

Power and Privilege in the 21st Century Museum

Tactics for change from the Museums Association Transformers programme

MUSEUMS
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Introduction

Transformers: Diversify was a strand of the Transformers programme launched in 2017.

This strand was designed and developed in response to a recommendation in the Museums Association (MA) report *Valuing Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Museums* (2016).

Transformers: Diversify was a professional development programme for people who believe that museums cannot achieve their objectives unless they are founded on equality, diversity and inclusion and want to embed this practice into their own and organisational practice.

Where many diversity and inclusion programmes in the sector focus on one protected characteristic from the Equalities Act 2010, this cohort was made up of people from all kinds of backgrounds. Participants brought a wide range of lived experiences and perspectives to the programme.

The common factor was a belief that museums can and should be more inclusive. This created a network of supportive peers sharing experiences and rich learning outcomes. The learning not only happened within the cohort, but also within the MA.

Our last report on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) was *Valuing Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Museums*, published in 2016. Since then, language and ways of thinking and working have rapidly evolved. This publication captures some of that. It includes commentary from MA staff and trustees and reflections from Transformers participants. It offers practical guidance for people who want to work in a more inclusive way. We hope that it will be of use to others in the sector who want to make change happen for themselves and their organisations.

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Putting inclusion at the heart of our institutions

Sharon Heal

Director, Museums Association

There is pretty much universal agreement that museums and galleries in the UK would be better, richer and more engaging places if our audiences and workforce were more representative of the communities that we strive to serve.

MUSEUMS CARRY THE VOICES, ECHOES, PREJUDICES AND PRECONCEPTIONS OF THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT DAY.

However, if we are honest we have to admit that despite almost 400 years of existence museums and galleries have singularly failed to diversify their audiences or their workforce. Which begs the questions: is it possible; is the task just too large; and more critically, do we actually want it to happen?

In the 21st century most of our institutions remain stubbornly monocultural to a degree that would be deemed remarkable and inexcusable in other sectors. While some of the most hierarchical and established professions such as the judiciary have seen improvements in diversity, museums have talked a good fight but have failed to deliver substantial or lasting change.

There are lots of reasons for this, and some of them are explored in this report, but a critical factor is the relationship between the collection, the institution and the public.

Collections have rightly had a specific weight at the heart of our institutions – they are the thing that sets them apart from other types of organisation and are what museums are founded upon.

However, the history of our collections and buildings, the very act of creating the collections – from cabinets of curiosity to collections of empire, is so often rooted in Britain's imperialist past and present.

For all the richness and variety this creates, it also brings with it a responsibility that we must address. Museums carry the voices, echoes, prejudices and preconceptions of the past into the present day. They are not and cannot be neutral spaces, a fact that we have to acknowledge before we are able to move on.

The history of our collections means that when challenges to their authority occur: alternative narratives; multiple voices; decolonising; the resistance to change in the heart of our institutions and in the establishment soon becomes evident.

Hearing, acknowledging, supporting, facilitating and giving equality to different voices and narratives is a powerful way of recognising and overcoming that resistance to change.

Our collections are more contested than ever but they also hold more potential to effect social, environmental and political change. Remoulding our institutions to reflect the rich diversity of 21st-century Britain requires brave and radical approaches: giving power and authority to the unheard and underrepresented; and collecting with new and existing communities is one way of doing that.

If we really do want to move beyond the status quo we have to accept that museums are not neutral spaces, ours is not the only authority and that challenge, dialogue and debate should be the new heart of our museums.



The language of equality, diversity and inclusion

Rachael Minott

Trustee, Museums Association

There are many challenges in the pursuit of equality, diversity and inclusion. One of the most difficult is language. How do we enable change if we are using ill-defined terms - if the language we choose creates barriers, assumes hierarchies and reveals our inherent biases? For most of the language we use there is a connotation that we start at a point of normality to which we need to add colour, flavour and spice and this must be challenged.

WE MUST COMMIT OURSELVES TO DEEP ROOTED CHANGE AND FRANK HONESTY...

Equality

Equivalence is a pursuit based on the idea that museums are for everyone, that memory is universal, and so the benefits of retaining and sharing history should be distributed equally. But when we use the term equality we enter into a dialogue of resistance, one with a long history of fighting inequality.

