

Museums and Sexuality

by *Stuart Frost*

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Sex and sexuality are fundamental aspects of what it is to be human. Historically, museums have found sexuality difficult to address (Frost 2008, Liddiard 1996). The material culture of some ancient civilisations was so problematic that museums restricted access to it. Excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum demonstrated that Roman attitudes to sex were very different to those of 19th century Europe. During the early decades of the 1800s, both the National Archaeological Museum of Naples and the British Museum created secret museums to contain 'disreputable monuments of pagan licentiousness' (Caro 2000, Wallace, Kemp and Bernstein 2007). The British Museum's Secretum grew significantly as the 19th century progressed (Gaimster 2000, 2001), encompassing material from other continents and cultures. Secret museums, private cases, censorship and segregation are evidenced elsewhere (Quignard and Seckel 2007). Libraries created similar spaces to contain material that was regarded as 'obscene' or 'pornographic'. The British Library, London had a Private Case, and the *Bibliothèque nationale*, Paris had an equivalent known as 'Hell'.

Although the era of the secret museum or restricted collection waned in the 1950s and 1960s, it bequeathed a challenging legacy to future generations of museum staff. Sexually robust material languished in storage, uncatalogued and unregistered, and received less academic attention than other parts of museum collections. It took

time for the aesthetic, artistic and cultural value of objects once regarded as pornographic, licentious or obscene to be recognised.

The acknowledgement of diversity in sexuality is something that museums around the world have historically found even more difficult to acknowledge. Museums and galleries have privileged and supported heteronormative histories and perspectives (Petry 2004). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) experience has been ignored or marginalised, and active collecting of LGBT history is a recent phenomenon. Museums, which are traditionally characterised by a single authoritative voice, have struggled to acknowledge difference and diversity, and to keep pace with social change. That museums have encountered difficulties is not surprising:

Lesbian, gay, bi and trans experiences and histories are a relatively new area for examination within the museum sector [...] Any investigation [...] throws up many questions and provides only partial answers. Perhaps the most complex question stems from the inherent contradiction that lies at the centre of the gay liberation movement and its legacy — the desire to eradicate discrimination whilst enshrining difference. (Winchester 2010)

There can be little doubt however, that despite these challenges, sex and sexuality have been

addressed more frequently, meaningfully and creatively from the beginning of this century. This paper focuses on examples of recent projects, primarily from the UK, which highlight contrasting approaches and provide a stimulus for debate.¹ The 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales will fall in 2017, and this provides museums in the UK with an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with LGBT audiences and communities, and to consider how to mark this important anniversary.

Integrating histories of same-sex love and desire

The acquisition of the Warren Cup by the British Museum in 1999 appears to have marked an important shift in the way the institution addressed same-sex history and sexuality (Williams 2013). This Roman silver cup, dating from around AD 10–20, is decorated with two scenes of male–male lovemaking. Upon acquisition, the cup was immediately placed on public display, where it has remained ever since without controversy. In 2006, the cup was the centrepiece of a successful small exhibition, *The Warren Cup: Sex and Society in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2006). The cup was included in the major exhibition, *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* at the museum, part of a section that contextualised Hadrian's relationship with Antinous, a relationship that has often been written out of history. The cup has subsequently been loaned out to other venues around the UK, including the *Pride in Our Past* exhibition held at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery (28 April–30 June, 2012).²

The project *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, a collaboration between the British Museum and the BBC (British Broadcasting



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The Warren Cup: Sex and Society in Ancient Greece and Rome at the British Museum

Corporation), used individual objects as the focus for a 20-minute radio broadcast (MacGregor 2010). The series was arranged chronologically, starting with the earliest objects in the museum's collection, and ending with the present day. Two objects addressed same-sex relationships. The first, the Warren Cup, was used to explore attitudes to sex, sexuality and same-sex desire in ancient Greece and Rome. The second, an etching by David Hockney, focused on human rights and the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967. Hockney made *In the Dull Village*, a print which depicts two male lovers in bed, to illustrate one of 14 poems by the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933). It was published in 1967, at the time the Sexual Offences Act was being passed.³ All of the episodes of *A History of the World* featured multiple voices and perspectives. The episode for *In the Dull Village*, for example,

included Shami Chakrabarti, Director of civil rights organisation Liberty:

It's a picture of two gay men [...] It reminds me of what Eleanor Roosevelt said about human rights – 'Human rights begin in small places close to home'. This is not about big politics [...] this is about understanding what it is to be human and respecting it.

