

Museums as Launchpads for Creativity 24th and 25th February 2005

Evaluation Report

Compiled by Lisa Kerley, Museum Learning and Access Consultant
April 2005

This report is a record of the 2 day event 'Museums as Launchpads' that took place on 24th and 25th February 2005, organised by Slough Creative Partnerships in collaboration with SEMLAC. The event was planned to enable teachers, creative practitioners and museum professionals to explore creative ways of using and working with museums and museum collections.

5 museums took part from the Thames Valley area representing a wide range of museum types and collections as well as 5 creative partners including a visual artist, a dancer, a drama practitioner, a photographer and a musician, and a range of teachers from primary, secondary and special schools in Slough, Buckinghamshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Oxfordshire and Reading.

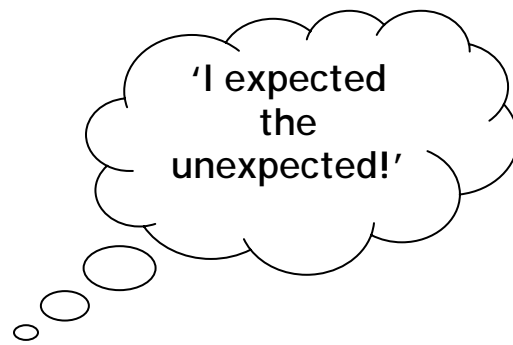
Day one comprised of visits to 4 of the 5 museums; Slough Museum, Reading Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Ashmolean Museum. These visits were structured so participants were introduced to the museums, their collections and staff as well as given the opportunity to explore 5 chosen objects from each museum to be used in the workshops taking place on day two. Day two comprised of a visit to the 5th museum; the River and Rowing Museum and taking part in creative workshops led by the 5 creative practitioners.



How did we start?

It was a grey and wet start at Slough Museum, which when we arrived seemed like a trip out shopping and not to visit a museum - it looking like a shop and being right on the high street! There we were then, museum professionals, teachers and artists all gathered in 'The Space' (Slough Museum's new education room) waiting to be told what was going to happen over the next 2 days. Patty Cohen, Director of Slough Creative Partnerships welcomed us all and explained what Creative Partnerships was and how it has been working in Slough, the purpose of the event and what kind of outcomes she hoped for - 'no lesson plans please' being one of them!

We were to visit 5 museums in total, meet their education staff, explore their collections and be introduced to a number of objects that we would later work with in some creative way - all in 2 days! Exhausting was the first thing that came to mind! Would we achieve our objective to explore the possibilities of creative inspiration from museums and museum objects by the end of the 2 days?



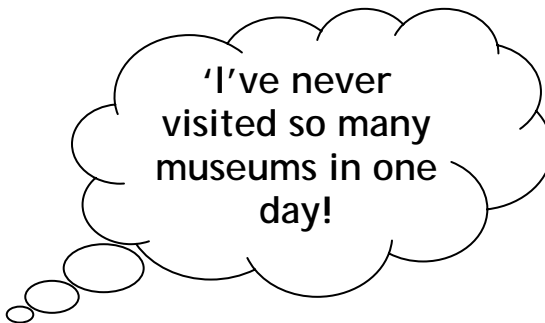
What did we expect?

Expectations of the participants involved were mostly common - to explore ideas for creative projects using museums as inspiration and to meet and work with new people. However, there were of course some individual expectations of the event and these differed largely between with 3 main groups of participants.

Generally museum staff wanted to meet artists who would look at collections in a different way and provide ideas for new ways of working with objects. They also wanted to explore the idea of collaboration between themselves and artists for projects with schools and young people. Some museum staff were excited at the prospect of meeting and spending time with local teachers to discuss ideas.

