Call for Papers

National Programmes Conference 2019

Conference and debate at the British Museum
Monday 4 November 2019

The British Museum’s National Programmes team invite you to contribute towards a day of workshops, discussion and debate exploring equality and diversity in museum practice across the UK. The conference will highlight issues of representation, authority and power with particular focus on disability, class, gender, race and sexuality.

In this one-day conference we want to provide a platform for colleagues to honestly and openly share their work, their research, and ideas on how UK museums can address their own histories and those of their communities. The conference will focus on museum practice: addressing the realities of museum work and how colleagues are effecting change within their organisations.

We seek contributions from across the UK arts and cultural heritage sector through critical and reflective presentations, case studies, workshops and practical examples.

Background

Each year, the National Programmes team hosts a major conference at the British Museum as part of the Knowledge Share programme, generously supported by the Vivmar Foundation since 2010. In 2019 we intend for the National Programmes conference to explore the realities of current museum practice within the context of our rapidly-changing times.

Public discourse on issues around diversity and representation is intense, widespread and critical for the development and relevance of our work. From debates in the press and in Parliament, to crucial sector-level reports such as Arts Council England’s recent report Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case and the 2018 report Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries, these conversations cannot be ignored. They have immense significance for museums – not only for the ethics of museum practice, but for the principles of their continued existence.

Museums’ own histories and present-day operations are intimately bound up in the UK’s structures of power: they are largely public institutions, founded and funded by governments, universities, historical societies or wealthy individuals. Current debates around inequality, and mis- and under-representation, have direct ramifications for museums – what they do, what they represent, and the stories they choose to tell. These issues come into play across all areas of museum work.

The museum sector, including the British Museum, is thinking about how we address this. This conference aims to bring together practitioners from across the country to explore how museums and cultural institutions are actively responding to these debates, when they too have inherited the complex, problematic and often deeply traumatic legacies of the eras in which they were founded. We may not be able to change those histories, but we can acknowledge them – and this conference seeks to showcase what is currently being achieved.

We warmly invite professionals across all relevant sectors to take part.
Conference Scope

We seek papers exploring how museums are engaging with issues around representation, authority and power with particular focus on disability, class, gender, race and sexuality. We want to cover as wide a range of museum work as possible, from varied approaches to collecting, collections research, object display and interpretation, to public engagement and workforce diversity.

The conference programme will ultimately be shaped by the papers received, but we aim to encompass two key strands, which are distinct but interconnected:

- **The work of museums** [e.g. how we ‘do’ or ‘don’t do’ collections research, care, display, interpretation, public engagement, etc.]

- **The context of museums** [e.g. policy, power structures, accountability, the unrepresentative workforce, etc.]

It is crucial that the discussion is respectful, honest, non-defensive and intersectional. We hope that the list of questions below might inspire discussion or particular case studies:

- Can museums be democratised? What are museums and galleries across the UK doing to bring in different and disparate voices, to challenge traditional museum practice and rhetoric? How and why are particular narratives being platformed? How are museums with ‘difficult’ histories telling their own origin stories?

- How can current museum practice address historical museum practices or historical ways of working in museums, and their legacies for people – audiences, staff, the people whose cultures, identities and histories the museum represents? What does this mean for collections, contemporary collecting, engagement strategies, workforce development plans?

- How is ‘outside’ activism affecting current museum policy and practice? (How) are decision-making processes changing? Where, how and why are new acquisitions being made?

- How are we reimagining curatorial practice? How are specialist knowledge and lived experiences valued? How are we working with communities (source and diaspora communities, communities of interest, identity, culture, faith, locality)? What changes are being made in interpretation and display, to respond to these reimaginings of how the museum works, and with whom?

- (How) are museums working to address workforce diversity and representation? How can we ensure recruitment and employment policies match our aspirations for equality and diversity across exhibitions and programming? (How) are job descriptions changing to include new practice? How does this professional practice affect the individuals doing the work? What is the cost of the emotional labour required of people working in these sensitive areas?

