

One thousand Curious conversations, one curious exhibition

What I liked about the project, why I got involved is that it isn't curators telling us what is right. We're doing this, we're making it and that's very special.

Curious is an innovative project that supports and celebrates the 2012 Olympic Games, and prepares for the 2014 Commonwealth Games.

The aim across the four strands of the project (www.glasgowmuseums.com/curious) is to create intercultural dialogue and a legacy of increased understanding of each other, our city and our collections.

We developed the Curious exhibition - which runs for eighteen months in St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art - in collaboration with a wide range of groups & individuals. One hundred people were directly involved in selecting and interpreting museum objects. There are thirty objects in the exhibition from across the museum collections including art works, domestic technology, world culture & social history objects. There are interpreted through a variety of methods, often chosen and shaped by the participants. You can find out more about the exhibition on www.glasgowmuseums.com/curious and <http://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com>. The objects are almost entirely interpreted through community contributions.

Through using a wide range of facilitative approaches to work with participants we have learnt lots about our objects & how our visitors make meaning from them. Since the exhibition opened, we have continued to encourage & collect responses including through a response space, facilitated tours in five languages, our blog and an extensive volunteer and events programme.

As we near the end of the project, we're considering how much of the generated content to keep, how we make decisions about retention of information, and who is involved in those decisions. By using Curious as a case study at the SHCG workshops, we hoped to generate discussion and learn from others' approaches to similar questions. We are conscious that many organisations have been experimenting with the Revisiting Collections methodology, so many colleagues will also be wrestling with these questions.

We focused on four objects* including two art works: a sculpture called *Veil*, and a painting called *One Man Band Outside the Fish and Chip Shop* by Hans Jackson. We asked groups to look through a selection of material we'd gathered with participants and consider what they would put on display and keep for collection information.

For each object we explained why it had been chosen and who by, and gave out the sparse information we had in object records at the beginning of the project.

For the sculpture *Veil*, we also circulated an email from the artist; transcriptions of interviews we'd carried out with participants including a group from the Muslim Women's Resource Centre; notes, comments and questions from various participants including volunteers and young people. (<http://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/veil/>)



Sybille Von Halem giving a talk about Veil. © Glasgow Museums

For the Hans Jackson painting we circulated information from the artist's family; a session plan used with an ESOL group working towards their Life in the U.K. test, and their artistic responses; alternative images created by various groups, including hospital patients recovering from strokes; a summary of the way the object has been used and the responses generated in our learning programme, and comments from our response space in the gallery. (<http://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/one-man-band-outside-the-fish-and-chip-shop/>)



Artistic interpretation of Hans Jackson's painting, by stroke patients at Stobhill Hospital.
© Glasgow Museums

We asked delegates to consider which of these elements they would include in interpretation of the object and then what information they would keep in object files/database. When asked these theoretical questions, the groups tended to want to include as much as possible in the exhibition and to suggest various technological methods of layering information. There were innovative ideas about how to reflect the process in the exhibition. We were able to share with the group the interpretive decisions that we had made, and how we'd balanced facilitating a satisfactory experience for participants with prioritising the creation of engaging, accessible content for visitors. This meant that many responses generated were not included; however all the work with participants informed the exhibition.

A pressing question for us now is how much of the content we've generated should be kept in object files and databases.

The general consensus among delegates was to keep all of the generated responses, as even object information that seemed irrelevant now could become useful. It was suggested that a note could be added to the object database that shows a link to the information. The group also felt that we should create an archive of the project which should be searchable by object and by participants.

We've had similar feedback from colleagues in Glasgow, and we're keen to keep as much of the information as possible. However we are conscious that keeping all the responses may make any database unwieldy and difficult to use. For us, the challenges are exacerbated by the scale at which we worked and the range of approaches we took. Not all the content is written – there are mind maps and drawing as well as drama, audio and film.

We recognise that there are practical advantages to building a separate archive or database for community responses but we also feel there needs to be strong link to specific objects. A separate community responses database could imply a hierarchy which privileges traditional factual curatorial information while learning from and about communities' meaning-making around objects is marginalised. While it is tempting to keep all the responses gathered, we also need to take account of ethical questions. This issue was raised in our discussion with delegates. Where we have filmed or audio recorded responses we have signed copyright forms which allow us to keep and use the information in future. However, it wasn't possible or appropriate to take that approach with all the responses we generated. While there are many individuals we could contact to ask if we can continue to store and use their responses, there are also participants with whom we could no longer establish contact, because of the large number of groups with whom we worked.

The project has been participatory in approach, so we are keen to explore the potential for a participatory approach to continue into these decisions. We'd be really interested to hear about approaches you've taken to archiving community responses, particularly if you have experience of collaborating with groups in that process.

Curious is part of the Scottish Project. The Scottish Project has been funded by Legacy Trust UK, creating a lasting impact from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games by funding ideas and local talent to inspire creativity across the UK and by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland.

*The other two objects were a butter churn (<http://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/one-man-band-outside-the-fish-and-chip-shop/>) and a radiogram (<http://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/rigonda-stereo-radiogram/>)