant an exponential rise in demand for cadavers for teaching. In 1791, a law was signed to allow anatomists to use the bodies of executed criminals for dissection classes. Failing to meet demand solely through this source and lacking effective preservation methods for them, anatomists resorted to grave robbers to supply the schools with recently buried cadavers. A mass pledge in our collection records how, perceiving this issue and the violence that it could incentivise, Anatomy professor Joseph Macartney (1770–1834) acquired over three hundred signatures of physicians and their relatives in support of private body donation for dissection. The Anatomy Act of 1832 cemented Macartney’s efforts.

Over two hundred years later, the body donor programme in Trinity School of Medicine is recognised for its ground-breaking approach to the practices that govern interactions between the students, the donors, and their relatives. Unlike most medical school cadaver programmes that entirely obscure the identity of a body donor, pending consent from the donor’s family, their first name may be revealed to students.
This practice instils respect for the individual concerned and fosters the whole patient mentality that students will be encouraged to follow in their careers.

The Named and the Unnameable

Each museum specimen is a microcosm, the axis of a story involving the multiple characters who have brought it into focus behind glass: the collector, the anatomist, the donor, and the physician, but most importantly, its original owner, the individual to whom the femur, skull, or spleen once belonged. In many cases, this last character is the one about whom we know the least: the one who remains unnameable.

This is the case with the oldest items in the collection: a handful of remnants of an extensive collection of wax models created by Denone, a Parisian anatomist and sculptor, and gifted to Trinity College Dublin circa 1739 by the Earl of Shelbourne. In his 1816 Catalogue of the Anatomical Wax Figures Belonging to Trinity College Dublin, John McAllister notes that,

...those who have in any degree made anatomy their study may refresh their memory, without going thro’ the fatigue of dissection, as there is scarce a part in the human body not pointed out.

Denone’s waxes served as three-dimensional mnemonic devices; life-sized illustrations sculpted in wax and laid on bone. We cannot know if the features depicted on these models / specimens / chimera are faithful to the original carriers of the skull, but we may assume that the artist, who expertly moulded wax into features, intended for anatomy students to feel that they were looking at a living individual.

Other remains belong to individuals we know fairly well. These include for example William Clarke (1677 – 1738), a night watchman from Cork, whose skeleton is one of two showing the effects of called Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva (FOP), a very rare genetic disorder that causes skeletal muscle and connective tissue to be gradually replaced by bone. In 1872, his skeleton became instrumental in helping Dr Edward H. Bennet (1837 – 1907) to diagnose the condition of an eleven-year-old girl who presented with bony growths,
...so fully developed and so well defined, that it merely required one to have seen the skeleton to recognise the nature of the cue and adjust her treatment accordingly.⁷

Nearly 150 years later, endocrinologist Adrian F. Daly and paleontologist Olivia Cheronet collected DNA material from Clarke’s skeleton, and that of an unidentified woman with the same condition, to contribute to research on this condition that currently plagues about 800 people worldwide.

Preserving the Past to Inform the Future
Anna N. Dhody, Co-Director and Curator of the Mütter Museum, and Director, Mütter Research Institute at The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, has said that,

*Medical heritage collections such as these ‘biomedical repositories’, if you will, can save lives. Locked within museum specimens is information that can help us inform treatments, develop cures, design vaccines. Learning about when and how these infectious disease outbreaks spread, can help us understand not only the diseases and pandemics we are dealing with now, but the future ones as well. The answers are there, it’s up to us to ask the right questions.*⁸

In recent years, genome sequencing technology has rapidly improved, allowing for an array of incredible discoveries and insights into the past through the sampling of ancient DNA (aDNA) from historical remains found in museums.⁹ Today, aDNA sequencing can be achieved through minimally destructive means, such as removing dental calculus from a skull,¹⁰ a proposition that was unthinkable during the time that the Old Anatomy Museum was first populated with its silent residents. The potential benefits of such research cannot be underestimated. For example, ancient pathogen genome analysis can allow us a macro view of the evolution and epidemiology of viruses, like SARS-Cov2. By studying the patterns of epidemic and pandemic outbreak eruptions, or...
pathogen variant evolution throughout history, we can become better prepared for future challenges.

Naturally, as medical heritage collection custodians, we are keen to emphasise the scientific and educational value inherent in our collections. But there is another dimension no less educational and valuable: the undeniable humanity of it. Even in the bubble of being a museum professional working with human remains, it is not easy to lose sight of how remarkable it is to hold a human skull in your (gloved) hands, or to conserve the femur of Cornelius Magrath, a 7’6’ foot skeleton with gigantism. There is a palpable reverence imbued in carrying out this work. It is this reverence and awe that we hope to inspire in visitors when, in due time, we can share the Old Anatomy collection with more than the students and researchers who currently get to see it.

Evi Numen is the Old Anatomy Museum Curator in the School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin. This article builds on and discusses some of the ideas in her paper delivered at the February 2020 Irish Museums Association conference in Athlone.

This article has been written in collaboration with Siobhán Ward, the Museum’s Chief Technical Officer; and with Martina Hennessy, Associate Professor and Consultant for Medical Education, and Head of School Professor Michael Gill, both of the School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin.

Notes
1. Thomas Percy Claude Kirkpatrick, History of the Medical Teaching in Trinity College, Dublin, and of the School of Physic in Ireland, 1912.
2. Davis Coakley, Medicine in Trinity College Dublin: An Illustrated History (Dublin: Trinity College Dublin, 2014).
5. George Newenham Wright, An Historical Guide to the City of Dublin, Illustrated by Engravings, and a Plan of the City, 2nd ed. (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1825).
8. Said in conversation with the author. Used in this article with permission by Anna N. Dhody.
The museum of the past must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed from a cemetery of bric-à-brac to a nursery of living thoughts. The museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and the laboratory.

Smithsonian curator George Brown Goode, 1889

In thinking about the theme of the 2020 Irish Museums Association conference, Transforming Museums, we were encouraged to ponder the above views of George Brown Goode of the Smithsonian. His words strike a note that is as relevant today as it was when he penned them in 1889. The ideas of museum pioneers are worth examining, as they frequently surprise us with their prescience.

When I took up my role as CEO of Museums Victoria in Australia in 2002, I was intrigued by the thoughts of its first Director, an Irishman called Frederick McCoy who was also one of the four foundation professors of the University of Melbourne. In an address to the Philosophical Society in Melbourne in 1856, he drew heavily on his knowledge of museum developments in Europe, applauding the recent opening of what he termed ‘Government Museums’ such as the Museum of Economic Geology and the Museum of Irish Industry. He commented that ‘even the better-informed classes of the public cling to the old notion of a museum being at best a place merely of innocent amusement of schoolboys and idlers’. However, ‘within the last few years our countrymen are beginning to find out that, under proper direction, and as managed in modern times, museums become the most ready and effectual means of communicating the knowledge and practical experience of the experienced few, to many who, under less favourable circumstances, are engaged in, or mean to enter upon, those useful pursuits of life which depend more or less directly upon a knowledge of the peculiarities of the raw materials that Nature furnishes to us’.

The debate implicit in these remarks about whether museums should be about amusement or instruction will strike a chord with any museum director today who is asked the perennial question, ‘is your museum more about entertainment or education?’ My answer is always ‘both’; McCoy came to the same conclusion 164 years ago. Although expressed in rather condescending terms, his words nonetheless captured the essence of what a museum could be. He quickly assembled specimens of timber and minerals that might prove useful to the new colony. He also commissioned superb models showing gold mining techniques to inform the thousands of people flooding into Victoria who were heading for the goldfields. The Museum as a source of useful information for a varied public was a concept that provided me with a sense of direction when I started as his distant successor in 2002.

In this paper I will present a few examples of ways in which museums that are known to me rise to the challenges of our times. I begin with Norton
Priory in Cheshire in the North West of England. I directed the excavation of the medieval site in the 1970s and 80s. The museum that we opened on the site in 1982 provided an opportunity to show how archaeological research could illuminate the lives of the Augustinian canons, their benefactors and the masons who erected the monastic buildings. However, we could not have guessed that, in the twenty-first century, research undertaken by the Museum and its partners would be exploring an important health issue – Paget’s Disease – and could help rewrite history.

Paget’s disease is nowadays the second most common metabolic bone disorder; and can result in the weakening of the affected bone, causing deformity, pain, and sometimes fracture. In very rare cases, a bone affected by Paget’s disease can develop osteosarcoma, a malignant bone cancer. It affects around 1% of the UK population over the age of 55, with an especially high prevalence in the North West of England, where it rises to 4%. Both genetic and environmental factors are important in trying to understand the disease. Interestingly, its prevalence is much lower in Dublin, and still lower in Galway.

Scientific research at the molecular level, on a collection of medieval skeletons excavated at Norton Priory, show a high incidence of Paget’s disease, and that the individuals were affected by an unusual ancient form of the bone disorder. The study, coordinated by researchers at the University of Nottingham, involved analysing proteins and genetic material preserved in bones and teeth that are as much as 800 years old. The work suggests that ancient remains can hold a chemical memory of disease and that similar molecular analysis could be used to explore the evolution of other human disorders.

Lynn Smith, who is Senior Keeper at Norton Priory Museum and Gardens, said,

...the results of the scientific research into an ancient form of Paget’s here at Norton Priory have been a real surprise and are adding a huge amount to our knowledge and understanding of this unique medieval population. It is very rare for an archaeological collection to be used in such...
cutting-edge research and as such it has been both a privilege and a career highlight for me. The results will not only help to re-work our interpretation of the site and the individuals that had connections with the Priory but will also help inform modern medical practice and future research.¹

Another initiative, in which many museums are now engaged, concerns one of the biggest health challenges internationally: the rise in dementia. I witnessed a particularly effective programme at the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish in County Durham. It was a heart-warming experience to sit at a table in Orchard Cottage with a group of about a dozen people, toasting bread on an open fire and enjoying homemade jam, lively conversation, reminiscence and laughter. Most sessions start that way, and move on to collection items or potting plants or baking scones, all inspired by the special nature of Beamish. The programme is run by the museum’s Health and Wellbeing coordinator and is largely funded by fees paid by local authorities. How did I know about this initiative? Well, one of the participants was a close relative of mine, so I have seen first-hand how a programme like this can contribute to meaning, friendship and enjoyment of a person diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.

Until August 2019 I lived in Australia and, in 2020, watched horrified from Ireland as bushfires exacted a terrible toll on human life, houses, landscapes and wildlife. Six million hectares of threatened-species habitat were incinerated, out of a total of ten million hectares, an area greater than the island of Ireland (8.4 million hectares). This is a statement that was issued by the Directors of all the major museums of Australia’s states and territories:

The impact of the recent fires on Australia’s biodiversity is on a scale not previously seen since record-keeping began in the mid-1800s. The estimate of the destruction to our biodiversity from the fires is in the trillions of animals, when considering the total of insects, spiders, birds, mammals, frogs, reptiles, invertebrates and even sea life impacted over such a vast area.

Australia’s natural history museums are committed to finding out how species have been affected, to implementing and supporting programs to restore those species that can be saved, and to engaging the public in mitigation strategies.

Over the next few months, and once it is safe to do so, each museum plans to return to the field, working in collaboration with our national networks of museums and herbaria, state government agencies and universities to ascertain the impact of the fires and work to plan for the restoration of species where possible. The time to act is now and the nation’s natural history museums are ready to respond.²

Migration is another area in which museums are describing a phenomenon that has been part of the human condition for millennia, but which emerges as a divisive issue all too often. In Melbourne, one of the museums for which I was responsible was the Immigration Museum. It played a key role in strengthening a successful multicultural society by providing a platform for individual communities to tell their migration story, and through exhibitions such as Identity: yours, mine, ours that addressed issues such as discrimination and racism.

At EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum, we celebrate the contribution that Irish people, and those of Irish descent, have made in the communities where they have settled. On those foundations, we have built engagement in many contemporary issues. I have been delighted by the way in which EPIC has become a place that Dublin’s international community use as the natural focus for their activities. During 2020, these included the Croatian National Day celebrations, the installation of an altar for the Mexican Day of the Dead, and the start of the Chinese New Year with two days of cultural performances presented by the City of Chengdu. The programme of activities has featured migration-focused collection days, the launch of the national Samhain festival, and the annual Nollaig na mBan celebrations in collaboration with the Irish Writers Centre, among many other events.

EPIC has also hosted Dublin Pride events, the Transfusion Festival, and the International Organisation of Migration Global Migration Film Festival, and we are proud to be a supporter of the important series of six programmes broadcast on RTE 1 television: Herstory: Ireland’s Epic Women.

The series builds on an exhibition created by EPIC Blazing a Trail: Lives and Legacies of Irish Diaspora Women that resulted from the work of Dr Angela
Byrne, EPIC Historian-in-Residence, whose research was made possible by a grant from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. To draw attention to the fact that of the hundreds of public artworks in Dublin, only seven celebrate women, we commissioned an empty plinth, which we installed in O’Connell Street, to start a conversation about the invisible women in Irish history. These activities are part of an effort by a number of organisations to give women their rightful place in the nation’s story.

The examples that I have given all reflect the fact that museums, whatever their origins, are remarkably agile in their ability to serve their communities in ways that were never envisaged by their founders, but which nonetheless are in the spirit of their founding concept. It is as true of museums established in the nineteenth century as it is of museums of recent creation. The founders of museums in Sydney and Melbourne could not have anticipated fires of such intensity that they have razed huge areas of New South Wales and Victoria, but by establishing the study of the wildlife of the colonies they laid the foundations for bushfire recovery in which museums are engaged. Likewise, when we built the museum at Norton Priory, little did we know, or could have envisaged, that one day proteins extracted from the excavated human skeletons would make possible the search for a cure of a debilitating bone disease. When Beamish Museum was created, it was a museum of buildings and industrial archaeology: work with people with dementia is made possible by the setting but was never an inevitable outcome. EPIC, which opened just four years ago, has now added activities of community strengthening to a successful visitor attraction.

As a person who recently arrived from Australia, I am enjoying the experience of discovering how Irish museums are meeting the changing demands of the twenty-first century. I think back to the pioneering work of the Tower Museum in Derry in the 1990s, and the Icons of Identity exhibition at the Ulster Museum in the year 2000. The Chester Beatty Library won the European Museum of the Year Award in 2002, admired for the way in which its extraordinary collection was harnessed to show the world’s faiths in a new light. I am aware of

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Chinese New Year performance led by the City of Chengdu at EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum.
Credit: EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum
the exciting cross-border work of many museums today.

Museums have shown themselves to be remarkably resilient, not only surviving testing times but also evolving to adapt to changing environments and the needs of the public. I have described how museums have responded to challenges such as dementia and Paget’s disease. I have discussed how museums are facing up to the devastation of the Australian bush fires. I have mentioned work to combat racism and contribute to a cohesive society. We can recognise the fundamental qualities that underpin their survival: collections (tangible and intangible), buildings, sites and people (staff and volunteers) and above all, the fact that museums are trusted and popular with the population at large.

In the hands of passionate, imaginative, knowledgeable people, museums have a great future.