By using this word we are asking for our own history of misdoings to be challenged. We must commit ourselves to deep rooted change and frank honesty about the institutions we work with and in as historically oppressive places, for both workers and visitors.

Diversity

There is a desire to make pro-diversity sound like a positive action, rather than a response to historical exclusion. This is why for some practitioners there has been a move towards words such as decolonise over diversify, to acknowledge the trauma that is being skimmed over. But that too is incorrect. To decolonise is a larger task than to simply have visitors and workers with a range of lived experiences.

Pro-diversity schemes are merely the beginning on a much longer road to making meaningful changes. Decolonising requires more diversity in our workforce and audiences but having a diverse workforce does not mean we have decolonised the institution.

Inclusion

The language we use around the term inclusion attempts to identify those who have and those who have not and those who have been hidden and those who have been highlighted: the included and the excluded. This language engages with the process of 'othering' the excluded. Consciously or not, it is reductive. When we include those who have been historically excluded (by us) there is a danger of indulging in self-praise - praise that echoes paternalistic behaviours of the past, casting the institutions as benevolent and visitors as passive recipients of grace.

Inclusion actually means abdicating power and through this facilitating the use of the resources for which we care. It will be through co-production where we will be confronted in our subconscious 'othering', our biases and our paternalism.



If co-production is carried out well, partners will look to our practices and challenge and critique. Ultimately fair collaboration will improve both how we execute this work and how we reflect upon it.

There is a long history of exclusion in heritage industries, which this publication attempts to capture, address and reflect upon. It is a long difficult road, and sometimes our actions will feel clumsy and hap hazard. Critically engaging with the language we use will mitigate some of this clumsiness. It will acknowledge that we are merely players in a much larger pursuit of true equality, diversity and inclusion.

Learning from the Transformers programme: use your privilege wisely

Jessica Turtle

Inclusion Manager,
Museums Association

At the MA conference in 2016, I participated in a panel that explored class and inequality in the sector. During the questions and answers, a (self-described) white, middle class man asked what he, as someone who benefits from significant privilege, could 'do' about diversity. Apart from suggesting he move over and give up his place at the table, I was not able to answer the question adequately at the time. It has stayed with me since and I've been pondering how we can make real change happen in a sector that is predominately made up of a privileged workforce.

I have learnt so much working with the MA Transformers: Diversify cohort through 2017 and I owe the participants a great debt. What follows is a personal and honest reflection on power and privilege in museums, inspired by the ability of the Transformers to be vulnerable and fearless at the same time.

During Transformers 2017 and Festival of Change I learnt about allyship and it was a huge piece of personal development for me.

As the sector is undeniably privileged, I believe real change will happen more quickly if people work towards better allyship in their daily practice. Here are some tips that I have found useful and, had I known these then, I would have answered my colleague at the conference with something like this:

Five steps towards allyship:

Step 1: Become aware of your privilege and acknowledge it

For much of my childhood I experienced various forms of homelessness and poverty, but I have managed to forge a successful and interesting career in the arts. For years I hid my personal experience but more recently I've worked with it as a driving factor for my own social justice focused work. I'm proud of myself, of where I came from and of where I have got to. However, I know that despite the adversities I've faced, I hold massive privilege.

IN A SECTOR THAT HAS INSTITUTIONAL BIASES IN FAVOUR OF WHITE PEOPLE, HOW MANY JOBS CAN I REALLY SAY I GOT COMPLETELY ON MY OWN HARD-WON MERIT?

What extra barriers would I have faced if I was disabled or transgender? In a sector that has institutional biases in favour of white people, how many jobs can I really say I got completely on my own hard-won merit? These are truths that we need to examine if we are to work effectively towards inclusive museums. In April 2018 my colleagues and I at the Museums Association carried out an equality assessment and we've included the tool in the resources section of this publication for you to work on with your colleagues.

Step 2: Educate yourself

Don't expect to be educated by those you perceive as 'diverse.' It's not their job to educate you on social justice matters. This is the digital age and there's plenty of material out there to absorb. Emotional labour is tiring and people who identify under the protected characteristics and work in museums must explain themselves or fight micro-aggressions every day. Allyship means not adding to that burden by educating yourself as much as possible. This will also help you make better decisions on a day to day basis and you'll be better equipped to call out injustice when you witness it.