Most teachers were keen to make 'creative contacts', use museums to generate ideas for creative teaching and find out more about the sorts of museums in the area and what they could offer to schools. Some teachers had not visited all of the museums and so were looking forward to exploring new places! One primary teacher mentioned they were interested in using museum objects for subjects other than history. Some teachers (one special school and one secondary) wanted to explore the development of creative projects with artists in school using museum objects where visits to museums would not be possible. One teacher said she was looking forward to exploring the museums for inspiration, as preparation for teaching a topic is usually minimal at school and she doesn't have time to visit museums.

Artists wanted to meet museum staff and teachers to explore the possibility for potential future projects. Some artists were apprehensive about not having a set agenda for the workshops on the second day - having to 'create something from nothing'! One artist wanted to explore creative inspiration using objects and think about how the display and interpretation of objects can have an impact on creativity.



What did we do?

Over the 2 days we were introduced to 5 museums and their collections. On Thursday we started at Slough Museum, a small independent local museum with displays on the social history of Slough and the borough. What I liked about this museum was its informality; it was one of those rare museums that you feel comfortable in! Next stop was Reading Museum, a great example of a local museum with excellent displays and interactives as well as an established and enormous object loans collections. Pitt Rivers was the next museum we visited and here you really did feel the 'awe and wonder' of the past. The volume of objects and the way they are displayed doesn't leave much thinking when it comes to creative inspiration - it's all around you! The Ashmolean was our last stop of the day and is one of those extremely grand and foreboding buildings where you always feel compelled to whisper! This is the place where we all wanted longer to look at the collections because there is just so much to see. One teacher commented that he was surprised to see a museum like this that was not in London and was bringing his class as soon as possible!

We started each visit to the museums with an introduction to the museum and collections by the museum education staff. We were then shown the 5 objects that had been chosen for us to use the following day. We were then given time to investigate the objects and explore the museum. The objects were given to us with no interpretation information so we had to figure out for ourselves what they were! Much discussion ensued as to what certain things were as it seemed the museums had thought it good idea to provide a few 'mystery' objects to get us thinking! 'Do you think they would have had those then' and 'What do you think it's made from', were the usual questions being asked between participants followed by 'I wonder if it's a..' and 'Go on, why don't you try it out'! Exploring the objects provoked discussion with some teachers about the use of artefacts in school. One secondary teacher commented 'I do know that handling artefacts that are used in school but they are usually always used for history and not for art, I wouldn't know where to go to find out if I could borrow any'.



It was interesting that there were participants from all 3 groups (teachers, artists, museums) that had not visited some of the museums. Some teachers used certain museums very regularly and had a well-established relationship with them already; one teacher from Slough had not visited any of the museums either independently or with a school group. A recently qualified teacher mentioned she had just moved into the area and wasn't yet familiar with the local museums or galleries and didn't know where to find out information about what existed. Some artists had previously worked with certain museums but again most had not visited all of the museums we went to. The event therefore was not only an opportunity to explore creativity but also to find out more about the provision of a range of museums locally and enjoy visiting them!

When we were given time to explore the museums independently some participants were making notes, others were taking photographs and sketching. There was much discussion between participants when unusual or interesting objects were found and this happened especially at the Pitt Rivers! At the Ashmolean, one teacher was sketching a painting that she had decided to use as an example in class to explore shape. She mentioned that she would love more time to explore museums and galleries for ideas for class topic work and also be able to use art work in school to help explain genres, styles and techniques in art. At the Pitt Rivers Martin Franklin had inspiration for his creative workshop from the use of torches to view some of the displays that were difficult to view. One thing that definitely came out of the exploration of the museums was that we all wanted more time to look!



After an exhausting Thursday of museum visiting we started Friday morning with another museum - there really was no escape! The River and Rowing Museum at Henley-on-Thames was the final museum we would visit. This is a specialised museum about the history of the River Thames where we saw some of Steve Redgrave and Matthew Pinsent's Olympic winning boats!

With all of our museum visits complete our next goal was to get creative!



How did we inspire creativity?