The partnership of the British Museum with a national broadcaster like the BBC meant that *A History of the World* was particularly effective in reaching a wide audience, and the series represents a high-profile integration of same-sex themes into a mainstream historical narrative at the museum. Evaluation demonstrates that the project was extremely successful in encouraging museum visitors to seek out the objects that featured in the series, with over 90 percent of visitors engaging with objects that might otherwise have passed unnoticed (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2011). The online dimension to *A History of the World* provided an opportunity for audiences to comment on episodes and share their experiences and thoughts about specific episodes and objects. There have been almost 37m downloads of individual programmes to date.

Shortly after the *Warren Cup: Sex and Society in Ancient Greece and Rome* exhibition, the British Museum was invited to develop an online trail of objects highlighting LGBT history in the permanent collections for Untold London. This trail, curated by Dr R. B. Parkinson, an academic at the museum, was expanded and went through several iterations, ultimately leading to the publication of the award-winning *A Little Gay History – Desire and Diversity Across the World*. This book explores same-sex desire

through a selection of 40 objects from the museum's collection, accompanied by various web resources (Parkinson 2013).⁴ The project received international attention and no hostile or negative responses (BBC 2013). These recent initiatives at the British Museum have been aimed at a wide audience and this is reflected in the terminology that has been used in the interpretive frameworks. Formative and summative evaluations of exhibitions that have addressed same-sex relationships at the museum reveal widespread support for the approach (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2006, 2008).

There are, of course, numerous other examples where museums have sought to integrate LGBT references into broader-themed exhibitions. The National Portrait Gallery's touring exhibition *Family Album*, for example, explored the meaning of family in England from the 1600s to the present day (Sandell and Frost 2010). The exhibition included a portrait of Sir Peter Pears and Sir Benjamin Britain. The label acknowledged that they were lifelong partners, and went on to discuss the changing legal framework for same-sex lovers in England from 1967 onwards. The interpretive framework for the exhibition example acknowledged alternative concepts of family, inviting visitors to reflect on what family means to them and think about difference. This might seem like a small acknowledgement of same-sex relationships, but it is a significant inclusion, and the type of detail that, as Michael Petry has noted, is often unconsciously omitted or overlooked (Petry 2004, 2010), particularly for permanent displays.

Queering museums

The Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery commissioned artist Matt Smith to develop an

exhibition that aimed to represent queer lives, experiences and history.⁵ The lack of material culture in the collections meant that Smith was compelled to adopt a different approach. The result was *Queering the Museum* (November 2010–January 2011), a series of 19 installations or interventions distributed throughout the museum's permanent galleries and displays 'to draw out queer stories and themes, exploring subjects that a queer viewer might overlay onto objects the museum already held' (Horn, Winchester and Smith 2010, Smith 2013).

Visitors arriving at the museum encountered Jacob Epstein's (1880–1959) bronze statue of Lucifer, a figure that suggests a merging of genders. The statue is a permanent feature, but

for the exhibition, it was adorned with a cape of green silk carnations, a flower worn by men in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a symbol of gay identity. An introduction to the exhibition was placed alongside the statue, and visitors were invited to pick up a *Queering the Museum* map. This helped visitors locate the other interventions, each of which was highlighted with a green carnation graphic and an interpretive text raising questions about LGBT history or experience. For example, two male sculptures from the museum's own collections – a statue of Ulysses and one of Adonis – were paired together with a text arguing that curators have a tendency to heterosexualise displays by often pairing unrelated male and female sculptures.