Learning from the Transformers programme: use your privilege wisely

Step 3: Give space

Let's take a hypothetical situation. You are in an exhibition planning meeting where a person of colour is speaking on matters of diversity and inclusion, related to the content. You feel some emotions and have an urge to engage, to tell that person you understand how they must feel. Maybe you want to apologise, try and mitigate their experiences, offer up solutions. Don't. Give space and really listen. This 'talking over' behaviour happens a lot. We need to learn to listen, allow people to express what their ideal solution would be and think about how we can actively and practically contribute to making it a reality.

Step 4: Don't expect or require gratitude

At Festival of Change 2017, my biggest takeaway was Museum Detox's allyship barometer, inspired by the Racism Scale. The barometer was part of the design of the White Privilege Clinic led by Shaz Hussain. Looking at it I questioned my allyship. I realised I sometimes act as a performative ally. This can mean expecting or needing recognition or praise for social justice work, or leading when you should be amplifying. There is an increased risk of this if leading something as high profile and exciting as Festival of Change. My mind was blown by

this. I get a great reward from carrying out social justice work and this means I really have to watch my own need for recognition and gratitude in relation to the work.

This is delicate stuff. We all get a warm glow when a colleague thanks us or says we've done a good job, but in the social justice arena a different approach is needed. The barometer was a timely reminder that this work requires a reflective approach, self-awareness and putting a commitment to structural change above our own need for reward, professional or otherwise.

Step 5: If it hurts, it means the work is actually happening

If you are working with communities and criticism is levelled at you or your institution by members of the community, don't shut it down or dismiss it. Embrace it, listen to it and act on it. Often if we pride ourselves on being socially engaged practitioners, it's all too easy to say, 'we're doing our best, what more do they want?' But these difficult and complicated conversations are where the real change-making work happens. It's a symptom of a sector that is moving in the right direction: people are more and more empowered to claim space, inhabit museums and ask for more from them. Allyship means encouraging that, especially when it's difficult.



Allyship: an active, consistent, and challenging practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to work in solidarity with a marginalised group

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Tactics for inclusive museums

This section includes some tactics for change offered by MA Transformers participants

Go against the grain and be a change-maker

Joe Sullivan

Harness the strength of an informal network

Dan Vo

Pay attention to power

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Start with the right intentions

Quonya Huff

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Go against the grain and be a change-maker

Joe Sullivan

London Partnerships Manager,
Natural History Museum
(formerly RAF Museum)

Not everyone at your museum cares about external influences or opinions. In fact many of your staff actively don't want to create the space required for external influence and definitely don't want change. When I started working at the RAF Museum in 2016 I asked a (now retired) staff member about the work we were doing to engage with residents on our local estate, one of the most impoverished and diverse in the London Borough of Barnet. His reply? "They aren't the kind of people we can work with". He couldn't see why the museum and its local community would be relevant to each other.

In 2017 I developed interpretation telling the story of the local history of RAF Hendon. Residents of that estate (built over the former RAF base in the 1960s) worked with us to identify themes, images, stories and objects from the museum collection.

They contributed their own reactions and artistic responses in the form of narrative collages made from the material they had identified. We held sessions at the museum and in local community hubs, such as pubs and community centres. We worked with over 100 people, recording their thoughts, and using those to direct the stories we told.

The project helped to create a bond between the museum and its local community. It was built on mutual respect and on the creation of space for residents to have a voice in directing the way the museum told local stories, ensuring they were relevant to local people.

Instead of presenting them with stories we valued internally and hoping they liked them enough to visit we instead asked what they wanted to see at the museum and used their opinions to inform and be incorporated in the new interpretation designs. It created a sense of community ownership over parts of the museum - local visitors can now see their own work and voices represented, empowering them to visit and say: "I did this bit!". It is a huge change from viewing local residents as being the kind of people we 'can't work with'.

Work like this empowers our visitors but it also empowers you as a change-maker. You are in a privileged position to create space for change, because you work at a museum. Think about who you could work with, what ways it is possible to make the museum relevant to them and how you can engage them to change you.

THE PROJECT
HELPED TO CREATE A
BOND BETWEEN THE
MUSEUM AND ITS
LOCAL COMMUNITY.



Harness the strength of an informal network...