Postscript
The title of my keynote paper delivered at the 2020 Irish Museums Association conference in Athlone was ‘Museums in a Changing World’. The conference took place in February 2020. None of us gathered in Athlone could have imagined that just a few weeks later, museums throughout the world would be impacted by a global pandemic. Museums in the Republic of Ireland were required by the Government to close from March 13th and those in Northern Ireland followed soon afterwards. The cost in human lives and mental ill health is enormous. Many museums will struggle to survive, especially those dependent on income from visitors. Museums that are able to, have responded to the series of lockdowns in imaginative ways, especially using the internet and social media to provide services to the public such as podcasts, education materials, homeschooling packs, retail online and virtual visits. As I write this, the world is changing in unprecedented ways and the long-term outcome is far from clear – for museums and every other aspect of human life.

J. Patrick Greene is Director and CEO of EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum. An archaeologist by background, he is a former Director of the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester and CEO of Museums Victoria.
Notes

The museum of the past must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed from a cemetery of bric-a-brac to a nursery of living thoughts. The museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and the laboratory.

Smithsonian curator George Brown Goode, 1889

This quotation, used by the Irish Museums Association to frame its 2020 conference in Athlone, came as a surprise to me. Since starting work at the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI) in October 2017, I had been describing our goal of creating this new cultural institution as a kind of third space, between the library and the museum, as a repository for the past and a laboratory for the future. For many participants at the conference, the ideas about which I spoke were not new. However, the context in which I discussed them - the creation of MoLI - was interesting. This was both because of the scale of the project, and because a philosophy of access had from the outset positively and comprehensively impacted the development of this new cultural institution.

In my paper, I suggested that when an institution’s leaders aim for ‘access at every step’ and allow this ambition to filter through its entire ecosystem, they automatically enable an outcome quite in sympathy with George Brown Goode’s ‘nursery of living thoughts’. By contrast, the relegation of responsibility for promoting access to more junior roles leads to the entrenchment of the ‘bric-a-brac cemetery’ against which Goode warned. Thinking about Goode’s statement made me consider how the curatorial ambitions of museums must not only coincide with, but be the same as, their plans for access and audience growth; how this has become clear in the current blurring of lines of responsibility between curatorial, archival and education staff roles. The development of MoLI provides a useful case study of how these three goals – programming, audience development, and access – are closely interlinked.

MoLI Buildings and Ethos

The Museum of Literature Ireland project began over ten years ago, as a collaboration between University College Dublin (UCD) and the National Library of Ireland (NLI) to develop an exhibition on James Joyce in historic buildings owned by UCD on St Stephen’s Green. The original home of the university, these comprised two Georgian houses and a Victorian assembly hall. Having been restored in the 1990s, the houses were in reasonably good condition, but the assembly hall was derelict. Physical access across the site was furthermore impossible, particularly for people with mobility difficulties.

With significant funding from the Naughton Foundation and capital investment from the University and Fáilte Ireland, the two partners ultimately developed a larger scale project than had originally been conceived, requiring the
appointment not only of a curatorial team to drive
the exhibition content, but also, of architects
and builders to completely reshape the building.
When appointed as Director, I was struck by
the alignment of the project’s stars: it had an
exceptional parentage in the University and a
National Cultural Institution and a beautiful
location with its own rich geography and literary
history, and was based on a demonstrable need
for the literary arts to be represented – and both
locally and internationally championed – by a
large-scale, public-facing institution.

Arguably though, the project’s critical assets –
Ireland’s literary heritage and historic buildings
of exceptional quality – were also its greatest
obstacles. To both was attached a tendency for
over-reverence to the extent that for some, the
buildings, and the subject, felt like the preserve
of an educated elite. There was, too, a perceptible
distinction between Irish Literature (with a capital
‘L’), as represented by what the project team liked
to call the ‘hushed Irish Poy-ery voice’, and, on
the other hand, Irish writing – as represented by
experiences such as hearing the sound of children
laughing at Finnegans Wake.

Programming for Equality and Access
Our aim was, therefore, to reverse the treatment
of the buildings and the artform as pantheons, and
to build instead on their capacity to inspire. For
example, aiming to make the museum accessible
to as wide as possible a range of visitors, we set
the reading age of the exhibitions at pre-teen and
made use of restrictive word count limitations.
This resulted in, among other things, a concise
biography of James Joyce at only 1047 words. So
that people could hear Irish writing, we deployed
audio wherever possible and when the museum
opened, it was fascinating to watch how many
visitors preferred listening to reading. With our
specially commissioned, subtitled film pieces,
we also observed how many enjoyed reading and
listening at the same time. This, and many similar
access decisions that led to unexpected curatorial
discoveries, are now being incorporated into our
longer-term interpretative practice.

From the outset of MoLI’s development, the
curatorial team focused on tackling the under-
representation of the Irish language in the
perceived canon by selecting artists in both Irish
and English, and by providing bilingual exhibition
text. We have continued to address canonical
inequalities in the representation of gender
and sexuality through our temporary exhibition
programme, curated by female artists and on
female and lesbian or bisexual writers, including,
for example, Kate O’Brien, Eva Gore Booth and
Nuala O’Faolain.

MoLI deliberately celebrates Irish writers who
are widely and popularly known. Exhibitions
in the coming years will include a specially
commissioned film on beloved Dublin poet Pat
Ingoldsbys; Peig Sayers and the oral storytelling
tradition of the Blasket Islands will be explored
through newly commissioned work by the artist
Gary Coyle; and MoLI will host exhibitions, curated
by Pat McCabe and Sarah Webb respectively, on
Brendan Behan and Chris Haughton – the latter
deliberately chosen as the first Irish writer with
whom many young people, as small children, have
contact.

Business, Branding and Finance
It is well known that clarity of purpose is
fundamental to organisational viability and
longevity. To develop as a business, the museum
needed a name and a brand that worked at several
levels: it had to describe what was happening
inside the building, to help open up the subject of
Irish writing and make it accessible to everybody,
and to help the public to take ownership of – and
feel invested in – the future of the building and
the museum. In addition, it was important that
the project honoured James Joyce as the writer at
its heart and in memory of whom it had first been
established.

Appointed as the museum’s branding agency,
Dublin’s CI Studio suggested ‘MoLI – Museum of
Literature Ireland’ as a clever acronym combining
both the gravitas of the partner institutions,
and the museum’s playful intent, as well as the
Joycean aspects at the heart of the project. ‘MoLI’
has since proven its success as a welcoming,
memorable brand that recalls the first name of the
muse who inspired James Joyce to write Ulysses.

In line with MoLI’s ethos, procurement support
from UCD has enabled the appointment by public
tender of access-centred providers. However,
with no recurring funding from either partner
institution or from the State after opening, the museum’s financial viability was at first uncertain. Having an operating cost exceeding €1 million in its first year, it had to charge admission, but also, if it was to be successful in its access and audience development aims, to be freely accessible where possible.

As an educational institution, MoLI takes its responsibility to young audiences seriously, and for this reason, does not charge admission to schools. In addition, carers and job seekers can visit for free, and the museum is free to everyone on Tuesday mornings and the first Friday evening of every month.

Drawing where possible on philanthropic and corporate support, MoLI’s financial model is based on achieving longevity rather than quick financial wins. By addressing local needs, aiming for universal access and focusing on attracting people to make repeat visits for a lifetime, it was, before the COVID-19 pandemic, predicted to run ‘in the black’ for its first financial year: 2019/20.

People

Writers are MoLI’s lifeblood, and living authors and poets often lead its exhibitions. This is true also of the museum’s volunteers, many of whom are UCD alumni with strong emotional ties to the buildings. For both, MoLI aims not only to be a creative experience and outlet, but to become a kind of home for these, and all other, communities.

The quality of experience for MoLI’s thirty paid staff is equally essential. The institution focuses not only on meeting immediate staff needs, but also on building career resilience and enabling its people to do great work at St. Stephen’s Green that will contribute to strong CVs and progress their careers elsewhere. Reminiscent of Goode, MoLI conceives of itself as a kind of professional studio or interdisciplinary laboratory; a place where staff have opportunities to work across front of house, curatorial, exhibition, publishing, digital, audio–visual and learning departments. In addition, its HR policies are directed at making the museum an accessible, enjoyable, fun and easy employer: working from home where possible was institutional policy even before the pandemic, and lean reporting structures, equal access to maternity and paternity leave, and flexible working hours both reflect and enable institutional agility. Staff confidence, morale and commitment are furthermore promoted by a non-restrictive uniform policy. MoLI adopts a *Devil Wears Prada* approach, where everyone can wear what they like, providing it is black or monochrome and accompanied by a colourful identifying badge to help visitors find their way. The showing of tattoos, piercings, or any other style signifiers that staff enjoy are positively encouraged. In this way, individuality is valued: people can be themselves at work.

Learning

When we imagine a Science Museum, we imagine kids, excitement, colour, noise, fun... but science is REALLY COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT! Why couldn’t a literature museum conjure up the same images? MoLI has always focused its energies on the youngest audiences who are its future, and on challenging a sectoral service tradition that has favoured older age–groups. Convinced that Ireland has one of the most sophisticated reading cultures in the world, the museum knows that to succeed in the longer term, it must become an indispensable treasure embedded in the hearts of its supporters from the earliest age.

In partnership with a panel of Dublin schools, MoLI’s Learning Manager Jennie Ryan has centred engagement activities on developing creativity, shared storytelling, empathy and biography. Moving away from the initially jargonistic aim of delivering the ‘democratic potential of observation’, MoLI’s learning programmes are now ‘wild craic’ for children and adults alike, irrespective of their reading ability.

Through philanthropic support, MoLI has also been able to create an immersive bursary for teenage writers, and with corporate help, has expanded learning programmes into local youth and community projects with the aim of reaching disadvantaged communities. This financial support has also dramatically increased the number of family events in the museum and helped to provide free summer camps for children. Adult literacy classes are in development: a Museum of Literature should, after all, be a place where you can read.
Environment and the Outdoors
MoLI’s desire is to create an open, accessible civic space with reading and writing at its core. With a large garden, connected by a pedestrian gate to the huge, beautiful – and free – Iveagh Gardens, MoLI is a museum in a park and an intellectual and environmental haven. Inspired by museums connected to significant green spaces in the UK, the planting of MoLI’s gardens is intended to support sensory experiences of colour, scent, sound, and biodiversity – attracting songbirds, bees, and other wildlife.

With comfortable seats, soft furnishings, smiles from staff and a good café, the museum is somewhere where people can stay for hours, and frequently do (observed dwell times often approach three hours). The right customer pricing means that a family trip to MoLI is more affordable than a Saturday cinema outing. This is a place where people not only feel permitted to be, but moreover want to hang out, and even have a quiet nap. Deliberately subverting the tyranny of the visitor number, MoLI aims for depth, rather than quantity of visit.

Conclusion
When I presented this paper at the 2020 Athlone conference, I ended by saying,

We of course have a long way to go. We are only open 5 months; many systems are bedding down...
Things are going well, but already the organism is developing a life of its own, and growing in its own way, as it should.

Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed everything. But MoLI will continue to follow Goode’s beautiful idea of a ‘nursery of living thoughts’. These words give us all of the clues that we need to understand how to be accessible spaces. The nursery is a safe, gentle environment that focuses on beginnings and on young people, and that fosters and contributes to their growth. ‘Living’ gives a clear signal that our focus should not just be on the past, but on the present and future. Finally, by ‘thoughts’, Goode indicated the potential of our museums to be fundamentally creative spaces.

A final note: nurseries have parents, teachers, gardeners. If we want to foster personal and social growth in our museums, our leaders must have democratic practice at their core. Plants don’t water themselves.

Simon O’Connor is Director, MoLI - Museum of Literature Ireland
Introduction
Since 2017, Kate Drinane from the National Gallery of Ireland, Judith Finlay from the National Museum of Ireland, and Brian Crowley from Kilmainham Gaol have worked on LGBTQIA+ research and events within their respective institutions. At the Irish Museums Association’s 2020 annual conference in Athlone, they delivered a workshop to share their experience and knowledge with others who may wish to address the subject. In March of 2021, all three institutions successfully collaborated to run OUTing the Past Dublin 2021: The Festival of LGBT History virtually. This article records a conversation explaining their motivation and processes for this work.

Why:
Why did we get involved?
Kate Drinane: In early 2018, the Irish National Teachers Organisation LGBT teachers’ group asked me to research an LGBT-themed tour of the Gallery. I was happy for the opportunity to research a topic in the Gallery’s collection that I had always been interested in and wanted to highlight to the public. I wanted to use this as a starting point for long-term, well-rounded programming that would allow LGBTQIA+ stories to be told in various forms in the Gallery.

Judith Finlay: In 2017, I started my PhD research with Trinity College Dublin focusing on ‘The Healing Museum’ and the use of right-based structures to transform museum practice. I received approval from the Head of Collections and Learning to identify the most effective way to bring LGBTQIA+ history into the National Museum of Ireland, the NMI, initially via the Archive. The existing NMI collections tell a significant amount of LGBTQIA+ histories.

Brian Crowley: While there has always been a general awareness in Kilmainham Gaol Museum that the building had been used as a place of punishment for men who engaged in homosexual acts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not until the publication of Brian Lacey’s seminal Terrible Queer Creatures: Homosexuality in Irish History that we discovered its central role in the 1884 Dublin Castle Scandals. Although largely forgotten for over a century, this was one of the biggest political stories of the 1880s and involved a number of men, including some senior figures in the British administration, who were prosecuted for homosexual activity. Among other things, the story highlighted how, at a time when society largely refused to recognise the existence of homosexuality, prisons were often one of the few places in which queer lives were visible. In order to punish those who engaged in homosexual activity, the authorities first had to name and acknowledge that those acts had taken place. Kilmainham Gaol is thus one of the few historic spaces in which LGBTQIA+ stories were visible and overt, therefore it felt incumbent on us as a Museum to explore and share this aspect of the building’s history.
Kilmainham Gaol is, of course, much more than just a prison and has become in many ways a secular shrine dedicated to those involved in the fight for Irish independence across two centuries. Lacey’s book also recounts a number of queer people who played a leading role in that struggle even if, previously, being LGBTQIA+ was often portrayed as being somehow incompatible with being truly Irish. Elements within Irish society often went to great lengths to deny the queer identity of historical figures involved in the independence struggle. In the face of this deliberate silencing, it became very apparent to us that Kilmainham Gaol had a key role in acknowledging and promoting the role of LGBTQIA+ people in the foundation of the Irish state.

What: What did we do?

Kate: After the tour for the teacher’s group at the beginning of 2018, I carried on my research and rolled out several public tours for Dublin Pride 2018. On each tour I asked the participants for any hints or research links they knew of, as finding LGBTQIA+ stories in history can be difficult. This community-based research methodology worked brilliantly and means that the research is still continuing today. The tours were then embedded in the monthly Public Tour programme. This was to emphasise that LGBTQIA+ history exists year round and not just at Pride.

In 2019, the Gallery hosted the LGBT History Festival, *OUTing the Past*. It was the first time there had been a festival hub in Dublin. This festival included a full day of talks, breakout discussion sessions and a choir performance from Gloria, Dublin’s Lesbian and Gay Choir. Sara R Philips delivered the opening address and the closing remarks were from Panti Bliss.