Lucifer by Jacob Epstein (1944–45) with *Green Carnations* by Matt Smith, *Queering the Museum* at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

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The Ladies of Llangollen by Matt Smith (2010), *Queering the Museum* at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

A Civil Partnership Card from 2005 was added to an existing display exploring celebrations, a simple but effective addition that drew attention to a significant omission. The majority of the interventions were ceramic pieces made by Matt Smith. At first glance, most of these appeared to be historic objects that have always been there. Only upon closer inspection did Smith's *The Ladies of Llangollen*, for example, reveal itself to be a contemporary interloper. The piece represents Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, who set up home together at Plas Newydd in rural Wales in the 1780s. Some of these interventions were humorous or playful; others raised serious issues such as homophobia or discrimination in other parts of the world.

The historian Robert Mills has argued that some recent LGBT exhibitions have offered an overly simplistic narrative, from repression to outness, or that they have reinforced the assumption that people are either completely straight or gay (Mills 2010). *Queering the Museum* took a more nuanced approach that sought to reflect the diversity and complexities of LGBT (or queer) experience, rather than offering a simple linear narrative or progressive history from repression to equality. Its displays were woven in with the main collection throughout the museum building, ensuring that the exhibition was encountered by all of the museum's visitors, including those who otherwise might not have visited a self-contained exhibition with an explicitly LGBT focus.

The queering of existing museum displays by juxtaposing contemporary art works with historic works is an approach that has been used in other high-profile museums, for example, the *Queer: Desire, Power and Identity* exhibition at the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, or *Ars Homo Erotica* at the National Museum of Poland (Leszkowicz 2010, 2012, 2013; Stearn 2013). The latter generated considerable debate in the Polish media and a significant amount of controversy (Michalska 2010). The curator, Paweł Leszkowicz, viewed the exhibition as an active agent of change, provoking cultural and political debate, and therefore felt that the controversy was useful because ‘it massively mainstreamed queer culture and was successful in driving social change’ (Leszkowicz 2013). Richard Sandell, Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, has also argued that controversy might be a necessary and valuable part of human rights work for museums (Sandell 2012).

Enabling discussion and debate

The examples discussed so far have focused primarily on projects that have sought to acknowledge LGBT histories and queer perspectives, representing history accurately and meaningfully for their diverse audiences. The following exhibitions focus on the potential for using collections, objects and contemporary art to encourage personal reflection and to positively impact individuals’ education, confidence, self-esteem and well-being (Dodd 2002).

The recent *Intimate Worlds: Exploring Sexuality through the Sir Henry Wellcome Collection* exhibition at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (5 April–29 June, 2014) was organised in partnership with the University of Exeter’s Sex and History project. The objects featured in the exhibition were once part of Sir Henry



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Connie Asplin, Exeter College student, with a chastity belt artefact on display in the *Intimate Worlds* exhibition, Royal Albert Memorial Museum

Wellcome’s Collection, but they had never been publicly exhibited before. Many of them were similar to the types of artefacts once confined to the British Museum’s secret museum, and the exhibition is further evidence of a changed attitude towards sexuality.

Intimate Worlds was co-curated by Kate Fisher, Jennifer Grove and Rebecca Langlands (University of Exeter) with a view to stimulating discussion and debate about contemporary attitudes towards sex, especially amongst young people. The exhibition included a visitor response wall, and social media such as Twitter as well as a project blog were used to encourage visitors to reflect and share ideas.⁶ Resources were developed for teachers to help them plan sessions promoting awareness and understanding of sexuality, and to develop confidence in talking and thinking about sex and relationships. *Intimate Worlds* highlights the potential for exhibitions to open up discussion and debate, encouraging all visitors to question where their attitudes on sex and sexuality come from, and to examine their own beliefs and values.

In 2009, Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) developed an exhibition called *sh[OUT]* as part of a social justice programme to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) human rights (Macleod 2009). The *sh[OUT]* exhibition aimed to celebrate and raise awareness of LGBTI individuals, their rights and history, and included works by around 18 contemporary artists including Patricia Cronin, Nan Goldin, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, David Hockney, Robert Mapplethorpe and Grayson Perry. The exhibition was supported by a wider programme of outreach projects, educational arts workshops and other events.