Dan Vo

Project Coordinator LGBTQ tours (volunteer), Victoria and Albert Museum

It's both heart-warming and hilarious to hear people shouting at you, "we love history!" I remember hearing this spontaneous cry above the crowd's cheers while marching at Pride in London with Museum Pride London (an informal network of museum staff and volunteers) and thought - this is exactly what we're about!

The group's goal is simple - to bring as many people as possible from various galleries, libraries, archives and museums under one banner "Proud to Represent LGBTQ+ Lives". It's an excellent exercise in outreach, allowing us to be present and seen in the very communities we seek to serve.

Informal networks are a powerful way of enabling change because they can bring together people in an environment where their contribution is not limited by job title and organisational hierarchy. Our group is an impure mix of learning, archivists, front-of-house, marketing, conservators, more... and even finance come to the party!

In our informal network the opportunities for collaboration are unbounded. We can learn from each other. Ideas have a chance to develop and flourish with enthusiastic support. People can connect with like-minded fellows and feel confident knowing they have support beyond their direct sphere of influence.

In the case of our group, that an alliance of museums are willing to show their support for LGBTQ+ people and Pride by endorsing our presence and supporting it with an array of social media posts, events and activities is a hugely significant step forward in the history of equality in our sector.

Much of this happens organically of course. On the day of the march, there are no measures or key performance indicators involved for our group. Instead there are rainbows, glitter and dancing shoes. And an overriding sense of pride in knowing we're making a very clear message to our communities: that they are at the heart of everything we do.



AN ARRAY OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS, EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES IS A HUGE SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD IN THE HISTORY OF EQUALITY IN OUR SECTOR.

Pay attention to power...

Mark Barrett

Volunteer, Norfolk Museums
(formerly trainee, Colchester
and Ipswich Museums)

Inclusion in museums for those on the autistic spectrum is vastly increasing. Many museums have already put into place practices that improve access to people with autism. Examples such as the Natural History Museum's early bird hour are

opportunities to visit in a quiet, sensory-relaxed environment, or even consult audiences directly about access.

I have been involved with this type of activity with the Scottish National Gallery and Dorset County Museum. Of course the most important way to increase inclusion is awareness training, as I have done in my last job at Colchester and Ipswich Museums as my Transformers project.

Awareness training does a good job in raising the understanding that is important for our visitors. But is this enough? I feel there is a problem that is more systemic.

People with autism find navigating this social world extremely confusing and challenging. The unique ways that they present themselves are usually seen as 'different' or 'weird' because they exist outside the codes and conventions that are 'normal.' I believe the word 'normal' is socially constructed. The words neurotypical and neurodivergent (which includes autistic people) are sometimes used to define how society divides people on the basis of how they experience the world. This situation can also be thought of as a set of power relations. These power relations of the norm and 'others', the neurotypical and the neurodivergent, exist on an institutional level and museums are not exempt from this.

Those who benefit from more privilege than others in the museum workforce are active agents of this norm, especially if they don't understand or acknowledge that it exists. Speaking from only one autistic perspective working in the sector, I would say that inclusion is not just a case

of having awareness about autism; that is only the start. To achieve true inclusion, autistic people must be accepted as seriously as any other professional by changing thinking in our museums.

How do we do this? Well firstly we are all individuals and no one rule works for everyone! Ironically the best way of being most inclusive is to not try to a certain extent. We so desperately want to fit in within our work environment but are held back if not included or struggle to fit in.

Although autistic people want to fit in with everyone, it is true to say that we struggle with some communication, interaction and behavioural aspects of life more than most people. In this sense patience, listening and making allowances are needed to help us. But do not make a song and dance about it, do not allow some of our differences to place a question on our competence. Use a better understanding of how the 'norm' operates to make a culture that values everyone.



Start with the right intentions...

Quonya Huff

Commercial and Audience Development Manager,
National Mining Museum Scotland

I started writing this piece with the idea that Scottish demographics are changing and whether we are prepared to engage with these emerging audiences. The 2011 census shows that minority ethnic groups made up 4% of the Scottish population, doubling from 2% in 2001. This 4% represented 168 languages other than English, Scots or Gaelic spoken in homes throughout Scotland, showing the breadth of diversity amongst minority groups. The next census due in 2021 might show another doubling possibly making ethnic minorities 8% or even 10% of the population.

Demographics are changing but should museums be driven by outside forces?