With the growing success of the LGBTQIA+ programming in the Gallery, I planned a series of talks and tours for Dublin Pride 2019. The Gallery staff also marched in the Dublin Pride parade with the Civil Service LGBT+ Network. As a growing number of LGBTQIA+ people started to visit the Gallery, it was important to train up the Gallery’s front-facing staff and volunteers in best practice when welcoming the community into the Gallery. I ran four LGBTQIA+ Awareness sessions focusing on language and acceptance of the community. These were very successful from an educational perspective. However, they did involve an unexpected amount of emotional labour. This is something I would recommend outsourcing, as a level of separation from participants is helpful.

Even in a world of lockdowns and COVID-19, the Gallery has continued to engage with the LGBTQIA+ community. Since February 2020, I have been working with Gaisce LikeMinded, a group founded by Gaisce to offer one-to-one mentorship for young LGBTQIA+ young people and their allies who are undertaking the Gaisce Awards. Originally planned to be a series of onsite workshops, COVID-19 meant that the workshops had to move online and have continued there. The group is working on art in various media that express what it feels like to be a young LGBTQIA+ person in the world today. These artworks will go on display to the public at the end of July 2021.
Across the Gallery’s social media and website, we have continued to offer LGBTQIA+ history to the public, in the form of Instagram stories and online self-guided tours. The LGBTQIA+ Through a Lens self-guided tour on the Gallery’s website is a way to look more closely at specific LGBTQIA+ stories in the Gallery’s collection.

Judith: In 2017 I started discussions with Tonie Walsh, Curator of the Irish Queer Archive (IQA) on ways to bring LGBTQIA+ history into the NMI. Initially we analysed private, community and public archives and collections already available, following which the aim was to identify the most effective ways to complement existing archives and collections and address gaps in the public record.

Working with NMI Archivist Emer Ní Cheallaigh in 2018, we approached the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to add several actions to increase LGBTQIA+ representation at the NMI into the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy.

We used existing resources from the IQA in the National Library of Ireland (NLI), the Irish Trans Archive (ITA), Cork LGBT Archive, the LGBT Oral History project of Edmund Lynch and many more sources to create a nationally-focused digital introduction. Key members of the community co-curated this, primarily Tonie Walsh, Sara R Phillips, Edmund Lynch, Dr Patrick McDonagh and Orla Egan.

In February 2019 our Commercial Development Manager, Terri McInerney successfully secured Collins Barracks as the location for the Dublin LGBT Pride Mother Block Party. To reflect this LGBTQIA+ event within the museum, Rainbow Revolution was launched on 27th June 2019. This consisted of:

- A digital introduction to Irish LGBTQIA+ history.
- A rainbow trail highlighting LGBTQIA+ associations.
- A ‘Pop-up’ exhibition of the four objects.
- New interviews to launch the LGBTQIA+ Living Archive Project.

The digital resource was available on four touchscreens in Collins Barracks, and one in Turlough Park, Mayo, providing an accessible

Dr Panti Bliss giving the closing speech at the National Gallery of Ireland for OUTing the Past, 2019.
Credit: Jack Caffrey, The Pimlico Project, 2019
introduction to the Irish LGBTQIA+ movement. It introduced the Irish LGBTQIA+ rights movement and highlighted existing resources people could use to explore this history further. The introduction also launched the current NMI LGBTQIA+ Living History Project with two new interviews: one with Mary Shannon, custodian of the AIDS Memorial Quilts and another with Senator David Norris.

Alongside this was a display of the first four LGBTQIA+-associated objects acquired by the NMI, with Shane Harte’s *The Wall of Oppression* art installation as its backdrop. Brenda Malone, an NMI Curator, began to collect material relating to Ireland’s 2018 Abortion Referendum and the LGBTQIA+ collection grew from there. Conor Kelly donated a Pride flag used to cover graphic Pro-Life posters during the campaign. In 2019, Katherine Zappone donated her wedding dress and that of her wife, Ann Louise Gilligan. Soon after, Panti Bliss donated the dress she had worn when giving the *Noble Call* Speech in the Abbey Theatre.

These objects featured on the *Rainbow Trail* – a self-guided trail for visitors, leading them through the current exhibitions and highlighting objects with LGBTQIA+ connections. This trail brought together staff knowledge of the collections from across the NMI, and was coordinated mainly by Declan Walsh with our Education, Registration and Curatorial colleagues. These objects are now on display in *Exhibiting the Nation*. ‘Under the Rainbow’ provided LGBTQIA+ Awareness Training for staff.

**Brian**: The opportunity to focus on the LGBTQIA+ history of the Gaol arose with the Dublin Festival of History in 2018. We were anxious to take part in the festival and offer something different and new and, as such, we submitted a proposal to give a queer history tour of the building. We chose to do a tour rather than a lecture because we wanted to emphasise that these stories were part of the history of the building itself. The tour proved incredibly popular and was quickly oversubscribed. We scheduled a number of additional tours in the weeks to facilitate those on the waiting list, and...
Above: The Rainbow Revolution touchscreen introducing Irish LGBTI+ history at the National Museum of Ireland, 2019
Credit: National Museum of Ireland.

Below: The Rainbow Revolution loop screen at the National Museum of Ireland, 2019
Credit: National Museum of Ireland.
further tours also took place as part of the Dublin Pride Festival in June 2019.

Using the research we had carried out into the Gaol’s LGBTQIA+ history, we explored the museum’s collection for objects related to these stories. This resulted in a small exhibition, also for Dublin Pride, of LGBTQIA+ material from the Kilmainham Gaol collection. The ‘queering’ of the collection has become an ongoing project and we continue to identify and highlight objects which may have LGBTQIA+ associations. We are also actively seeking to increase the representation of queer material within the collection.

How?
How do you programme LGBTQIA+ events?
Kate: Begin by learning the terminology. There are excellent resources out there for learning about the LGBTQIA+ acronym, how to use people’s correct pronouns and make them feel as safe as possible in a new space. Once I began the research into LGBTQIA+ stories and lives in the Gallery collection, I quickly discovered that a huge amount of the stories were hidden and often hard to find among all the heteronormative narratives. What I came to rely on most was hints and tips from my colleagues and from visitors on tours. This was a simple and clear way to engage with the community from the very beginning of my research.

Judith: The key to this was building strong relationships with the community, empowering them and giving them the freedom to tell their history. Everyone I approached was extremely generous with their time and knowledge, willing to co–curate with us and build the permanent public historic record. Give the LGBTQIA+ community a voice in your work to ensure it is a true and accurate reflection.

Brian: Ironically, while the content of our LGBTQIA+ was new and challenging, the way we delivered it relied on existing formats such as tours and exhibitions. That did not mean that creating a programme of LGBTQIA+ events was without its challenges. Queer history is often, and necessarily, speculative. Museums, on the other hand, have traditionally traded in certainties and have presented themselves as the ultimate authority in their given subject area. When it comes to queer histories we are often unable to offer definitive answers, but we can offer thought–provoking questions instead.

When?
When is a good time for LGBTQIA+ programming and engagement?
Kate: While it can be simpler to programme events during Pride, I have found that there is a keen appetite for LGBTQIA+ events and content all year round. Even during a visit from the Pope in August 2018, we had 26 people attend that Saturday’s LGBTQIA+ tour. Pride can be a good starting–point to drum up enthusiasm from the public and to raise awareness, but relying on it can be reductive and come across as tokenistic. You can use events like Winter Pride to reinvigorate your programme and make new connections within the community.

Judith: Pride is a good time to start if your cultural space has never dealt with LGBTQIA+ history and culture before. There are regional Pride marches across the country all through the summer (when Covid–19 calms) as well as Winter Pride. As with the histories of any marginalised groups – women, Travellers, people of colour, it is important we embed LGBTQIA+ history within all of our Irish history narratives, to show genuine inclusion.
and equal consideration, to raise awareness and increase visibility.

Brian: Programming events for the Dublin Pride Festival and flying the rainbow flag for that week was a really significant way to demonstrate to the LGBTQIA+ community that the Museum was fully embracing their history. It was also a way of reaching new audiences who may not have been aware of Kilmainham’s significance in Irish queer history. It should be noted that LGBTQIA+ events do not always have to be tied to things like Pride festivals. Culture Night, Heritage Week and other history festivals could be useful opportunities to focus on LGBTQIA+ stories and they should also form part of a museum’s regular exhibition and education programming.

Who?  
Who is involved in the planning?
Kate: The LGBTQIA+ programming in the Gallery started very slowly. This allowed time to involve as many members of staff as possible. All levels within the Gallery structure had to accept the programming, from the volunteers and tour guide panel all the way up to the Director. This meant that the LGBTQIA+ community would feel welcomed and supported at all times. All of the Gallery staff were extremely helpful.

Judith: Our community curators and content providers were central to all of this. They had ownership from the start and drove its success. This became very apparent at the NMI symposium ‘Out On Display’ in October 2019. This event sparked a series of collaborations including ‘The Everywoman Project’ created in 2020 by the Stairlings Collective for the Herstory Ireland Project.

Brian: It is vital that initiatives around LGBTQIA+ inclusion are not seen as purely the preserve of education and outreach departments. Curatorial, exhibition and documentation staff have a vital role in developing our understanding of queer history in museum collections. Without research to underpin them, the initiatives we have embarked upon in terms of promoting an understanding of Kilmainham Gaol’s queer history would have been impossible.

Kate Drinane at the National Gallery of Ireland for OUTing The Past, 2019.
Credit: Jack Caffrey, The Pimlico Project, 2019

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Who:

Who is the event or content for?
Kate: While most of the LGBTQIA+ events and research were aimed at people in the LGBTQIA+ community themselves, we wanted the content to be accessible to all. We assumed no prior knowledge of the community or specific terminology associated with it. The Gallery uses the inclusive LGBTQIA+ acronym, however we wanted to ensure that as many as possible of the identities included in that are represented in our research and content. This can be difficult in a predominantly historical collection, and will need a continuous extra effort from staff.

Judith: Bringing this history into the NMI introduced it to audiences who may never have encountered LGBTQIA+ history before, increasing awareness and visibility. For LGBTQIA+ people, having their history alongside other aspects of Irish history can show them they are welcome and equal and that their history deserves to be preserved and available to everyone.

Brian: We found that there was a significant appetite for queer history-related programming, and that the audiences for these events did not just come from the LGBTQIA+ community. These are fascinating stories and we found that a broad range of people, many of whom were not LGBTQIA+ themselves, were eager to engage with what was previously a little-known aspect of the building's history. Many visitors were particularly interested in how the use of the Gaol, as a place of punishment for homosexual men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was representative of the way in which the penal and judicial system was used to control and repress all kinds of groups within Irish society who were deemed to be transgressive.

If you would like further assistance
Please do contact the relevant institution if you wish to know more about this work.

In 2019, we founded Queer Culture Ireland, a research support network for anyone interested in, working on or researching LGBTQIA+ culture aimed at raising visibility, queering collections and catalogues, and consisting of a large number of experts all willing and able
Kate Drinane has been part of the Education Team at the National Gallery of Ireland for nine years. In June 2018 she began researching the lack of minority representation in the Gallery’s collection, starting with the LGBTQIA+ community. She has introduced and developed LGBTQIA+ programming at the Gallery, including the management of OUTing the Past: Festival of LGBT History in Dublin 2019. Kate is the co-founder of the Queer Culture Ireland research network. She volunteers with ShoutOut and Gaisce LikeMinded, through which she mentors young people in the LGBTQIA+ community.

Judith Finlay is Registrar and Collections Resource Manager with the National Museum of Ireland (NMI). She led the NMIs Rainbow Revolution exhibition in 2019, is co-founder of Queer Culture Ireland and is currently researching her PhD with Trinity College Dublin on The Healing Museum: Using rights-based frameworks to transform museum practice, looking at three areas – LGBTQ+ visibility, repatriation and animal rights.

Brian Crowley is Curator of Collections, Kilmainham Gaol and the Pearse Museum
Introduction
In this paper, I discuss the ways in which research takes place in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) and how a new strand of programming, groundwork, aims to make existing and new modes of research visible.

Research is a reflexive process involving experimentation, problem-solving and risk, and as such, happens constantly in art museums. It is concerned with discovering new information or reaching a new understanding. There are many definitions of research, including ‘a studious inquiry or examination … aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts … the collecting of information’. Also, ‘the detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) information or reach a (new) understanding.’

Common to all research, though, is the aim to make known something that was previously unknown.
Delivered through a series of case studies, the title and methods of *groundwork* refer to and conceive the practice of research as something that happens on the ground, in the field, and by being present, observing, gathering, reflecting and analysing. The first *groundwork* case study to be discussed here is *The Place Project*, an innovative research project involving over 400 students that has taken place in IMMA over a ten-year period, leading to new understandings and harnessing new knowledge. The modes of research *The Place Project* has used draw on its early associations, as suggested by the Old French *recercher*, to ‘seek out, search closely,’ and the Latin *circare*, to ‘go about, wander, traverse’.

**Research in an art museum**

Research is central to the work of artists, both in the conception and realisation of their work, and in how that it is communicated to a wider public through exhibitions that capture and articulate the new knowledge it produces. Exhibition curators also undertake research, including through the development and implementation of exhibitions.

This research may encompass the lives and work of artists featured, exhibition themes or subjects, the materials and methodologies artists employ, and the context of the art works. It informs how curators structure exhibitions, what they focus on and how they communicate the artwork to audiences and other users.

As a museum of modern art concerned with contemporary experience, IMMA’s subject exists and reveals its meaning in the present. Some of the work that is exhibited in IMMA did not exist prior to its exhibition and, in some cases, came about in the realisation of exhibitions or was the result of IMMA commissions that were informed by research. Collection curators undertake and commission research into the artworks in the collections – and research into the artists that create them – and research is also involved in IMMA’s practices of data management, archiving and conservation.

Research is central to the work of IMMA’s engagement and learning curators, informing public programming and underpinning the development of strategies to engage people with contemporary art. The museum’s technical crew undertakes research into artists’ materials and methodologies and into the new technologies that inform the installation of the art works. Members of the visitor engagement team research the artists and artworks featured in the exhibitions and represented in the collection, and in the preparation of their guided tours, workshops and public programmes. IMMA’s Artists Residency Programme provides artists with an opportunity to undertake research in the development of their practice. This is not to suggest that everything that happens in an art museum is research, but to point to the fact that many people working in an art museum are involved in research in the day-to-day implementation of their work.

**IMMA as a site for research**

As a site for research, IMMA is located in a significant building that provides a rich historical context and counterpoint to its contemporary focus. In addition, IMMA – as a whole – has a wealth of knowledge and resources across its programmes, staff and archives that constitutes the raw material of research. While the core functions of the museum are housed in the main
building, there are also a number of peripheral buildings that provide collection storage, artists’ studios and workshop and discussion spaces. The museum is also situated within a substantial urban green site that provides a campus for hosting innovative and experimental research initiatives such as The Place Project.

The Place Project
The Place Project is a reflection on a unique long-term collaboration between IMMA and the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) BA Art programme. What started off as a one-off site visit, has grown into an ongoing, museum-based student research programme that has informed how IMMA engages with third-level students. The IADT course module began as a site-specific project focusing on IMMA as the place. It is intended to develop the students’ research skills in the development and implementation of their research projects in response to IMMA and its grounds. The term ‘place’ offers latitude for students to approach IMMA in many ways: as museum, gallery, institution, public space, historical site, architectural structure, environment, destination or cartographical point.