We hope that a wide range of cultural heritage organisations will be represented (e.g. national museums, university museums, Local Authority or city museums, charities and external partners working with museums) to explore the range of contexts in which this work is done. It will be a practice-focused day with as many case studies, workshops and practical examples as possible, from large national initiatives to impactful local projects.
The conference will aim to:

- Be stimulating, informative, inspiring and challenging
- Showcase current best practice from across the UK and offer access to expertise both from outside the museum sector and within it
- Offer a mixture of practical and discursive sessions, so that everyone leaves having learned something useful or explored ideas applicable to their work
- Cater for a wide range of UK organisations at different stages of engagement with these ideas and with different levels of expertise – offering an introduction for colleagues wishing to introduce new practice into their work, and valuable knowledge-sharing for those with more extensive experience
- Create a safe space for open discussion – we need to be able to admit where things haven’t worked, and share personal perspectives as individuals as well as professionals / representatives of an organisation or workplace.

Submitting a proposal

We welcome submissions from museum professionals, representatives of sector bodies, community partner organisations and people working in the arts, cultural heritage and creative industries with a relevance to the museum sector, and others working in these fields including charities and third-sector organisations, freelance practitioners, artists, activists, funders, academics and early-career scholars. We particularly encourage emerging museum practitioners to take part. The Museum is unable to pay speaker fees, but we recognise the possibility of this reproducing inequities of the sector, so a limited number of honorariums are available for freelancers and applicants who feel this is a barrier to taking part. If selected as a speaker your travel costs will be covered.

The conference programme will be built around the proposals submitted, and we may respond to proposals with further suggestions, depending on how the day fits together. We intend for the day to be a mix of presentations, case studies, panel discussions and workshops, with an extensive series of parallel sessions to complement the main conference programme during the day and/or lunch/break-times. We are also exploring the possibility of running some closed sessions, to allow colleagues to share their personal experiences in a confidential setting.

Please indicate:
- the focus of the work you are submitting a proposal for
- preferred format (presentation / workshop / other)
- preferred duration

Presentations (minimum 10 minutes, maximum 30 minutes)
- Title
- Author/s (*indicate author for correspondence)
- Institution/s
- Position/s
- Location
- E-mail address/es
- Main body of presentation synopsis (300 words)
Workshops (maximum 1 hour)

- Title
- Author/s (*indicate author for correspondence)
- Institution/s
- Position/s
- Location
- E-mail address/es
- Main body of text synopsis (300 words) – please highlight the focus of the activity, how it would be delivered and how long you envisage the activity needing

Complementary creative sessions (maximum 1 hour)

More informal and/or creative responses to the themes and agenda of the day are also very welcome. These could include conversations, films, demonstrations, creative workshops, interviews, mentoring, focus groups, feedback sessions etc. This activity will run in parallel to the main conference lecture programme, making use of the variety of spaces available in the Clore Centre for Education. Please submit a proposal for your ideas no longer than 300 words, indicating any AV or practical requirements.

Please send proposals no later than Wednesday 5 June 2019 to Georgia Mallin, Knowledge Share Programme Manager, at GMallin@britishmuseum.org.

Enquiries and suggestions for the programme are very welcome; please do not hesitate to get in touch.

If there are any barriers that may prevent you from engaging with this conference, please contact Georgia to talk through how we can support you.

British Museum National Programmes

The British Museum National Programmes Conference 2019 is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Vivmar Foundation.

The annual conference forms part of the British Museum’s wide-ranging National Programmes activity, designed to support the UK’s cultural heritage sector by sharing collections and expertise.

The National Programmes include touring exhibitions, single-object Spotlight tours, partnership galleries and long-term loans supported by the Dorset Foundation in memory of Harry M. Weinrebe. These run alongside various skills-sharing, training and professional development initiatives which aim to support the UK museum workforce, including the Knowledge Share programme supported by the Vivmar Foundation and the Museum’s series of Skills for the Future programmes supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.