DEMOGRAPHICS ARE CHANGING BUT SHOULD MUSEUMS BE DRIVEN BY OUTSIDE FORCES?

The answer is probably a mixture of yes and no; i.e. it depends on the issue. But as I was writing this I began to question if we should be caring about groups only because they are large and thus their visits to our institutions would increase our figures. Or because a funder requires us to engage with audiences from particular backgrounds due to their prominence in the area.

What would we do if trends reversed and our minority groups decreased? This is not outside the realm of possibility with Brexit and the current government's hostile environment towards migrants. If our minority ethnic communities decrease in number, would we be expected to care less and work less hard to make relationships that are meaningful? Does the size of the population determine whether they deserve attention? Is there a specific number where a group of people become relevant and a priority for engagement?

If the aim of your institution is to engage all with the history, culture and heritage of your museum, then the numbers should not matter. Whether a group is 1% of the population or 12%, you should still prepare yourself to care about them.



Make small but transformational changes...



James Brandon

Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Tate

Does shifting the dial when it comes to inclusion always require huge strategies? Does it require so much investment that it wraps people up in business cases and evidence gathering to demonstrate change? I would argue not always. Sometimes all it takes is a nudge.

I firmly believe that change happens when the 'many' take incremental steps towards it. Nudging inclusion can be as simple as recognising someone's pronoun, or stopping the use of coded gender phrases such as 'Ladies and Gentlemen', or sharing our own gender pronoun to signal an environment for disclosure.

I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT
CHANGE HAPPENS
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Including your pronouns in your email signature is a great way to demonstrate an inclusive nudge. It signals that you think about pronouns. It shows that you care how you may address someone in the future. It signals a visibility to transgender people. I included my pronouns in my signature when I started at Tate and very quickly others noticed and started to do the same. This continued to snowball with more and more individuals making the change. Then our external partners noticed.

Now not everyone has adopted this yet, but we keep nudging people in the right direction. We tell our allies that their action means a lot more to us than they know. Our director adopted this during LGBT History Month and it led to HR teams changing our recruitment forms.

A nudge might seem small but they have the power to create the change we want to see.

Make space...

Sara Huws

Civic Engagement Officer, Cardiff University Libraries and Archives, and Co-founder, East End Women's Museum

"If you're having conversations on diversity and inclusion and everyone in the room looks like you... you're talking to yourself."
– Nicole Krystal Crentsil

Having 'the answer' is an enduring function of museums. Or if 'the answer' isn't readily available museums normally know where to look in order to find out.

'What is this? Is this real? What does this mean? How old is this?' – these are questions we hear and address on a daily basis.

When it comes to diversity and inclusion however the sector prefers to pose big questions: 'What is to be done? Why aren't

we more inclusive? How can we adapt? How do we reach the 'hard-to-reach'?

You'll have heard these questions in conferences. In think-pieces, keynotes and in lengthy twitter threads. Dismantling structural inequality takes action as well as introspection and reckoning – and as a sector we're keep ourselves busy by wringing our hands when we should be reaching out.

The pace at which we've made practical systemic change in our sector is glacial. Look past the 'special projects', the gleaming case studies and buzzy slogans. Look at the diversity of our workforce for example to see how little change our questioning has brought about. On a systemic level, these big questions we've been asking about diversity for at least the last decade have been mostly rhetorical.

Audre Lorde spoke about the Master's Tools, and what they can and can't achieve¹. The museum sector seems comfortable chipping at the edges. We make finite short-term marks that, all told, amount to exotic surface decoration on an (evidently sturdy) Master's House.

If the museum sector's tools aren't doing the job, then let's make space for people

who've successfully forged their own. Let's make space for established campaigners and activists, marginalised people, community organisers and grassroots organisations. Let's make an invitation to use the wealth of our museums, to liberate it, to move unmediated through our spaces and collections, on their own terms.

I don't suggest we take our worried questions to activists or that we turn to marginalised communities for Diversity 101, but that we make a conscious decision to reject performative activism and consider instead how to create enduring, meaningful space for people who have the answers to our sector's problems.

Every white museum worker has a responsibility to break this cycle of well-meaning enquiry, of showing up for diversity then asking the same questions to the same (mostly white) room, year on year.

When it comes to inclusivity, museums still don't have 'the answer'. But as always we do know where to find out. It's up to us to listen.