Over ten years, The Place Project has developed into a comprehensive, self-directed student research project, incorporating peer and professional-led learning, professional mentoring and public presentations of active research on site. The students engage with IMMA staff in various roles, including curators, the visitor engagement and security teams, technical crew, OPW gardeners, resident artists, and the museum’s visiting public.

In January of each year, approximately 40 students arrive on site at IMMA. Students are based in IMMA’s workshop studios for the twelve weeks of the research project, which provides a base out of which the students conduct their research. Following an introduction to the museum, its programmes, staff and site, they explore the galleries, courtyard, café, great hall, chapel, artists’ residency studios, and the museum’s environs: the gardens, graveyards, meadows and woodland. They become familiar with its structure, content, spaces, people, rules, constraints and possibilities, all of which inform their unique research projects.

For the tutors, art research is the practice of being lost in ‘thinking through making’; to wander – as the students do – is not aimless but is dynamic, a skilled intuitive response to what is discovered in the process. Through their explorations of the Museum’s buildings and grounds, by meeting staff and artists and by encountering the public, students develop their research ideas, reflecting their own interest, curiosity, and particular observations. Over the course of the twelve weeks, they can be seen in various sites around the museum and grounds, drawing, filming, measuring, observing, photographing, performing, interviewing, taking samples or just sitting chatting. Visitors to the museum therefore encounter students activating the museum as a dynamic and live space for research.

At the end of the twelve-week module, students present the outcomes of their research projects to each other, to museum and IADT staff, and to the visiting public. These outcomes can take many
forms, ranging from displays of research material, ideas and art works to performances, temporary interventions and happenings in the studio spaces or on site in the buildings and grounds of IMMA. Family and friends join the students to see the results of their research projects and to celebrate the end of the project. It is a moment of great pride for the students in the presentation of their research in response to, and in the context of, the museum.

Conclusion
The Place Project is an open-ended, exploratory and mutually beneficial collaboration between a third-level education institution and a museum of modern art, centred on the experiences of students in the formative stages of their careers as artists and researchers. It enables IADT to explore the possibilities of developing an ‘on-location’ teaching environment and it enables IMMA as a museum to explore ways in which it can be activated as a site of research and learning. This is, then, a process of constantly and mutually redefining what both ‘museum’ and ‘education’ might mean.

The long-standing relationships and commitment to The Place Project by IMMA and IADT, has enabled multiple conversations, resourcefulness and trust to build over ten years. This has helped both institutions to cultivate what has now become a unique model of collaboration between an art museum and a third-level education institution. The BA Art programme at IADT has been enhanced through The Place Project, enabling first-year art students to understand how the museum and its resources can be a foundation for research and a model of off-campus, museum-based learning. Reciprocally, some of the learning outcomes of The Place Project have informed the way in which IMMA understands its role as a site for research and has transformed how it engages with other student groups.

Dr Lisa Moran is Curator: Engagement and Learning at the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Notes
Unicycling, cartwheels and custard juggling in a museum? You must be joking. What curator, or even the most eager learning officer, would allow such antics in their esteemed galleries? The answer is: more and more of them.

In the last few years, there’s been a remarkable shift in museums in welcoming performance, and circus performance in particular. It began in 2018, the 250th anniversary of the very first circus, which was marked by over 500 events Ireland and UK-wide, coordinated by the not-for-profit Circus250 production company. Of these, about a fifth took place in museums. They included the Circus Work exhibition of Peter Lavery’s photographs of life behind the ring doors at the Harley Gallery, Nottinghamshire and Royal West of England Academy, Bristol; Performers, Politics and Pop Culture at the National Centre for Craft and Design in Lincolnshire; The Art of the Show at the National Gallery in Dublin showcasing their circus poster collection; and Circus. Show of Shows! at Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, which toured to Time and Tide Museum, Great Yarmouth and Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne. Live circus performance and circus skills workshops were often programmed alongside many of these exhibitions, doing cartwheels and custard throwing among them.

Museums that had never before seen a clown’s nose or sparkly leotard, embraced, explored and enthused about circus, its art, its social significance, its history and its science. The Science Museum, London, held one of its well-known ‘Lates’ on the science of circus, and the entertainment at the Museum’s annual Director’s Dinner was provided by aerial hoop, stilt walkers and jugglers. The Circus250 year opened in January with a 4-metre-high handstand act taking place under Hope, the giant blue whale in the Natural History Museum London’s stunning Hintze Hall. We called it ‘Handstand for Hope’.

My own background is both as a circus performer and museum advocate. I began life as an artiste in a traditional tented touring circus and am now director of Circus250. In between, I founded and ran Kids in Museums, the UK based charity, part of Arts Council England’s National Portfolio, that agitated for and supported better family and child inclusion in museums, in particular for those who hadn’t visited before. So when I ran back to the circus four years ago, to run Circus250 and coordinate the year-round anniversary celebrations, I took with me a passion for museums and a knowledge that they were spaces open to challenge and change.

Why have many museums rolled up to circus? Circus is live performance, often in a temporary space, involving a great deal of movement. Museums, in contrast, are stuffed with static things, their objects mostly displayed on walls and pedestals and in glass cabinets. Unlike the sensory-rich circus, museums have no smell and
discourage touch. Although many museums have digitised collections, in an increasingly virtual world, museums and circuses share a Unique Selling Point. They are both about the real.

There are many benefits for a museum that embraces circus. Circus attracts visitors, especially families, to a museum that might not otherwise venture inside. It’s the most accessible of art forms; no one looks awkwardly at their friend half way through a circus performance and whispers, ‘What’s that about??’ Circus may make you gasp, but there’s nothing frightening about it. No one worries they are not clever or educated enough to understand it. There are few words, so it doesn’t rely on literacy or even speaking the same language as the performers. Everyone, of any age, enjoys it. I walked around the National Gallery’s The Art of the Show with my Auntie, then again with my teenagers, once alone, and then with Dr Panti Bliss. I think every one of them enjoyed, and each took away something special from their visit.

Circus doesn’t only bring new audiences to a museum but introduces the possibility of new behaviours. Of course, these two are inextricably linked, as perceptions of proper ‘museum behaviour’ are a significant barrier to many potential visitors. At Kids in Museums, and now at CultureKids, we advocate dismantling what counts as ‘museum behaviour’ and coming to an agreement with visitors on a new code of conduct. This involves questioning assumptions about what’s considered acceptable and asking why some actions are frowned upon or forbidden.

An example is Circus250’s performance Frame: Circus for Drawing, developed for and first performed at the Royal Academy in London. In 2019, the Academy held an exhibition of the work of twentieth century painter Dame Laura Knight, best known for her circus work and in particular the spectacular The Grand Parade. To complement the exhibition, it seemed fitting to host some live circus performances. The Academy is a prestigious place, not given to allowing leaping and unicycling among the masterpieces. But by careful risk assessment, planning and frank discussion about what could go wrong, we not only juggled, unicycled and walked two-person high through
the gilded galleries, but did a clown act with custard as well.

Frame is a two–performer circus show specifically designed to take place in high art galleries like the Academy, in an attempt to broaden both audiences and acceptable behaviours. The audience watches an act and, supported by an artist tutor, live–draws it as the performance continues. Each act is created with repetitive elements and performed at a slower pace, so it’s easy to capture with crayons and pencils. We wanted to use live drawing, rather than anything more static, as, for those who don’t consider themselves artists, its concentration on capturing movement and feeling rather than being accurate is liberating. At the Royal Academy, visitors/audience members could draw on the floor, on a clipboard or beany tray (particularly useful for wheelchair users for whom clipboards can be tricky to balance). After the performances, their drawings were displayed in the gallery. The event was popular with audiences, many of whom said they now felt able to invite friends to the Academy who wouldn’t usually feel comfortable or enthused to go there.

Circus can also be used to bring fresh interpretations to familiar objects. The National Gallery in London holds Edgar Degas’ famous painting of Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando, depicting a nineteenth century black circus performer who was a superstar of her time. The painting had barely left the building for decades, but for the 250th anniversary it travelled to Sheffield Museums’ Show of Shows! exhibition. There, outside its former high art context where it had been considered as part of a French impressionist’s oeuvre, it told a different story. It was presented instead as the portrait of a powerful, wealthy, celebrated black woman living in an era in which many falsely believe there was no such thing. Sheffield Museums commissioned young black circus artist Blaze Tarsha to create an act in response to the painting, which was filmed and displayed beside it. The accessibility and immediacy of circus allowed this story to be told. And the painting was no longer just an 1879 masterpiece, but alive and with meanings for today.

Not only an individual object, but a whole space can be reinterpreted through circus. In partnership with Lost in Translation circus and the Royal Collection Trust, Circus250 staged a large–scale circus parade and performance in the quadrangle at Windsor Castle for the first time in over 150 years, including life–sized elephant puppets. This Victorian–inspired circus reinterpreted an area normally viewed by visitors as just a big bare lawn, thereby revealing and invoking how it was once a lively centre for royal entertainment.

Circus can also help explain complex and specialist ideas, which are wonderfully rife in museums and their collections, in simple and immediate ways. Science museums, in particular, can understandably struggle to convey physics, chemistry and engineering concepts in a way that makes them easy for non–specialist visitors to grasp. Our StrongWomen Science show is a circus science show for families that attempts to do just that. Words may fail to clearly explain to the non–scientist what centripetal force is, but we used some empty yoghurt pots, a paddling of yellow rubber ducks and circus skills to do a poi act, with
the aim of demonstrating something no label nor panel could.

We discovered another unexpected benefit of working with an all-female circus troupe. The typical visitor group at the Royal Air Force Museum in London is fathers/carers and boys. When StrongWomen Science performed and gave workshops there, the number of girl visitors increased by 60 per cent. Over half of families with girl children said they’d only visited because the circus was on. At a time when there’s a rightful concern of the lack of women in STEM, enticing more girls into an aeronautical museum is a good first step to addressing this issue as well as broadening the visitor base.

Circus has always been a disruptor, an outsider art form set apart from the mainstream, with a capacity for disruption that accompanies it when introduced to a museum. At the National Gallery exhibition *The Art of the Show*, new practices emerged. The curator, Joanne Drum, was from the education rather than the curatorial department, a first in itself. The posters and paintings were hung slightly lower than usual, to make them more accessible for children. The labels were written in slightly different language to the usual house style. Circus is based on risk, and encourages others to take risks too. When we performed at the Science Museum in London, the Director came up to me, dressed in my ringmaster’s outfit and whispered conspiratorially in my ear, ‘I bet this will shake things up a bit.’

And – in case you’re still worried about welcoming unicyclists, jugglers and clowns into your galleries – the only thing we’ve ever broken is visitor numbers.

*Dea Birkett is Director of CultureKids Ireland and Ringmaster for Circus250. www.circus250.org*
Introduction
This paper is an exploration of how the activities of editors of projects such as Wikipedia not only act as co-curators, but often also fill gaps in content as citizen curators. Akin to citizen journalists and citizen scientists, ‘citizen curators’ are activated amateurs or non-professional curators who use their spare time, or cognitive surplus, to edit crowdsourced projects like Wikipedia. They have varying motivations for doing this free labour, but the overarching reasoning is generally the perception of something being incorrect or incomplete within, or missing from, a Wikipedia article.

For the purposes of this article, the Wikipedia that is being referenced is the English language version, but it should be noted that there are over 300 other language versions of Wikipedia. While some trends and practices are universal, Wikipedias vary. The wider universe of Wikimedia refers to thirteen projects, including Wikipedia, which fall under the custodianship of the Wikimedia Foundation. The Foundation is a charity that supports and funds all these projects. These include the media repository, Wikimedia Commons (or simply ‘Commons’), and Wikidata, a multilingual open linked database. Within this universe, cultural institutions are referred to as GLAMs: Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums.

In Wikipedia and Commons, all the text and most images and other media are licensed under the Creative Commons licence CC-BY-SA in its varying forms. Their content also draws on non copyrighted works that are in the Public Domain. It is these licences, and more permissive ones like CC-Zero, which operate like Public Domain, that are being referred to broadly as ‘open licences’ within this article.

Working with the internet’s beach cleaners
Donna Alexander has artfully framed Wikipedians as the ‘beach cleaners’ of the internet: In their collective effort, they strive for a pristine and perfect landscape, picked clean of errors, oversights and omissions. Much like the work of the real beach cleaners, however, this is an on-going task with no end point in sight. As knowledge is, by its own nature, forever growing in depth and breadth, so does Wikipedia. As Shirky states, ‘A Wikipedia article is a process, not a product.’ It is this constantly evolving state that makes Wikipedia articles fundamentally different to many of the outputs of GLAM organisations, and in the early days of Wikipedia was often cited as its central flaw rather than its strength. What we have come to understand is that the ability to amend articles readily and swiftly in light of new information is the ultimate power of Wikipedia. This means that any one Wikipedia article can reflect the most current and most accurate representation of that segment of human knowledge at any given moment. All any one topic needs is to be activated by interested
and empowered editors with access to the right information sources and reference material.

Individual Wikipedians can often work for long stretches on Wikipedia without much interaction with fellow editors, and for many that is the ideal. However, there are many more who look for editors to collaborate and work with, generally to attain shared goals around the quality of articles relating to a particular topic. Wikipedia itself is not in the business of being a social network, but many editors find themselves forging communities of practice as well as developing friendships with those they interact with. As activated individuals and communities, Wikipedians set themselves goals and challenges to improve distinct areas of content through writing drives, seeking to encourage people with expertise to review and contribute to articles within their specialisms, and at times even rally to protect articles from vandalism or other unconstructive editors.

When they choose to write about GLAMs or the objects within them, Wikipedians do so out of a belief that the subject is worthy of space in the largest encyclopaedia ever written. Wikipedia was visited over 74 million times from Ireland alone in February 2021. When we talk about impact and outreach, the power that Wikipedia holds to reach not only audiences within Ireland, but across the world, cannot be questioned. Often these editors will write articles with no support from the GLAM, no special insight into the institution, limited access to high-quality information, and they will do so using the resources that are most readily available to hand. If a GLAM wants to ensure that the best quality images and information are made available to these editors, there are two simple strategies that most institutions can explore.

An image found is better than no image at all
One of the most powerful ways that GLAMs can aid in the work of Wikipedians, and more broadly Wikimedians, is through the open licensing of images from or of their collections. The movement towards the open licensing of images from GLAM institutions is one that has been going for many years, with institutions formally ‘donating’ their images to projects such as Wikimedia Commons by publishing them under open licences.
Much has been written to address the concerns of GLAMs in relation to the effect of such open licences on their images, and on their ability to earn revenue from them. Increasingly, institutions are realising that the benefits of opening up their image collections, or ‘setting them free’, vastly outweigh any perceived negatives. One documented effect is the the Yellow Milkmaid Syndrome, named after a case in which poor-quality, yellowed versions of a painting in the Rijksmuseum became so prevalent online, that people didn’t believe that the museum’s own postcards showed the original painting. The Rijksmuseum’s open publication of a high-quality, high-resolution image resulted in poor-quality, yellowed versions of a painting in the Rijksmuseum became so prevalent online, that people didn’t believe that the museum’s own postcards showed the original painting. The net benefits of this response has been, for the museum, that its own image is now the one that users globally are most likely to virtually encounter, and, for viewers, an improved quality of experience of the painting, irrespective of where in the world they are.