All the time we had been enjoying our visits to the museums there were 5 participants busily looking for inspiration and ideas to facilitate a creative workshop for the event. 5 creative practitioners, representing a wide range of art forms were going to lead a workshop each to allow people to explore how museum objects could become the inspiration for creativity in a particular art form. Groups could collaborate or work independently and could use the museum space and any of the objects each of the museums had designated. Each of the groups took a different approach in using the objects they chose. The objective of the workshops was purely to experiment with ideas of ways that objects could be used and there did not have to be an outcome as such. However, all of the groups wanted to develop something they could visually present to the whole group. The groups had approximately 2 ½ hours for the workshops and then fed back their results to the whole group.

Fil Gierlinksi - Photographer

Fil's workshop was based around the idea of asking questions about museum objects and the role they played in a curated display or the context they were shown in. The group chose 2 objects from the collection - an **African mask** from the Pitt Rivers Museum and a **glass bottle** from Slough Museum. What the group set out to do was relate and combine the objects to the space and collection at the River and Rowing Museum. The objects were not related in any way but had been chosen for their properties - glass and wood, as it would be difficult to find a common context for the handling objects and the museum.

The group then set out into the museum taking photographs using a digital camera of objects relating to the mask and bottle in terms of materials. The photographs were then printed using a photo printer and made into a collage with the mask as the centrepiece. The outcome of the workshop showed 'that an object can be linked to its environment by meaning, physicality, location or all three'.



Petre Nikoloski - Visual artist

Petre's workshop used a visual technique that would create 'an imminent result'. Petre had chosen to work with a **hoover** from Slough Museum to create an installation also using Asian spices and some old clothes belonging to his daughter and himself. He was keen to use a window space in the museum so the group could explore the idea of 'the circle of life'.

Using a window in the museum together with the object and equipment Petre worked with the group to create a 'dynamic relief' of colour and fragrance using the spices. 'By using the window we connect the outside winter view of the riverside flora with the spices covering the relief-like positioned clothes on the floor which all together create a dynamic form - recycling the nature into the hoover - a circle of life'.



Louise Keyworth - Drama practitioner

Louise had several ideas which the group explored within the drama workshop. Firstly watching the body in museum spaces and thinking about the written and unwritten rules and codes of behaviour in museums. Secondly, the properties of objects in space and lastly the story of an object. Each of the participants chose an object they wanted to work with which included a **pair of spectacles** from Slough Museum, a **tin of dried egg** from the River and Rowing Museum and a strange looking **ball game** from the Pitt Rivers Museum!

The group began by choosing a space in the museum, looking at that space and then the body in space. The group experimented with entering and existing in the space in different ways and layering them together. The group then discussed the objects they had chosen and Louise provoked questions about them such as: 'If it were a person what or who would it be?' and 'What

question do you want to ask it?' This helped to set the tone for the character and each piece.

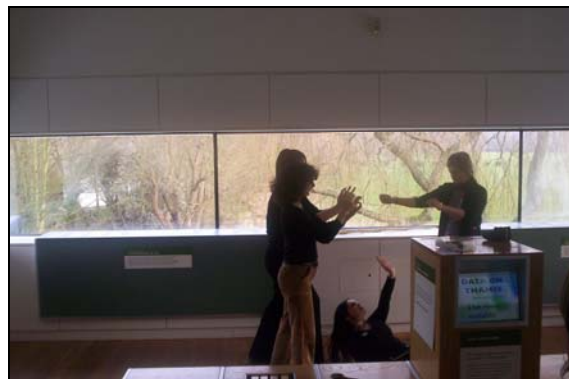
The group improvised using their objects and asked questions in role to develop the object's story. Each of the characters behaved with qualities similar to the objects. By choosing 3 positions in the space and moving through a sequence at different speeds the story and personalities of the characters took form. The group fixed a sequence, Louise directed the interactions and brought in key lines from the stories and music accompanied the performance.



Emma Carvahlo - Dancer

Emma worked with her group to explore objects through the form and movement of the human body. Each member of the group chose their own individual object; the **unicorn horn** from Reading Museum, a pair of **miniature shoes** from Reading Museum and **Egyptian pottery** from the Ashmolean Museum were the chosen objects. The participants started by drawing their objects and discussing them within the group in terms of what they were, how they were used and how they were made.