¹ Lorde, The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House, 1984



WHEN IT COMES TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION HOWEVER THE SECTOR PREFERS TO POSE BIG QUESTIONS

Believe in how museums can tackle societal issues...



Arlene Bell

Formerly Capital Programme Manager,
National Museums Northern Ireland

For National Museums Northern Ireland, our inclusion work focuses on combating social and economic disadvantage. We work with a broad range of people and partners. Our programmes aim to enhance wellbeing through creativity, encourage social cohesion and support families to learn together. All of this is only possible by making our sites inclusive spaces where the following programmes can thrive.

Parental Engagement

Based on the Department of Education curriculum, our parental engagement programme involves parents and children learning together in our museums. Each year we provide activities and free transport for 1,500 parents and children from schools identified as being most in need by the education authority, as well as 2,000 complimentary family passes to our paid sites and free entry and activities for many disadvantaged parents and toddlers groups.

Craft in Mind uses museum collections to enhance participants' health and wellbeing opportunities through programmes based

on traditional crafts. Activities including basket making, forge work and paper quilling develop participants' skills, knowledge, confidence and self-esteem.

Working across the generations

Treasure House and Live Well use our collections to inspire older people to tap into, explore and develop their creativity through programmes which include art, object handling, local history and drama. Our Heritage Lottery Fund 'Kick the Dust' programme is already engaging 'hard to reach' young people aged 16-25 with museum collections using a wide range of digital technologies and techniques.

Building a better future

A recent programme with people from Loyalist and Republican backgrounds, who are seeking to build a better future for everyone, provided a platform for a creative collaboration between NMNI and communities in areas of deprivation.

At National Museums Northern Ireland we prioritise socially engaged practice because we are aware of the vital role museums can play in creating a healthier and more connected society.

Overcome hurdles to tell lesser known histories...

Hajra Williams

Freelance (formerly Learning and Access Manager, Florence Nightingale Museum)

When I walked into the Florence Nightingale Museum on my first day in January 2017 I was pleasantly surprised by the visual and graphic simplicity of the displays. When a project to develop more interpretation on Mary Seacole fell into my lap I was intent on seeing it through despite being a temporary member of staff.

So what were the problems, issues and resistance that I encountered? As a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) person, I was particularly conscious of the fact that the intangibility of Mary was in stark contrast to the material richness of Florence, a prolific writer, campaigner, nurse and health reformer.

Thousands of letters, many books and reports, personal artefacts and objects survive Florence and document her life. We rightly celebrate Florence's contribution to healthcare and society. Of course as the namesake of the museum she is the focus of the displays. In contrast although we have Mary's autobiography and images of her, we have very little else materially.

By comparing these aspects of Mary and Florence I do not mean to imply a competition between the two. There is no comparison - they are very different people and each occupies their unique place in history.

However, one of the issues of dealing with black stories is the refrain I had often heard in museums, "but we just don't have the material" or "the evidence doesn't exist - we can't prove it". With regard to Mary there was a whole lot of additional negativity and controversy ranging from "was she a nurse?" to "was she even black?" The fact that there wasn't a nursing profession at the time so nurses didn't exist anyway seems to have been lost on the critics. What is really meant is that Mary didn't conform, that she used exotic herbs, that her mother was a 'doctress' practicing traditional medicine.

In addition, the fact that Mary had a Scottish father and a mulatto mother (so technically speaking she was only one quarter black) is an issue. It seems that if we want to celebrate blackness we have to choose people who are sufficiently black. Mary and her story do not fit neatly enough into pre-conceived notions relating to both Mary's work and her race and ethnicity.



Overcome hurdles to tell lesser known histories...



It seems not a lot has changed since the 1850s. The standards that BAME people are judged by are different to the white majority. The creativity that diversity brings is often lauded but the 'diverse' communities themselves are discriminated against for the very difference that leads to that creativity. Diversity is often viewed as complex, unfathomable, exotic and plain weird. Telling the story requires hard work to uncover it in the first place. After that hurdle is over, interpretation requires empathy and, finally, an open and unbiased mind. It is not surprising perhaps that people have in the past been inclined to ignore the story. It is often just too complicated to tell.

So how do we tell a story when we don't have much material to choose from? How do we frame the subject when there are opposing views right up to the present day? How do we confront negative issues of race circling around the heroine represented in our displays and in the dominant culture? And more importantly why should we do this work relating to diversity? Who benefits?