Until an institution makes its images available under a licence that is compatible with Wikimedia projects (non-commercial or non-derivative caveats preclude their use on Wikimedia platforms), editors will make do with the best images available. These will range from tourist snaps to low-resolution thumbnails, and any others that happen to find their way onto the internet under a suitable licence. This has resulted in the use of images from US and UK institutions, which have by comparison been quicker to adopt open licences than have their Irish counterparts, to illustrate articles on Irish collections. Examples of Wikipedia articles in which this has occurred include, for example, those on the Book of Durrow and Kinsale cloak. This raises questions about who is telling the visual stories of Ireland and what sources are given primacy. Opening up image collections that can be published under either Public Domain or Creative Commons licences, ensures that those stories, histories and narratives that are relevant to Ireland can be meaningfully illustrated with high-quality images from our GLAM collections.

The case for open licence text
As many large institutions have moved towards the open licensing of their images, a similar discussion about the use of open licences for text has come to the fore. Many US and also international organisations, such as NASA and UNESCO, now routinely publish not only images, but also their captions and longer text, under open licence. For many knowledge-building institutions, this may seem like a strange next step, but there are several compelling arguments for text to be openly licenced, of which two will be examined here.

The first and most pragmatic centres around accuracy. Within many GLAM disciplines, the choice of words in image captions and descriptions is highly specific. When the text accompanying an image is not published under an open licence, it forces the citizen curator to paraphrase the text, and thus remove, obscure, or otherwise lose the benefit of the expert knowledge that went into an image caption or object description. This results in the needless changing of specialised language
to synonymous words, and in doing so removes most of the benefit of taking the information from sources written by disciplinary experts who in this example are professional GLAM authors.

Secondly, as with images issued under Creative Commons licences, text made freely available is still required to be given proper and rigorous attribution. For GLAMs, this could result in their text becoming the foundation or core of Wikipedia articles on a wide range of topics, with links to the originating text displayed prominently within the article. In this way, GLAMs’ websites would become further integrated into the knowledge web, allowing interested readers to find and access their collections, text and associated data, and driving traffic towards our cultural institutions.

Conclusion
As I have stated elsewhere, regardless of whether a GLAM acknowledges, cooperates, collaborates, or partners with Wikimedia projects, the editors that work at the coalface of Wikipedia will continue to write. Their work is driven by an encyclopaedic urge that is not contingent on gaining approval or consent from holding institutions, and the strength of their commitment to disseminating knowledge far outweighs that of any gatekeeping by a GLAM.

However, many of these citizen curators want to work with GLAMs, and share a passion with many GLAM professionals in getting the best available information into the hands of their audiences, and doing so in the most impactful way possible. In short, most Wikimedians are already on the side of GLAMs, and are just waiting for the opportunity to collaborate with them. You will find no better advocate for rigorous peer review, high standards of accurate citations, proper use of open licences, and the full attribution of information to GLAM sources than these citizen curators.

Notes
2. The term Public Domain refers to creative materials that are not protected by intellectual property laws such as copyright, trademark, or patent laws. The public owns these works, not an individual author or artist. Anyone can use a public domain work without obtaining permission, but no one can ever own it. See https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/public-domain/welcome/#:~:text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9Cpublic%20domain%E2%80%9D%20refers%20to%20the%20idea%20that%20one%20can%20ever%20own%20it.

Dr Rebecca O’Neill is the Project Coordinator for Wikimedia Community Ireland, the recognised affiliate of the Wikimedia Foundation in Ireland. A large portion of her work focuses on improving and strengthening the representation of women and content relating to Ireland on Wikipedia as well as on the Irish language Wikipedia – Vicipéid.
Audience development has a bad reputation, or at best, suffers from an image problem. We say the words, and sometimes point to a beautifully worded and formatted plan that has sat on a shelf since the last time a funder asked for it. But it is not an activity or a project, and nor is it a series of time-bound actions that, if blindly followed, will magically produce those longed-for audiences.

Spoiler: it doesn’t work like that. Sorry.

**A shift in mindset**

By habitually bringing great ideas to life before thinking about who might want to take part, we cannot grow our audiences. We need to put people first, centring on and responding creatively to their needs and behaviours, before curating
exhibitions or programming events. We need to flip it.

This shift in mindset entails a radical re-imagining of how we do things. Audience development is about building relationships, requiring dedication and time. A useful analogy is that of progression from a first date to a marriage proposal; it is a comparable process of progressive learning about a partner’s character and habits, of being flexible to their needs, and of long-term commitment.

Communication, Respect and Trust

As in any relationship, audience development depends on good communication, respect and trust. It is an intelligent conversation with a good friend, in which, rather than talking about ourselves, we ask about their life, how they are getting on, and what they’ve been doing. This is a dialogue in which both parties talk, and both parties listen.

Professional cultural institutions treat people as equals, believing in their creativity, interests, talents, opinions and tastes. They outwardly display trust in people, taking pride in being friendly and respecting them as adults – irrespective of their age. Negative institutional behaviours – for example, issuing instructions about how to behave, insisting that people stifle coughs or not laugh too loudly, preventing them from carrying their coffee through the door – are unwelcoming and not welcomed and will invariably damage our relationships with audiences.

Audience development isn’t rocket science. Rather, it is that thing we were all told as children: ‘treat people as you would like to be treated’. And that is how we will be able to flip it.

Fiona Bell is Client Relationships Director with Thrive – a Northern Ireland-based agency that supports arts, culture and heritage organisations to understand and grow their audiences.

C.S. Lewis Square, Belfast.

Credit: Thrive
This exciting new exhibition was ‘opened’ before Christmas 2020. Due to the COVID–19 pandemic, however, it has not been possible to make this rich and wonderful display accessible to the public. Hopefully this will happen as soon as the dreaded virus has been defeated.

The exhibition is indeed a gem in the Waterford Treasures displays and is a major addition to Waterford’s expanding ‘cultural quarter’. It is a credit to those responsible for its preparation and presentation. The material may be viewed and examined under a number of headings, depending on the interest and inclination of the museum visitor. The three obvious headings are those of design, function and historical significance, the exhibition scores highly on all three fronts.

On the issue of design, it is worth noting that there is a considerable body of material on display from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a period of great importance in the history and development of Irish silver. The restoration of Charles II, the advent of the Huguenots and the growing wealth of the new Anglo–Irish aristocracy all contributed to the growth in silver production. The growing urban middle class also made increasing use of silver wares.

The silver in the Waterford exhibition, thoughtfully chosen and well laid out, mirrors these developments. The advent of new foods and beverages, the growing sophistication of dining habits and the development of novel containers and utensils, are reflected in the display. Particularly eye-catching pieces include a 1694 tankard by James Weldon and several pieces by the famous Dublin silversmith Thomas Bolton, including a 1696 punch bowl or monteith, three exceptionally fine pierced castors dated 1699 and a rare pair of taper sticks dated 1714.
A fine and rare pear-shaped teapot by John Hamilton, dated 1715, and a beautifully proportioned beer jug from 1720 by the same maker are also worthy of note. The beer jug was originally owned by Dean Swift, giving it an added historical dimension. The exhibition also includes several pieces by the celebrated Dublin silversmith Robert Calderwood. A range of teapots, sugar bowls, cake baskets, tankards and coffee pots serve not only as indicators of evolving dining habits and usage but also as examples of changing design features, decoration and ornamentation. The gradual shift from the restrained and elegant shapes of the Queen Anne period to the swirling asymmetrical silver of the rococo period can be traced through the display, as can the progression from the exuberance of the rococo style to the lighter and more graceful decoration of the neo-classical designs that replaced it.

The exhibition also shows Irish silver not only in terms of its craftsmanship and artistic development but also in its social and historical context. The nobility obviously figures prominently and the coats of arms of such aristocrats as the Earl of Drogheda, the Earl of Shannon and the Marquis of Sligo appear, not only on presentation pieces but also on domestic wares. The arms of Lord Norbury, the infamous ‘hanging judge’ from the 1798 Rebellion period, appear on a handsome cake basket made by Dublin silversmith John Lloyd in 1770.

There are also a number of important presentation pieces, including freedom boxes presented to Lord Camden by the City of Kilkenny in 1800 and to Robert Peel by the City of Cork in 1813. These are important historical objects in that they carry information relating to both the donor and the recipient. An imposing ceremonial mace, commissioned for the borough of Blessington in County Wicklow by the Marquis of Downshire, reflects the power and wealth of the great land-owning families who ‘owned’ such boroughs.
Other important historical pieces include a pair of lidded cups, presented to an officer of the Manx Fencibles for his part in suppressing the 1798 Rebellion in Ulster, a sword presented to a yeomanry officer in 1799, and a hot water urn presented to an officer in the Liberty Rangers for his part in defeating the Rebellion, led by Robert Emmet, in 1803.

The great majority of the exhibition pieces were produced and assayed in Dublin and the list of makers reads like a ‘who’s who’ of the city’s most celebrated silversmiths: Thomas Bolton, James Weldon, Thomas Walker, John Hamilton, Robert Calderwood and John Lloyd. Limerick and Galway makers are also represented, the former by such well-known names as Joseph Johns and William Parker and the latter by Mark Fallon.

This is a well presented and visually pleasing exhibition, containing a fine array of high-quality material. It will be enjoyed and savoured by all those with an interest in the story of Irish silver.

Michael Kenny is an historian, writer and former Keeper of the Art and Industrial Division of the National Museum of Ireland.
Suffering the Most
Cork Public Museum
21 September 2020 – 20 December 2021

Danielle O’Donovan

As you drive into Cork City from the east, along the dual carriageway at Tivoli, two giant banners portray the two lost Lord mayors of Cork, Tomás MacCurtáin and Terence MacSwiney, accompanied by the slogan ‘A City Remembers’. MacCurtáin, Lord Mayor of Cork, was shot in March 1920 as violence in the city escalated. By October, MacSwiney, as his replacement, was dying on hunger strike in a British prison. In December, when crown forces set fire to St Patrick’s Street, hostilities reached a fever pitch.

One hundred years on, in 2020, Cork was to have taken a leading role in the Decade of Centenaries. Exhibitions and events had been planned to fill the cultural spaces of the city, and to spill onto the streets in the form of state commemorations. The appearance on 17 February 2020 of the first case of COVID-19 in Ireland and the announcement of restrictive measures on 12 March overshadowed the centenary of Tomás MacCurtáin’s death on 20th of that month. When full lockdown was announced on March 29, it became clear that Cork City’s year of remembering would be severely curtailed.

Cork Public Museum’s Suffering the Most: The life and times of Tomás MacCurtáin and Terence MacSwiney was launched in September 2020 but has only managed to be open to the public for nine weeks at the time of writing. The exhibition was a collaboration between museum staff and Dandelion Design, with well-known local historian Gerry White, who researched and wrote the information panels. His knowledge of the period is encyclopedic, and he has distilled it into a compelling text.

An excerpt MacSwiney’s first speech as Lord Mayor of Cork forms the gateway to the exhibition:

This contest of ours is not on our side a rivalry of vengeance, but one of endurance - it is not they who can inflict most but who can suffer the most will conquer - though we do not abrogate our function to demand and see that evil doers and murderers are punished for their crimes.
Punishment for crimes is certainly a recurrent theme in the exhibition, and so too is suffering and loss. Beyond the gateway text are panels that describe the early lives of MacCurtáin and MacSwiney, a good curatorial decision. It becomes immediately apparent that these two men led parallel lives, had much in common and knew each other well. They were both ‘North Mon’ boys, both played leading roles in cultural groups, and both joined the Irish Volunteers, ending as first and second in command in Cork City.

Juxtaposed in cases are the texts that they read, their Fáinne pins, and their weapons. These objects tell us that MacCurtáin and MacSwiney were thinking, cultured, men of faith, who loved Irish culture and language. While they were not afraid to resort to violence, they also knew that there was power in political action. In 1915, MacCurtáin became the commander of the Cork No. 1 Brigade of the Irish Volunteers, and so was commanding officer during the 1916 Easter Rising, following which both men were interned in Britain. In November 1919 during the War of Independence, under MacCurtáin’s command the Cork Volunteers stepped up their campaign with attacks on RIC barracks. Both men were elected to Cork Corporation in January 1920 as Sinn Féin councillors. A well-chosen quote by Daniel Corkery tells us much about their working relationship:

_They were exactly opposite in type — Terence MacSwiney being an intellectual for good and harm; his friend being a man of shrewd, homely wit,_

A whole wall of the exhibition is dedicated to the election of MacCurtáin at the Cork City Council meeting on 30 January 1920, and the subsequent election of MacSwiney two months later.

Credit: Cork Public Museum
high-spirited and gifted with an amount of brain, having, moreover, an insight into men and affairs that astonished all who came into contact with him. Exactly opposites, they yet worked most happily in harness.

The end wall of the exhibition is dedicated to the appointment of the two men as Lord Mayor. When elected to lead the new Cork Corporation at a meeting on 30 January 1920, Tomás MacCurtáin’s first act was to recognise Dáil Éireann. Within two months he was dead, shot in his home in front of his pregnant wife and children in retaliation for the killing of an RIC officer. The tragedy of his death is captured brilliantly in the images of the MacCurtáin family at the funeral.

Succeeding MacCurtáin, much of MacSwiney’s time as Lord Mayor was spent on the run. When he was arrested at Cork City Hall in August and charged with sedition, he decided to join a hunger strike that had been commenced by republican prisoners on the previous day. As the exhibition attests, when sentenced he declared that he would be ‘free, alive or dead, within a month’. MacSwiney’s hunger strike in Brixton Prison is set in the context of the hunger strike which continued in Cork throughout the months of August, September and October 1920. The international impact of MacSwiney’s hunger strike is evoked with curatorial precision, including the display of letters of commiseration from around the world after his death on 25 October. His funeral took place in Cork six days later.

**Notes**

1. The North Monastery is a Christian Brothers secondary school in Cork.

2. A pin badge worn to show commitment to the speaking of the Irish language.

3. Royal Irish Constabulary.

4. Meaning ‘Assembly of Ireland’, the Dáil Éireann is the lower house and primary chamber of the Irish legislature.
Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century and developed the language of abstract painting. This landmark exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland is the first major survey of the artist’s work to be held in Ireland. It was organised in collaboration with the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the Netherlands, which has the largest collection of Mondrian works, some 300 in total. The Dublin exhibition features 40 paintings by Mondrian. The focus of the exhibition is the art that Mondrian made in the Netherlands and Paris before the Second World War and spans five decades of his career. Mondrian fled Paris for London in 1938 before eventually leaving for New York in 1940, where he spent the final four years of his life.

The exhibition is divided across the periods of his career under the headings of Zeeland – Light & Colour, Paris – Cubism, De Stijl, and Paris 1930s–40s. It provides a compelling visual narrative of Mondrian’s long artistic evolution, from his landscape paintings to his rigorous geometric abstract works for which he is best-known.

