

# The Horniman Museum and the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester 2 day Conference

## Museum Curators and Communities: Embedded Approaches to Participation, Collaboration, Inclusion.

26 – 27 November 2009

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been significant academic interest in and publications about the relation between museums and communities. In part this is due to changes in the museum and heritage sectors, including new concerns over funding as well as increased competition from non-museum organisations purporting to offer the authentic heritage experience. There have also been some curatorial initiatives from within the museum for more collaborative approaches. However, two other factors have been key to this change of focus. First, neo-liberal state policies that encouraged collaborative approaches to governance, while at the same time divesting state responsibilities for some citizen services. Second, museum visitors demanded more consultation and inclusion as they embraced reified categories like community.

In line with these developments, museums have been forced to re-examine themselves in relation to communities. In an effort to ensure higher levels of community engagement, many museums strengthened their learning teams and improved the quality and number of learning programmes. Within recent years museums in Britain have moved beyond community engagement and towards a more active community participation. These strategies have borne fruits and the shift has resulted in what many may call a more engaged museum.

But how have these changes impacted on curatorial practice? One effect that has been expressed is that museums have been criticised for 'dumbing' down for audiences. In some instances curators have found themselves at odds with exhibition and public programme specialists about the level of academic content. What these responses suggest is a dualistic relationship that places curatorial integrity at one extreme and community engagement at the other. But why are these seen as oppositional? Is it possible to be a museum that is led by a strong community participation ethos while at the same time maintaining strong curatorial integrity?

In this conference, we would like to explore contemporary movements beyond narrow, dualistic conceptions of curatorial practice versus community, towards new collaborative paradigms within museums. The Horniman Museum and the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester want to rethink concepts such as community and participation. We are interested in unpacking such taken for granted notions which can gloss over the complexity of community identities and lead to tokenistic claims of inclusion by museums. We want to engage participants in discussions on what, more precisely, is meant by these key terms and concepts and try to identify new models of practice for working with communities.

In this two-day conference, museum scholars, practitioners and others involved in the heritage sector will discuss methodologies that can be adopted to ensure that neither community participation nor curatorial integrity suffer in the process of reaching different publics. Can community participation be integrated into curatorial practice in substantive ways? How can new media and other technological innovations contribute to curatorial practices that are more inclusive?

Many conferences have been held on community engagement and participation in recent years. In this conference, we would like to concentrate on curatorial practice. We will critically examine several best practice examples to see if these provide a better model for 'doing' community participation.

The conference will be held at the Horniman Museum and Gardens and is open to the public. If you would like to attend and would like to book a place please email us at: [wmodest@horniman.ac.uk](mailto:wmodest@horniman.ac.uk) or [vmg4@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:vmg4@leicester.ac.uk).

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