They then did some warm up exercises using the senses and explored ways of interpreting and telling the story of their object through body movement and expression. The outcome was a performance of the story of an object through human movement accompanied by music. Each participant told their own story which was mirrored by the others in the group, followed by individual freestyle movement.



Martin Franklin - Sound artist

Martin's group chose 2 objects to use in their workshop - an eel prong from the River and Rowing Museum and a carved wooden cylinder from the Pitt Rivers Museum. Martin wanted to gather some response from the object which could be translated into a 'visualisation or deconstructed audio'.

The group experimented with the objects in terms of the sounds that could be extracted from them in different ways. Those sounds were then 'recorded and subjected to a sonographic analysis to gain a graphical time/frequency display'. Martin then worked with the audio files in a digital audio programme and processed various sections in order to break apart the sound and 'discover the hidden voice of our object'.

The group also explored the idea of using light on an object 'as a means of lending a dramatic sense of discovery to the surface texture'. They initially thought of using candlelight but because of concerns over safety used torchlight instead. A digital video camera was used record the torchlight dancing on the surface of the object. The visual and the audio elements were then combined and edited to produce a short performance piece.



'If you weren't scared it wasn't worth doing it!'

How did we feel and what did we learn?

Some participants were apprehensive at working in different ways, especially those of us who feel we have less creative talent than others! The atmosphere was electric when the groups were watching each other feed back and perform. If this is an indication of the experience of workshops for the participants it was most definitely positive and inspirational! After the workshop feedback Patty made some closing remarks and people were invited to offer their ideas for the future. This was followed up with a feedback form sent to the participants a week after the event to allow them time to digest and ponder over the experience.

How people felt about what they had taken from the experience is best described in the words of the participants:

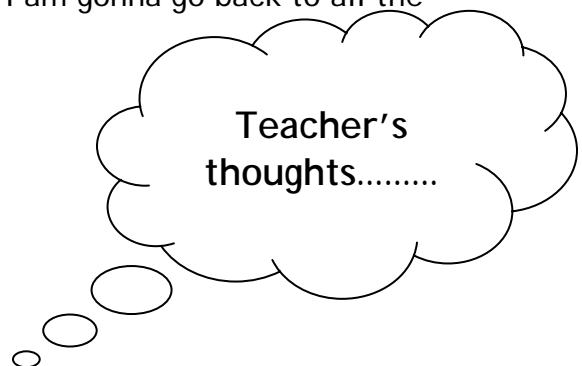


'I felt good for having created something from nothing and taking the risk publicly. I was pleased that our work as artistic felt valued'.

'Although the format put a lot of pressure on the artists to deliver, going through this experience generally results in new ideas emerging that may not have done otherwise. I felt that the opportunity to work with objects from the museums was exceptional and inspiring, as it brings a very rich and resonant dimension to the whole project'.

'Visiting the different museums and seeing what each one can offer'.

'As an artist I got so much from the two days - I am gonna go back to all the museums visited'.

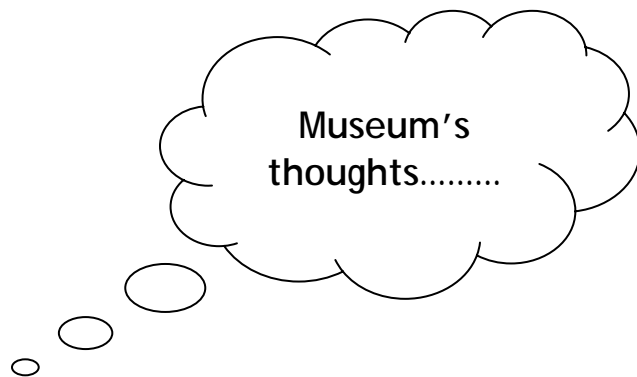


'The most valuable element of the event was having the opportunity to meet such talented and interesting people'.