Born in Amersfoort in the province of Utrecht, Mondrian studied painting at the Amsterdam Academy from 1892–4 and again, part-time, from 1896–7. The earliest work is The Royal Wax Candle Factory (1895) of which Mondrian made many studies when he lived across from it on Ruysdaelkade in Amsterdam. The artist’s deep affinity with nature is in evidence from early on in his oeuvre, and works such as Bleachworks on the Gein, 1900 show the artist painting very much in the Hague School tradition. Indeed, up until Mondrian was almost forty, his art was informed...
by his native Dutch countryside, with a preference for repeatedly painting the same subjects: the river Gein, trees and windmills. Several paintings demonstrate the artist’s rootedness in his Dutch heritage.

From early on, Mondrian eschewed the inclusion of the figure and this is evident in his views of the farmhouses and barns that date from his time in Uden, North Brabant, where he spent a year from 1904. These works, with their flattened structures, limited tonalities and emphasis on verticals and horizontals and the blocking in of colour, are a foretaste of things to come. In 1905 the first solo exhibition of Van Gogh’s work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam had a profound impact. A further interest in theosophy, and the idea that painting could express natural form and a spiritual dimension, led to Mondrian joining the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1909.

From 1908, Mondrian made regular trips to Domburg on the Zeeland coast, then a remote area with a growing artistic community. Here Mondrian’s palette becomes much more saturated with pure, intense colour and there are some stunning examples from his series of paintings of the towers, lighthouses and sand dunes of the region. Dots and dashes of oranges, yellows, blues and pinks abound. The high point of this room is the exquisite painting of the Church Tower, Domburg, 1911 with its startling pinks and blues. Arum Lily, 1908 is also particularly striking and it is interesting to note that Mondrian painted flowers right through his career, especially blooms that were tall with a strongly defined structure. In 1909, Mondrian had an exhibition at the Stedelijk, which established his reputation as a leading Dutch avant-garde artist. An exhibition of modern art in 1911, at the same museum, led to the artist encountering Cubism and the work of Picasso and Braque. After this, he made radical changes to his life and art and at the age of 39 he moved to Paris. There he mixed with Dutch and international artists and met Georges Braque, Diego Rivera and Fernand Léger.
The Paris-Cubism room of the exhibition has two main themes: trees and buildings. Here we see Mondrian experimenting with the oval as a compositional device. From 1911–1914 it featured in many of his paintings of trees, buildings, and the sea. *Composition in Oval with Colour Planes 2* (1914) is particularly fine and based on demolished buildings he had seen at the time. In June 1914, the Walrecht gallery in The Hague held an exhibition of Mondrian’s Cubist work. He was in the Netherlands to see the exhibition and to visit family when the First World War began, and remained there for its duration.

While in the Netherlands during the war, Mondrian continued to paint. Crucially he also met Theo Van Doesburg with whom, in October 1917, he formed *De Stijl* magazine, in which Mondrian published the first instalment of his essay ‘Neo-Plasticism in Pictorial Art’. Neo-plasticism was the term adopted by Mondrian, for his own type of abstract painting which used only horizontal and vertical lines and primary colours. His growing commitment to abstract art can be seen in the striking *Self-portrait* of 1918, with the clear reference to the series of compositions of 1917 in which the principles of Neo-Plasticism are expressed. Mondrian withdrew from *De Stijl* in 1923 following Van Doesburg’s adoption of diagonal elements in his work. Examples of works by *De Stijl* artists and designers – including Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leck, Gerrit Rietveld and Vilmos Huszár – feature in the room devoted to *De Stijl*.

Mondrian returned to Paris in 1919 and remained there until 1938. Here in the final room, we see the full articulation of his language of Neo-Plasticism where the simple pared back language of verticals and horizontals and his use of primary colours comes to the fore. As a lover of jazz and dancing, he frequented Parisian clubs where he was noted as an idiosyncratic dancer. He began to compare his art to jazz in the 1920s, seeing it as a musical form that was tightly arranged and melodic but allowed space for improvisation and disruption with its syncopated beats and off-kilter melodies. *Composition de Lignes et Couleur: III* (1937) provides the viewer with an opportunity to witness and enjoy close up Mondrian’s dynamic, sensual and timeless paintings from this time. However, those visitors not especially versed in Mondrian may leave without a sense of the significance of Mondrian’s Parisian studio at rue du Départ, which he occupied from 1921 to 1936 and which was so integral to the application of his ideas in his art, and the inclusion of this would have added further to the exhibition.

**Dr Margarita Cappock is an Art Historian, Curator and Lecturer. She is Assistant City Arts Officer at Dublin City Arts Office and Chair of ICOM Ireland.**

**With thanks to the National Gallery of Ireland for supplying the images for this review.**
A British Museum touring exhibition
Living with Art: Picasso to Celmins
FE McWilliam Gallery and Studio
17 October 2020 – 30 January 2021

Dougal McKenzie

The irony will not be lost on viewers of this exhibition (which within its gallery and museum touring cycle can also be viewed online), that in the same way that COVID-19 lockdowns have forced us into watching movies on the internet, so too do we find ourselves (at the time of writing) wandering around art exhibitions in a comparable ‘virtual world’ of viewing.

The exhibition reviewed here comes to us through a generous bequest to the British Museum by film critic and writer Alexander Walker, who, more than most, valued the actual experience of sitting in a cinema. His commitment to buying artworks for his London flat (in his case, exclusively works on paper), suggests that he equally valued and understood the impact art has on us when experienced ‘face-to-face’.

These face-to-face encounters have been few and far between for gallery and cinema goers this past year, but before the December lockdown I was lucky enough to have visited the exhibition twice in its iteration at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Studio. I was therefore able to experience the lovely touch provided at the exhibition’s entrance: the very bike that had been used by Walker when he returned to Portadown on visits home. Walker never drove a car; according to his 2004 obituary in London’s Evening Standard, for which he was the film critic for 43 years, he generally eschewed any sort of gadgetry. The display of his bike therefore provided a playful sense of circularity, in joining his art collection for what might be described as the ‘home leg’ of the exhibition’s tour.

On entering the gallery, a ‘Who’s Who’ of 20th century artists’ works on paper unfolded. Walker was drawn towards buying works of art which he found challenging as much as he found them stimulating, and in the process accumulated a quite extraordinary roll-call, extending from a Picasso Cubist still life etching printed in 1911, to a Peter Doig folio of ten etchings produced in 1996.

The extensive exhibition catalogue written by exhibition curator Dr Catherine Daunt displays a forensic eye for detail, equal to Walker’s own meticulous keeping of records of his purchases. It is interesting to note that of the 211 works in his collection, the vast majority of purchases were made from the 1990s onwards, made possible by the successful sales of his film biographies. What was to become an addiction had begun however...
in 1964, with the purchase of an unidentified Soviet artist’s watercolour drawing (possibly by Igor Ivanovich Yershov) for £60. By 1968, Walker was able to acquire a more significant work, a Braque lithograph, but it wasn’t until 1990 that his collection really took off, with purchases including a Howard Hodgkin colour etching and a Max Ernst colour lithograph. By this time, Walker’s regular (almost monthly) art-buying habit had extended to thousands of pounds for each work.

The selected works at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery were intelligently and elegantly arranged by curators Catherine Daunt and Riann Coulter, with some really outstanding pieces on show. In many ways there is an increased intimacy and sense of pleasure in looking at an artist’s hand at work when viewing small works on paper, and perhaps because of this, my eye was drawn towards these particular pieces:

- A Keith Vaughan gouache, ink wash and crayon with collage on board, from 1964 and titled *Cymbeline II or Fear No More the Heat of the Sun*, which in its tender figurative grouping, seemed to reach forward to our present Covid times.

- Equally powerful and resonant, a David Bomberg World War I charcoal on paper work from 1915, called *Study for Billet*.

- A joyous Alan Davie black oil paint on paper, *Opus 627* from 1954, in which a figure and an ancient Egyptian pottery design meld into one;

- A Bridget Riley graph paper instruction from 1967, that included her penciled note ‘Luminosity therefore Larger Scale’;

- A Willem de Kooning charcoal on paper, *Figure in a Landscape* from around 1970–75, displaying the painter’s customary searching, smudging, obliterating lines of a human form;
• and perhaps most extraordinarily (given the recent furores over the postponement of the Philip Guston exhibition in London, Washington, Houston and Boston), a small 40.5 x 58.6 cm charcoal on paper from 1968 titled *Hooded* – a bandaged head that displays the nascent formation of what were to become the Ku Klux Klan characters in many of his late paintings.

The closing credits for the Walker touring exhibition are, however, positive. Our longing to return to the cinema to watch the big screen, and also to see artworks in galleries and museums, may lead, thankfully, to a sort of resurgence once lockdown eases again, as we come to realise how much we have missed the social and physical interactions of the cinema, and equally, of going to look at art.

Walker’s collection of works on paper, and his motivations for buying them in the first place, underline our human need for this beautifully.

*Dougal McKenzie, who lives in Banbridge, is a painter and a lecturer at Belfast School of Art and is a member of the FE McWilliam Gallery and Studio Programming Committee.*

**Notes**

**Review: Online exhibitions**

**Reflections on Resilience**
*The National Museum of Ireland*


**Hannah Crowdy**

Whilst online exhibitions are no substitute for the ‘real thing’, they enable us to get our ‘museum fix’ during lockdown and they have much potential for museums in terms of expanding our audiences and raising awareness of our collections. What struck me during the first lockdown was that even when our most fundamental and valued function, that of opening our doors to visitors, is taken away, we still have our collections at our core and we must strive to keep people connected with them.

This exhibition has a particularly topical and resonant theme during this time of pandemic. As each of us faces up to our own particular challenges and anxieties – from the frustrations of homeschooling, to the monotony of home working, to the very real fears over job security and income – the objects explored here bring welcome perspective and reassurance. As the introduction reminds us, ‘Human resilience is as old as history itself’.

The 26 objects featured cut across time-periods, continents and traditional collection disciplines, speaking to a commonality of experience. The prehistoric flint mace head, with its Munch-like scream, sets the scene for our introduction, on a page which provokes my one stylistic quibble due to the slight illegibility of text presented across the image. The mace head is one of a number of objects featured that represent layers of resilience – in its tough flint form, meticulous craftsmanship, remarkable survival from a long-distant time and the persistence of professionals who successfully excavated and conserved it. Such professional resilience is celebrated again with the remarkable Cogalbeg Bronze Age Hoard, saved for the nation thanks to the skill and tenacity of the Gardai and National Museum of Ireland staff.

However, compared to other inhabitants of our world, the resilience of humankind can seem rather paltry. A beautiful Blaschka model of a jellyfish is interpreted with a reminder that these marine creatures have been on earth for over 500-million years, far longer than us and pre-dating and outliving the dinosaurs. This could prompt feelings of insignificance about our own time on earth and contributions to life, but the exhibition contains more than one reminder that resilience is not about being stoic, it requires proactivity and we all have a part to play. The Golden Eagle comes with a stark reminder about contemporary issues of biodiversity loss and species conservation, and the need for ‘communities, whether scientific, international or local, (to) work together purposefully’.

When asked to choose a favourite object from the National Museums NI collection, I often pick a ‘lost pig’ notice from the 1840s, which is on display in the Modern History gallery at the Ulster Museum. I love it for its ordinariness and its resilience. Such a scrap of everyday ephemera was not intended to survive at all, let alone within the collections of a national museum. So it is no surprise that I was drawn to the raffle ticket from 1940, another throwaway item not meant to last (especially as it was not even a winning ticket). It is small and humble, but part of a bigger drive for the survival of Irish language and culture. Other seemingly insignificant but quietly powerful and resilient objects include the contents of the pockets of Thomas Clarke. Out of context they are nothing more than a book of stamps, a pencil and an empty glasses case, but for those who know or are informed here of the full story, that Thomas Clarke was imprisoned and then executed for his role in the Easter Rising, they are suddenly part of a seismic event in our history. It was sad and
sobering to read that they were returned to his wife who was refused his body for burial. Different times, schisms and threats now, but this did make me think of the many resilient families who have had to endure being parted from their loved ones at the end due to COVID-19, and denied the opportunity of shared, supported grief.

I missed the stimulating conversations with others in a real gallery setting but enjoyed the opportunity to immerse myself fully in the exhibition, and – as it notes – which objects are on display so it has nicely whetted my appetite for when I can visit once again. Resilience is a universal and timeless theme, as the objects demonstrate, so I hope that the exhibition will be updated in time, and I would be particularly interested to see how contemporary collecting of the pandemic could be represented. These stories of resilience are a reminder that we will come through these bad times, and things will get better. They are also a reminder of the role museums and collections play in helping us to understand and face up to the challenges within society today, and inspire positive attitude and action for a more sustainable and resilient future.

Hannah Crowdy is Head of Curatorial at National Museums NI. She sits on the ICOM UK Executive Committee and the Ethics Committee for the Museums Association.

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**Exploring the Irish Wars, 1919–1923**

The National Museum of Ireland


**Darragh Gannon**

The digital doors of the National Museum of Ireland are well and truly open. The ‘long’ 2020 has been a challenging year for Irish museums; the international pandemic has restricted the opening of Irish cultural institutions and limited the public’s access to their collections. What functions can museums perform, and for which communities, in a COVID–19 world? Reflecting on this subject, the Director of the National Museum, Dr Lynn Scarff noted that it was important ‘that we use this time to connect with communities that may have thought our institutions weren’t for them in the past’. One such community has been the global Irish diaspora, traditionally restricted from access to Irish museums by geographical and cultural distance. For the millions of migrants around the world who claim Irish heritage, the National Museum’s digital approach to the Decade of Commemorations has been truly revolutionary. The digitisation of the Military and Easter Week collections have made ten thousand artefacts available to international scholars, while the virtual tour of its successful ‘Proclaiming a Republic: the 1916 Rising’ exhibition has brought visitors from across the diaspora into the digital spaces of Collins Barracks. The *Exploring the Irish Wars, 1919–1923* online exhibition is the latest innovation from the National Museum.

Developed from its acclaimed *Soldiers and Chiefs* exhibition, *Exploring the Irish Wars* brings the digital visitor through the well-worn histories of the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War respectively. This, however, is an exhibition with a difference. As its curator, Brenda Malone has stated, the central exhibition idea of *Exploring the Irish Wars* is to ‘expand and develop traditionally underrepresented stories…personal stories of ordinary people involved in atrocities and tragedies on both sides of the conflict’. The digital platform is well designed to deliver on such ambitious museological aims. Wide-ranging themes such as ‘civil disobedience’, ‘imprisonment’, ‘hunger-strike’, ‘propaganda’, ‘women in warfare’, and ‘effects on civilian populations’ are given greater attention in the unlimited white space of the online exhibition. The digital platform further facilitates the integration of engaging multimedia sources (Irish Film Institute newsreel films) and
virtual reality interactives (‘Which side would you choose?’), often prohibitively expensive to install, and challenging to maintain, in the physical exhibition space. However, it is the digital display of the NMI’s extraordinary collection of objects, artefacts, and images which allows the visitor to explore the realities of political violence in the Irish War of Independence and Civil War.