Rigorous evaluation of exhibitions that have addressed LGBT subjects is hard to find, limiting the opportunity for museums to learn from others' experiences and to inform future projects. GoMA's *sh[OUT]* exhibition is a notable exception, and the evaluation provides extremely useful insight (Sandell 2012, Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010). *sh[OUT]* generated significant controversy in the media, initially prompted by a work by Robert Mapplethorpe, and subsequently by a small exhibition, *Made in God's Image*, which



Memorial to a Marriage by Patricia Cronin (2004), first shown at *sh[OUT]* at the Gallery of Modern Art (2009), and now displayed at Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, Glasgow

included work by LGBT artists of faith. However, the overwhelming response from those who visited *sh[OUT]* was positive: 71 percent of visitors were supportive of GoMA and the project's aims and approach. The evaluation suggests that GoMA made an important contribution to social change by providing a space in which challenging issues connected to human rights could be explored and debated.

The evaluation did reveal that some visitors, including people who identified as LGBTI and heterosexual, felt uncomfortable with the sexually explicit nature of some of the art works included in the exhibition and their emphasis on sex or sexual practices. The inclusion of these works was interpreted by some LGBTI participants as a sign of GoMA's commitment to the *sh[OUT]* project. On the other hand, the controversy that these works generated potentially undermined the goal of building more widespread support for Glasgow's LGBTI community. This tension reflects the challenge in balancing the needs of stakeholders and LGBTI and non-LGBTI audiences.

In addition, the evaluation of *sh[OUT]* revealed that a minority preferred to identify as part of the mainstream rather than being defined by difference.⁷ The use of LGBTI in the exhibition, for example, was questioned by two visitors: 'I've never come across that word intersex before; I just wondered, do we not have enough words, categories at the moment, that we need another one?' (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010). While for some audiences, the use of terms like 'LGBT', 'LGBTQ', 'LGBTI' and 'queer' are meaningful, inclusive terms, for other visitors, they are potential barriers.

Reflecting on current initiatives to represent sexuality meaningfully, against the backdrop of

the long and difficult relationship that museums have had with it historically, inevitably leads to consideration of the future. The exhibitions and projects discussed in this short article undoubtedly had a significant impact both institutionally and on the public who engaged with them, but they were of short duration. LGBT experience and queer history arguably remain underrepresented in museums' permanent displays, the areas of museums that are visited week in and week out, often by the largest and most diverse audiences. The reasons for this omission are undoubtedly complex and varied, but this is an area requiring further debate and action.

The number of museum projects addressing LGBT history and experience has increased significantly in recent decades.⁸ Many of these have either actively involved LGBT communities or been aimed primarily at LGBT audiences. These much-needed initiatives have begun to address the legacy of omission in museum collections and displays bequeathed by previous generations. However, there is an equally compelling need for LGBT histories to continue to be integrated into mainstream narratives and displays that reach the widest possible audiences, and all museums have an important role to play in this regard. As Richard Parkinson has pointed out, LGBT experience is not a marginal aspect of human history, but is integral to it – and therefore, far more than a minority concern (Parkinson 2012, 2013).

Notes

1. The scope of this paper is defined by the contexts and case studies with which I am most familiar – it is selective and not intended to be representative.
2. The exhibition was part of a wider project in Plymouth to research LGBT life in the city and create an archive of it. For

more information see: <http://lgbt-history.prideinplymouth.org.uk/project>

3. The Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised sex in private between men aged 21 and above. The act applied to England and Wales.

4. See http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/themes/same-sex_desire_and_gender.aspx

5. 'Queer' is used by many writers, activists and academics to capture the widest array of differences and identities related to desire, expression, gender and sexuality. Some institutions prefer the acronym LGBTQ (Fraser and Heimlich 2008).

6. See <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/sexandhistory>

7. The Unstraight Museum uses the term 'unstraight' as a more inclusive term, defining it as 'anyone or anything that is or was not a part of a norm in society' (Petersson 2013).

8. The extent to which LGBT experience is acknowledged in museums around the world varies widely, but is too vast a subject for the scope of this concise paper.

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