At the museum we decided to deal with the subject honestly and accurately and to use it as an opportunity to invite discussion and

conversation. We adopted a bold, visual, simple approach. We would present an image of Mary, an etching of her in the British Hotel, as a graphic life-size backdrop. This image is as good as a photograph of her and could not be contested.

In front of it we would hold Key Stage 1 sessions, storytelling, readings and other events to provoke, challenge and discuss themes around Crimean history and Victorian attitudes, bringing Mary's history to life. These events were intended to

IT IS CLEARLY IMPORTANT FOR BAME COMMUNITIES TO SEE THEMSELVES REFLECTED WITHIN DISPLAYS, TO HAVE STATUS, PRIDE AND RECOGNITION IN OUR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS CONTRIBUTING TO A STRONG SENSE OF SELF-WORTH.

engage people in discussion, debate and questioning and help them make meaning for themselves rather than simply reading labels detailing dates and facts.

In the current climate there is increasing support for diverse histories to be represented in museum displays and acceptance of the positive impact for BAME communities. It is clearly important for BAME communities to see themselves reflected within displays, to have status, pride and recognition in our public institutions contributing to a strong sense of self-worth. When we value ourselves we can begin to value others. However black stories aren't just for black people. To build strong communities we need to be able to understand each other at more than a superficial level.

The benefits of diversity and representation for all of society are often missed. Mary's story of overcoming racism and hardship, with her creativity, entrepreneurship and single-mindedness, is something that we can all relate to. She fought for her place in history - she didn't take no for an answer. Who are we to deny her place in the museum?

The dos and don'ts of inclusion

Mithila Ramagavigan

Sankofa Project Curator,
National Museums Liverpool

It's hard to say what exactly inclusive museums would look like, but to me it would feel like progress and what we should strive for. Working for a national museum I'm acutely aware that we are funded by the public and should therefore be as accessible as possible to everyone.

Museums should be a space for all and can be a great source of knowledge and inspiration. With the current political and economic struggles faced by many people this role becomes even more important. In the context of severe cuts made to services that support society's most vulnerable. I believe that museums can be an incredible voice and catalyst for social change.

Dos

- Do put your money where your values are - if inclusion is a core belief then it deserves long term investment rather than short term fixes.
- Do listen to your communities - if your workforce looks wholly different to the communities you aim to serve then it needs to be addressed.
- Do collaborate not just with other museums but with your communities.
- Do care for your staff like you would your buildings - invest in their development.

Don'ts

- Don't make inclusion feel like a burden.
- Don't undervalue your learning teams - they are most likely the ones interacting with public and seeing how people engage with exhibitions.
- Don't expect staff with protected characteristics to be a homogenous group with the same lived experiences.
- Don't view transparency as a weakness; if you've found working with local communities difficult previously then say so - people appreciate honesty.

- Don't think that museums would be better if we didn't have to 'deal' with the public.
- Don't be the person that says "that's just what we do here" - people need to invest in change before it can happen in meaningful ways.

These points are not exhaustive but they are written by someone who is passionate about seeing real change and is very hopeful that this is possible.

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Inclusion starter kit

In this section we've drawn together links to resources, tips and guides for making your work more inclusive.

We've included a spider diagram to plot out where you sit among the protected characteristics and their impact on your working life. We've also included the access form we use for Transformers. Using a form like this when people first form a relationship with your organisation is an important way to ensure you meet everyone's requirements for an event or programme.

We've included some baseline things to think about when creating publications and events that are accessible to as wide a range of people as possible. These are drawn from the MA's work on Transformers and the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund.

It is important to remember that everyone benefits when we work in an inclusive way. Documents, spaces and content which have been developed from an inclusion perspective are more appealing and more accessible to everyone. Recognising this helps us remember that we're not dealing with a set of barriers or having to put a lot more work into things, but simply considering how we can make our museums better for everyone.

Resources

[Inequality self-assessment spider diagram](#)

[Spider diagram instructions](#)

[Racism scale](#)

[Access form - for starting new relationships well](#)

[Tip sheet - planning inclusive events, spaces and programmes](#)

[Tip sheet - creating inclusive publications](#)

[Tip sheet - giving accessible presentations](#)



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