The exhibition chronicles the period from the IRA attack at Soloheadbeg on 21 January 1919 to the IRA ceasefire on 30 April 1923. The exhibit’s displays range widely over the period. The presence of unique narrative artefacts adds weight to accounts submerged within the written historical record: a Thompson sub-machine gun smuggled by the IRA from the USA; a civilian pass from the Limerick Soviet strike; the hair shorn from a woman in a ‘bobbing’; a previously unpublished IRA intelligence file of post-Bloody Sunday British crown targets. Other items add depth of character to figures previously consigned to two-dimensional biography: the set of keys used by Éamon de Valera in his prison escape from Lincoln Jail; the suit waistcoat worn by Peadar Clancy on the evening of his murder in Dublin Castle; the pen used by Michael Collins to sign the Anglo-Irish Treaty in London. While the narrative of the Irish War of Independence can often be difficult to follow in an online exhibition, such objects restore contemporary experience and counter-narrative to its well-established history.

If history is written by the victors (as Churchill once claimed), museums curate the memory of both victors and vanquished. The National Museum’s open invitation to donate items relating to the 1916–22 period prompted the submission of thousands of objects by members of the public in the decades which followed, from both pro- and anti-Treaty supporters alike. Exploring the Irish Wars offsets the potential for partisan narratives of the Civil War by displaying the tangible, personal effects of individual lives on both sides of the conflict: Kevin O’Higgins’ wedding photograph; Rory O’Connor’s rosary beads; the death masks of Cathal Brugha and Arthur Griffith; the greatcoat worn by Michael Collins at Béal na mBláth; the military uniform worn by Liam Lynch at Knockmeadown. The completed exhibition, consequently, is a display not only of the history of the Irish Civil War but of its contested memories.

Dr Darragh Gannon is AHRC Research Fellow at Queen’s University Belfast and ICUF Beacon Fellow at the University of Toronto. He is the author of Proclaiming a Republic: Ireland, 1916 and the National Collection (Irish Academic Press, 2016).

Notes
IMMA Screen
IMMA
26 May – 17 November 2020
https://imma.ie/whats-on/imma-screen-project/

David Haughey

From 26 May – 17 November 2020, IMMA Screen presented a selection of video works by six artists online. Querying how the lens shapes and contorts identity and how the self is performed and mediated, the initiative prompted discussion concerning not only the position of the socially distanced viewer, but also the dissemination of video works. This review contemplates the complete series and also the digital context as the mediating frame.

The existential threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic flared a particular form of reaction, both from individual arts practitioners and institutions that support them, suggesting that no matter the encroaching symptoms, there must be a continuity of production: public visibility should remain unfettered and on a schedule structured by the conditions familiar until the Spring of 2020, but now in the only available public space: digital space. Uncomfortable questions, gathering momentum just beneath the surface of our recent necessary mobilisation to digital platforms, are summoned by the apparent congruence between video and the context in which it is presented. These questions have a bearing on the suitability of online platforms for particular artworks, and are primarily concerned with display.

Albeit that the screens of mobile devices and desktop computers appear strikingly similar to those of the screens and planes of projection housed by fine art institutions, the differences are of consequence. As Victor Burgin has described, this moment is not emblematic of a visual monoculture, but rather, with our screens connected to an all–encompassing internet, we are in possession of a cinematic heterotopia.1 Video in this distributed context spills over spatial and temporal boundaries. Personal photo–reels mingle with YouTube conspiracies and TikTok shufflers, and the historical, political and trivial fuse with personal memory, fantasy and feeling; all pixels pucker and contort in the same imaginative territory. Burgin suggests that the images within these virtual matrices have a significant parallel with theories of the unconscious: through a variety of autopoiesis, the fragmentary can spontaneously organise in narrative terms.

In Alanna O’Kelly’s Sanctuary/Wastelands, the suggestion of an inward voyage through ritual is suggested by auditory and visual undulations. The film describes and evokes a journey towards a space where individuality is transcended, with consciousness ushered toward the universal symbol of the mound. In O’Kelly’s work, the sea washes up and spontaneously formulates symbols from an implicit interior, a parallel being drawn between the body of water at Silver Strand, County Mayo, and the self. The location, known as Sanctuary and also a famine grave, is what inspired and provoked the coagulation of sign and sound in O’Kelly’s film. While alluding to a history of materiality, the work also describes a transcendence of physical limitations. Composed initially on slide–tape, its digitisation by O’Kelly is an act about the consequences of which she apparently remains uncertain. There is evident discomfort in her recount of this inevitable transition, and her misgivings have no doubt increased with its movement from the gallery wall to the hyperlink.²

Through a minimal documentary approach, Helen Cammock’s The Long Note successfully mutes the torrent of everyday lockdown anxieties. The film describes the strength of women’s actions during the civil rights movement in Derry:

Catholics were getting wee jobs, you know. Working in the hospital or something with a wee pension attached, a bit of security.

The voice of a mother describes a spare existence over archive footage of the city. The subtlety and regard of Cammock’s arrangement, tracing the resistance enacted by the women of Derry, has an overwhelming emotional resonance that transcends the constraints of its online presentation. Although her work is consistent with the conventions of documentary film, it foregoes certain formalities to embrace a much more absorbing, universal perspective.

Phil Collins focuses on the conventions of
documentary method, and his video describes the whispering callousness that surrounds the aestheticisation of tragedy, and the trauma that image-making can inflict. While all the works in the IMMA Screen series are concerned with visuality and identity, Collins’ 1999 How to Make a Refugee deftly unpicks some of the more loathsome features of representation. Remarkable in this presentation, is the pronounced embarrassment that viewing can inflict. Had the video been presented in the gallery environment, the boy and the frame of the work would be somewhat isolated by context. Amongst the tabs on a browser or a mobile device, we tacitly collude with the depicted white throw rug and the photo-wallpaper landscape. ‘Can they all sit down?’ a photographer asks, and this question seems strikingly improper, becoming imperial and simultaneously pornographic. ‘Can I do one quickly?’ another female photographer asks, as the boy, in a topless contortion, is squashed between his granny and cousins.

An escape from the species of complicity suggested in Collin’s film, is a conceptual thread binding Isabel Nolan’s two short video works. From Sloganeering 1–4 comes the statement from the artist and subject, ‘I will not make any more art about art’, while The Condition of Emptiness describes a self-imposed wordlessness. The former work delivers an avalanche of language and pithy self-branding statements, and the latter, isolation. These differing states are borne of a similar impulse: refusal to be enmeshed with and enfolded within ‘the artifice of relations between people.’ Desaturated pencil clouds envelop a bone–bare tree in deafening silence, and then morph into concentric circles and geometric abstraction. The austere retreat described in The Condition of Emptiness is voluntary, contrasting with the involuntary isolation imposed on its viewers at present. A typewritten note forms inaudibly across the screen above withering hands and reads, ‘I have lived without seeing any text or hearing words. I’ve had no direct contact with other people for ten months.’ The anxiety described by The Condition of Emptiness does not arise from the brutality of disappearing within a crush of people, but rather, from vanishing within ourselves in a self-selected hinterland. Precisient of this insulated moment, the film asks us to consider what constitutes a nation and a self.

The methods by which the exhibition as a visual medium distinguishes fine art practices from other expository techniques, appears to be a set of conditions all but elided from popular consciousness. An unbridgeable divide may exist between these video works, composed to engage with gallery and museum spaces and with the expansiveness of perception that they enable, and video destined for the lecture theatre, smartphone, or cinema. The disciplinary transposition of Kevin Gaffney’s work, Everything Disappears, adapts anthropological documentary filmmaking to biographical poetry. Distributed online in the present context, the line: ‘Sometimes I feel like I’m from outer space. When I’m not with my family, I have no connection to them, I’m visiting my own life’, takes on a visceral poignancy. The lottery of self and the consequence of narrow social waters described in the film, not only speak to a feeling of individual boundlessness and worldly constraints, but also raises questions about where and how we nominate and define the artefacts that emerge from our exercises in remembering.

In Vivienne Dick’s Visibility; Moderate, the exuberant disaffection that hangs in the female narrator’s voice as she sings ‘If you’re Irish come into the parlour’, could easily have been the co-opted anthem of the past two decades. Between the depictions of youth’s gum-chewing restlessness, and mock interrogation of republican terrorists, Visibility; Moderate presages the deluge of strategically ironic, autobiographical video that is now amassing on servers. Now situated alongside them in online space, Dick’s visual language and critique, distilled in 1981, appears to have augured both that of the video-enabled individual, and the tactics of branding companies in the twenty-first century. A young man from the Curragh exclaims, ‘people around here are like mushrooms, kept in the dark and fed shit’. His vox pop, spliced between news footage of Belfast and coupled with a sean-nós trill, invokes the horror of an unceasingly, relentless present and a spectral future. Perhaps, as with Vivienne Dick’s protagonist, the time is high to collude and cooperate a little less, and to better consider the specificities defining physical public space, digital space and the implications for artefact and display.
David Haughey is an artist and researcher based in Belfast. In April 2021 he successfully defended his PhD thesis, which considers time and the image in the context of expanded fine art practices, with a particular focus on video and the exhibition.

Notes


5. A form of unaccompanied, highly ornamented traditional Irish singing.

The video works in IMMA Screen, as they appeared in this review, were:
Phil Collins, How to Make a Refugee, 1999.
Kevin Gaffney, Everything Disappears, 2014.
Vivienne Dick, Visibility; Moderate, 1981.
The Early Medieval Hand-Bells of Ireland and Britain
Bourke, Cormac
National Museum of Ireland / Wordwell. 2020

Griffin Murray

This book is a major achievement and an incredibly valuable resource for anyone with an interest in Ireland’s past. It is Cormac Bourke’s magnum opus, and both the author and the publishers, the National Museum of Ireland in association with Wordwell, are to be congratulated on its release. I am especially delighted to see this book being published by the National Museum of Ireland, which, given that most of the surviving bells featured are within its collections, demonstrates a deep commitment to supporting and making publicly accessible high quality research on its holdings.

The hand-bell’s origin appears to lie in Roman Britain and, as with other aspects of Irish Christianity that have similar origins, the Irish took the idea and ran with it. Irish bells can also be found today in the Ulster Museum, British Museum, National Museum of Scotland, Armagh Robinson Library, the Hunt Museum, and in a scattering of other museums, institutions, and churches. However, this is also an international book and, in keeping with the history of Irish Christianity in this period, the tradition of hand-bells extended to Scotland, Wales, England and Brittany.

Sound is something that we often do not consider when thinking about the distant past, but the ringing of a bell, used in timekeeping, for celebrations, and in times of danger, remains a powerful sound to this day. As discussed in this book, these bells were used in similar ways: to mark time during the monastic day, to enhance the celebration of the mass, but also, infunerals, and even for the cursing of one’s enemies. Many are associated with saints, were revered as relics, and were handed down to us under the protection of hereditary keepers, while others were lost or buried and were recovered in modern times. While the humble hand-bell might not have the ‘wow’ factor that their later shrines certainly have (which are also detailed in the book), the social and religious history of these objects is one of the richest you will encounter.

Bourke’s classification of hand-bells, first advanced by him in 1980, remains sound, consisting principally of bronze-coated iron bells (Class 1) and bronze bells (Class 2). Bells in his further classes (3 – 6) are less numerous and, dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, are later. The catalogue contains 161 extant bells, to which the author adds another 138 records of bells that are now lost. Given the number of both surviving and recorded hand-bells from Ireland, and their wide distribution, they must have been ubiquitous in the period before AD 900. Their creation nonetheless required material wealth and expertise; these were expensive objects that were made to last.

At over 700 pages, this book is quite a tome and consists of two interrelated parts, the first comprising discussion chapters and the second, and larger, a catalogue of bells. Bourke details the manufacture, dating, and use of hand-bells with great skill and, while this is principally an archaeological study, makes extensive and insightful use of historical sources throughout. While the main discussion is contained in the chapters, a great deal of information can be mined from the catalogue itself, and the author always goes the extra mile in his efforts to hunt down the history of a bell. I was struck for example by the story of Christopher Fagan, who in the summer of 1881, while searching for eels on Castle Island in Lough Lene in County Westmeath, lifted a stone and discovered one of the most impressive Class 2
bells we have (catalogue number 109). I also find
evocative the fact that the bell of Saint Ronan is
still carried in processions around the parish of
Locronan in Brittany on his feast day, a practice
that surely has its origins in the medieval period
(cat. 161). Another vivid account is that of the
Bearmán Ciaráin, a lost bell from Clonmacnoise,
which in 1043 was rung ‘with the end of the
Bachall Ísu’ in the act of cursing a local king (cat.
212 & pp 200–3).

The book is full of such gems and will forever be an
invaluable point of reference. Supplemented with
footnotes, tables, concordances, maps, and with
every bell illustrated, this volume is multi-layered
in its presentation. If I have any quibbles, it is the
lack of an index and my preference would have
been to incorporate the images in the catalogue
alongside the text, but these are minor points. The
book has had a long period of gestation and is the
culmination of many years of studying, writing,
and thinking about the subject matter and it is all
the better for it. This is top class scholarship, a
bible of bells.

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Painting Dublin: Visualising a Changing City
1886–1949
Milligan, Kathryn
Manchester University Press. 2020

Róisín Kennedy

One of the key aims of Painting Dublin is to
‘restore the representation of Dublin into the
realm of urban painting of late 19th and early
20th centuries’. Rather than presenting Irish art
in terms of Irish nationalism, the book seeks to
contextualise these representations in terms of
wider urban studies. The research draws on art
historical and interdisciplinary studies of city
and empire and the urban historical studies of
Dublin by David Dickson, Mary Daly and others.
The latter’s elucidation of the rise of the urban
middle classes and commercial life provide a rich
context for the analysis of imagery. Dublin is a
unique city. From 1886 to 1949, it moved from
being one of several provincial port cities in
Britain, albeit the only one with a vice-regal court,
to becoming the capital of an independent state.
Its Huguenot and Georgian past remained in the
physical fabric of the city and was increasingly
evoked in the nostalgic desire of some of its
inhabitants to revive a more noble image of their
impoverished metropolis. This is a major theme in
the representations discussed in this book.

The content is structured into biographical case-
studies of individual artists. Some, like Walter
Osborne and Jack B. Yeats, are well known,
while others, Rose Barton, Harry Kernoff, Estella
Solomons and Flora Mitchell, less so. While this
biographical format is intended to illuminate
how the social background and political leanings
of the artist’s life inform their representation of
Dublin, arguably, it impedes at times a deeper
interrogation of the artworks themselves. The
selection of artists does, however, highlight the
diversity of political and religious backgrounds of
artists generally in Dublin.

Osborne’s Near St. Patrick’s Close and The Fish Market
depict one of the oldest and poorest areas of the
city. These paintings of Dublin were exhibited in
England, as the meagre Irish art market preferred
rural landscapes and portraiture to cityscapes.
The frequent inclusion of flower sellers, market
stalls, and carts were motifs found widely in
late Victorian city paintings and were a way of
assimilating Osborne’s views of Dublin within the
wider British market. The Vendor of Books, 1889,
features the popular touristic view of O’Connell
Bridge and the Custom House. Its mixture of
different social types, including a flower seller
and a Gordon Highlander, makes it appear,
Milligan argues, like a stage scene. Thomas Bodkin
later dismissed Osborne’s work ‘as the trained
detached observance of an intelligent foreigner….he never seems to see Dublin with native eyes.’
The dismissal was perhaps a rejection of his compromised representation of the city aimed at British collectors.

The work of Yeats and Kernoff shows a more genuine empathy for the poorer inhabitants of Dublin. Yeats’s *Three Traders of Dublin*, a depiction of female figures, may refer to the dispute between Dublin traders and the city commissioners in 1927 which sought to curb their lifestyle. Setting the work within the contexts of contemporary modernist representations of urban life, most notably that of the German Expressionist, Ludwig Kirchner, Milligan even suggests that the figures could be interpreted as prostitutes.

Both Yeats and Kernoff favoured the river and the docklands in their representations of city life. Their wanderings approximate that of the flaneur, the quintessential modernist artist who observes street life, sketching or memorizing from a distance. The dilapidated buildings and machinery of the docks enabled Kernoff to produce images of industry and of workers. His prints and drawings were reproduced in numerous publications of the 1920s and 1930s, including in *A Book of Dublin* (1929), an official publication which sought to present the city as vibrant and industrial in the post–civil war period. An accomplished draughtsman, Kernoff produced drawings of other parts of the city, including St. Stephen’s Green and the Guinness Brewery. A prescient review of his 1937 exhibition noted that ‘many of his most beautiful paintings will in future have historic as well as artistic value, as they depict a Dublin that is passing’. The book offers a rare art historical appraisal of Kernoff’s work, noting that he was one of very few artists working in Ireland who was committed to the representation of labour and unemployment. His visit to the Soviet Union in 1930 and his left–wing sympathies were manifest in his empathetic attitude to Dubliners and made plain in his numerous representations of Liberty Hall.

Victorian Dublin was a city of contrasts with commentators comparing the finery of Dublin Castle to the extreme poverty of the tenements. Rose Barton, who was presented at court in 1876, was part of the elite of Dublin society. Her ethereal watercolours such as *Going to the Levée* offer a suitably unproblematic image of imperial Dublin. Several of her works were acquired by the Lord Lieutenants. Her illustrations for Frances Gerard’s *Picturesque Dublin*, 1898, focus on 17th and 18th century streetscapes. This ‘Old Dublin’, the pre–union city, was rediscovered at the end of the 19th century as part of a ‘reflective nostalgia’ in which continuation and stability were sought in times of change. This emphasis on the past reveals, Milligan argues, a detachment from contemporary reality.

The representations of Dublin by Solomons and Mitchell share this disengagement with the living inhabitants of the city, focusing instead on buildings and streetscapes. Solomons preferred the ‘older and more tumble–down parts of Dublin’ in her etchings of the 1920s which, like Barton’s work, show an aestheticized and antiquated view. For the nationalist Solomons, these expressed a sense of pride in the enduring history of Dublin as manifest in its streetscapes. In the 1950s, Mitchell embarked on a project to record the still extant Georgian buildings. Reproduced in *Vanishing Dublin*, 1966, a reviewer noted that Mitchell’s watercolours gloss over the wretchedness of the families living in squalor inside these buildings, giving us the Dublin ‘we would like to remember’ rather than the one that actually existed. One could say the same, perhaps, of many of the representations in *Painting Dublin*. These complex and at times contradictory images offer another way of thinking about the social history of Dublin, one that is characterized by a sense of loss and wistfulness. As today, a dichotomy exists between the graceful images of an historical city and the marginalisation of its living citizens. *Painting Dublin* is a valuable and refreshing addition to the literature on the city and to Irish art history. It uncovers fascinating insights into the relationship of visual artists to their maligned but much–loved metropolis.

*Dr Róisín Kennedy is an Irish art critic, writer and curator. She is a Lecturer in the School of Art History and Cultural Policy at University College Dublin.*
Despite the macabre title and the author’s description of her research for this book as her ‘misery project’, it begins with an inviting chapter entitled ‘Welcome’. *The Darkness Echoing* draws from archival sources, historiography, ethnographic research, and numerous Irish literary sources, as well as conversations with curators and tour guides and interactions with tourists. Special mention has to be made of O’Brien’s research assistants, including nieces, nephews and friends who accompanied her in exploring over 200 locations. What is particularly touching is how she incorporates the memories of past relatives, taking them with her as she explores Ireland’s dark and beautiful places.

Gillian O’Brien is a Reader in Modern Irish History at Liverpool John Moores University, but this is not a typical academic history book. *The Darkness Echoing* is a refreshing read in which she seamlessly weaves scholarly research together with personal stories. She writes with friendly and endearing prose throughout, welcoming the reader into her life while visiting Ireland’s dark tourism sites. Through the engaging text, she introduces us to several charming characters, including her Nana, who rehearsed her own funeral.

The book’s research-orientated chapters are organised thematically (Battle and Sieges, Rebellion and Revolution, Maritime Disasters, Famine, Emigration, Incarceration and Death), punctuated with smaller ‘Detour’ segments. The detours are short, clever insertions, allowing room for the reader to appreciate a touching or thought-provoking story that is loosely connected to the previous chapter. O’Brien critically analyses Ireland’s dark tourism sites, highlighting the processes by which exhibition narratives have been selected from among many potential stories. She argues that, as a result of this synthesis, interpretations of these places often lack the nuance needed to really understand Ireland’s past. O’Brien additionally debunks familiar myths about Irish history; for example, Sir Walter Raleigh did not bring the potato to Ireland (who knew!).

A useful map by illustrator Liane Payne accompanies each chapter, providing a guide to sites the length and breadth of Ireland. I would have loved to have seen some images in the book, especially the worn, creased, and fragile map O’Brien vividly describes. I want to see the folds and the red marker pen, which helped her to navigate the writing. I would happily purchase a new edition, or a travel guide edition, if it included images of some of the characters we meet and that trusty map.

The final short chapter, entitled ‘An Unexpected Darkness’, is particularly poignant. O’Brien takes time to reflect on how the COVID-19 crisis has affected Irish death rituals. The absence of wakes and gatherings at funerals, where family and friends provide comfort for those mourning, has been felt by many who have recently lost loved ones. The pandemic has shown many Irish people the importance of these rituals, which may seem overly morbid to those not from this island, for how we process grief. Through the lens of the current situation, O’Brien empathises with people of the past who experienced periods of extreme poverty, famine and mass emigration. For a book that provided a lot of fun and humour, the final three pages brought tears to my eyes.

Overall, *The Darkness Echoing* is a brilliant book for several reasons. It makes a valuable contribution to Irish history and Museum Studies scholarship through its meticulous historical research. The book is written in an accessible way, making it appealing to people interested in death rituals, travel and tourism, museums and heritage sites and family history. It is engaging, endearing and warm while being critical, analytical, and informative; a rare find in academic history books.

*Emma J. McAlister is a PhD Candidate researching material religion in museums at Queen’s University Belfast.*
Art and the Nation State: The Reception of Modern Art in Ireland.
Kennedy, Róisín
Liverpool University Press. 2021

Catherine Marshall

Maybe the single greatest tribute to the history of Modernism in the visual arts in Ireland or wherever Irish artists took it beyond the island, is Róisín Kennedy’s courageous and nuanced discussion of the impacts it had on audiences, whether they were artists themselves, critical writers, collectors, or the receiving general public. This remains true whether those responses were mainly hostile or if they were positive. Kennedy takes us through negative responses that were rooted in early Free State economic and cultural protectionism, provincialism, xenophobia, misogyny, and ignorance, but is balanced in her handling of them and of positive reactions that were rooted in fashionable taste, post-colonial attitudes, and uncritical pursuits of the great and famous. This allows her, for example, to see Sean Keating’s genuine attempts to understand modern art in what is often seen as a reactionary diatribe by him against the 1971 Rosc exhibition. She casts a critical eye on the use of the visual arts as an ambassador for the young nation, pushed forward by politicians and civil servants who were themselves often sceptical about the practices that they supported. At every level, Kennedy reveals the degree to which responses to art works are more often about image – the image of the viewer/consumer/commissioner/ institution than about the artwork.

The outstanding conclusion, from her detailed research into newspapers, journals, broadcast material, and interviews with leading writers, collectors, artists and curators, is that nothing is fixed. Attitudes are not static; they change, and blanket institutional responses are often undermined, even as they are delivered, by views within the institution itself. The Government might have rejected Harry Clarke’s famous Geneva window because of fears that the nudity it contained might upset the Catholic majority, but when it sought the advice of a senior churchman, Rev. Dr. Fogarty, Catholic Bishop of Killaloe, he advocated that the window be presented as planned, without alteration. Kennedy quotes an official as saying that the bishop ‘thought it a wonderful example of Stained Glass Art and felt it would make a tremendous impression’. The Board of the Municipal Gallery rejected Roualt’s abject Mocking of Christ as lacking the dignity that Christ should be afforded, only for it to be accepted on loan by the Catholic Seminary at Maynooth until such time as the gallery should change its mind. The list is endless and embraces secular commissions for religious art in public places, such as Andrew O’Connor’s Christ the King monument for Dun Laoghaire; a complex mix of misogyny, social-class and post-colonial prejudice in responses to abstract artworks such as Mainie Jellett’s Decoration and a similarly nuanced reaction to figuration in Micheal Farrell’s Madonna Irlanda.

Surprisingly there are few images, only twenty-four altogether and these in black and white. The book refuses to seduce the viewer with colour, focusing on the intellectual arguments and the central tenet, that it is about reception rather than artworks, about which, it might be argued, there are now quite a range of publications. Indeed, Kennedy herself has contributed to nearly all of the important recent ones, both as an editor and contributor. This book returns her to her PhD research of two decades ago into art critical writing in Ireland with the addition of a vastly expanded field of research that includes the full range of measurable and identifiable social modifiers from the marketplace to art education and gender politics. Given the pressures on universities to produce PhD graduates in four years, with research and writing completed to a formula, books such as this one remind us of the value of that older approach where the research was all important and the outcomes so significant that they cried out for publication.

We must be grateful that in this case, that is what happened. The author has spent years analysing and consolidating her material, and it shows. Oscar Wilde said that criticism is a creative activity, that the critic completes the artwork, unfinished until it finds that receptive soul to whom it speaks, influencing future production, and that is what this book does for Irish Modernism. It completes the picture of what has been created already and challenges artists, institutions and audiences alike.
to up their game for the future. Watch out, it says, Róisín Kennedy is watching you.

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**Revisiting Museums of Influence: Four Decades of Innovation and Public Quality in European Museums.**  
Mark O’Neill, Jette Sandahl and Marlen Mouliou (eds)  
Routledge. 2021

**Hugh Maguire**

Founded nearly forty-five years ago as a British charity with a European outlook, in a step that now seems remarkable and poignant, the European Museums Forum (EMF) has achieved credibility as the coordinating body for the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA). Comprising a loose amalgam of trans-national contacts and professionals, its remit for museums is contiguous with that of the Council of Europe, under which the award scheme has some authority. Alongside other culturally diverse groups with which it has collaborated, including the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) and ICOM Europe, the EMF can be celebrated for its unified stance on sectoral excellence. Not without its own personality clashes, tensions and splits over the years, its very considerable logistical achievements include its own survival, and maintenance and delivery of its award scheme year upon year.

A select range of Irish museums have had some success in the European Museum of the Year Award. These include the Waterford Museum of Treasures (then Waterford Museum at the Granary), 2002 runner-up to the overall prize-winner, the Chester Beatty Library. Volunteer judges have traversed extreme distances to the most unlikely places: an island in Greece one day, a remote Arctic Circle village in the Russian Federation, or a Scottish loch (admittedly not on the one trip). All this has been achieved on a shoestring budget, with local representatives facilitating where possible the efforts involved on the ground. And the award itself, when it comes, is much deserved, representing a huge achievement for the recipient. In a world of multi-million-euro museum projects, one might wonder at the equity of the playing field. But like a comparable institution, Europa Nostra, the EMF is not about money and expenditure, but rather, philosophy. This is a competition where we find an early winner, like the comparatively small and simple Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation in Nafplion, Greece, enjoying the same award and trophy as the 2015 winner, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

This recent publication sets out to capture something of the motivations and diversity of award-winners over the decades. Some fifty or so mini essays, authored by past EMF judges, take the reader through the variety of recipients. Much can be expected from these essays: the professional and personal insights of the adjudicators, the nature of the museums themselves, and the authors’ attempts to capture something of the quality that justified the overall prize. Overall, they succeed; it is almost sobering to see how rich and diverse the museum landscape remains, and the dedication of the many who keep such collections secure and interpreted for others. Unintended insights are provided, through the voices of the individual judges, into their particular interests: for some, an elegant building and its design comes across as more eloquent than the actual collection, while for others, the interpretive approach chosen is of course the core message. This is the sort of
publication one can dip into from time to time or use to find ideas from museums of a particular type.

If there is a fault with the publication, it is in the nature of its design and production values. The essays are arguably too short to give us anything other than a fleeting glimpse, or feel, of what the actual museum is. For some, the memories are inevitably distant – the museum once visited on that island back in 1982 is after all forty years ago! In our world where we now can Zoom anywhere and everywhere, illustrations need to be high quality, informative and, one might suggest, beautiful and evocative. For those of an architectural bent, some photos just about work, such as that of the Madinat Al-Zahra Museum in Cordoba, where the strong lines of the architecture come across well. The same cannot be said of that Peloponnesian Folklore Museum, which for me on a visit some years back, had a richness of Eastern Mediterranean costume and colour; the photo here is largely meaningless, and the same blur of grey nothingness applies to all too many. Similarly, while innovation is apparent and the potential for influence is implied, it is not always obvious that the winning museums exercised influence on others. Has the Chester Beatty Library influenced the interpretation of books and manuscripts elsewhere? Perhaps.

The whole is prefaced by an introductory essay setting the scene and providing the rationale for the origins of the scheme, and, usefully, the motivations of the organisation. This is set within the wider and practical logistical issues of delivering the scheme, as well as the experience of the editors and multiple authors. There is possibly unintentional reference to Britain being different from other countries in which the reviewed museums were situated, and to its different approach to museum culture, as with culture in general. Being British-based, and with many British trustees, it could be argued that the EMF’s award scheme, for all the international make-up of its judging panels, remains somewhat embedded in a British cultural perspective. In this author’s view, this is one where, despite changes in cultural priorities, museums must still be places with a social purpose; almost the equivalent of George Bernard Shaw’s moralist approach to theatre. They may no longer wish to improve the working classes, but they seem determined to improve instead the middle classes, and to voice remorse and despair for the historical wrongs of the past.

For all that, and while other schemes and initiatives have floundered, the EMYA scheme continues, and remains a sought-after accolade. It has been sustained by dedicated people across many countries and has adapted to the changed geo-political map of Europe in the years of its existence. It was initiated when the Soviet Union still dominated a vast area. It has avoided political controversy and – on the whole – shows that, in our care of cultural treasures, there actually is a shared idea of Europe, hard to pin down perhaps, but certainly one where the members of the EMF and award-winners share the dream of something for the enjoyment and betterment of all.

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