'It's great to have artists happy to share their skills with teachers and children. At last we have a means of raising the self-esteem of low achievers and challenging high attainers while having fun'.

'Most of the children at our school only learn through tactile methods. This is why this sort of learning is so important. I want the opportunity to work with artists and objects in school as there is still often a stigma when taking children from a special school out on a visit'.

'Never knew it could be so innovative and know the kids would be very interested'.



'I was really impressed with the calibre of work that was produced in such a short period of time. I really liked the work of the musician as it was so different to what I had expected'.

'The whole experience was very positive'.

'Those two days on a personal level created an oasis of being able to think about learning, creativity and museums'.

'I came away with many ideas and contact details for possible artists to work with'.

'This event showed how we could probably achieve just as much or more in some cases by approaching our collections from this creativity angle rather than the traditional history angle'.

'Good to see how another museum is inhabited!'

'There are many museums represented today and it has been fantastic to spend time with museum colleagues to think about what it could mean for museums to work together'.



Where do we go now?

There were a great many positive outcomes and ideas from the event. It was clear that everyone shared the belief that the culture and creativity should be an important part of learning for children of all ages. It is a certainty that by the end of the event all of the participants also understood the potential that museums have to inspire creativity in learning. New relationships were explored and ideas were fruitful. However, there were some concerns about the future in terms of where we could go from here and it is important to acknowledge these as well as being excited about the positive aspects.

Concerns for the future

'My only concerns are whether other teachers are as enthusiastic about creativity and may still think of museum visits in terms of history'.

'It is great to work with artists but where would the money come from in the absence of Creative Partnerships in my area?'

'It is often money that prevents schools from venturing far or often from school. Parents complain about costly coaches and expensive outings. Another hindrance for many schools is covering the groundwork to get good results in SATs. However, that hasn't stopped me. Children write well when they've got something good to write about'.

'I've got an ever increasing file of ideas for projects but at the moment our priority is to open up the museum'.

'I have suspicions that many people are unaware of what museums can offer and that they can be very different to one another but this still came as a revelation to people'.

Ideas for the future

'It would be great for children to invent dances, create pictures etc.. and then present them to others and together create stories, poetry and drama about them'.

'A database of artists and performers happy to work in a museum?'

'Spreading the word is so important and encouraging all teachers to be as enthusiastic as those here'.

'How about inviting science, sports and IT teachers to contribute and use museums in a creative way?'

'It would be great to explore creativity through the written word to show that creating stories is also accessible to all'.

'Spreading the word to LEA advisers - in all subjects'.

'Because of the nature of our museum I didn't think things like dance could work as collaborative projects. Now I am thinking of organising some kind of dance event/project'.

'Exploring how learning takes place in museum spaces - what fascinates and remains in people's thoughts?'

'We have already been in talks with our local schools to work together on a project with children as they make the transition from primary to secondary school. This event has given me more ideas to develop this project'.

'Love to do a dance project'.

'I'd love to do another project of this nature where a number of artists work throughout a building and the outcome could result in a wider performance event. An extended project could involve a number of days of workshops with school/community groups, but then be accompanied by the same number of days for the artists to work on their own pieces with the objects. This could be followed by an event where the groups return to tour the building and view the installed work. If two or more museums were used with the same format, it would also be an interesting opportunity to gain some kind of objective contrast between the collections contained in the different places'.

'Next time you have an event like this perhaps you could invite a writer/ storyteller or poet - the artefacts have such amazing stories to tell'.

'Puppetry in the labyrinthine Pitt Rivers Museum?'

'A competition as part of the joint exhibition with a good prize of course'.

'I love the idea of doing a theme based approach using mystery objects'.

Ending on a creative and positive note!

By the end of the two day event two possible collaborative projects had already been discussed between participants and further meetings arranged for future planning!

The art department at Gillotts School is planning to collaborate with the River and Rowing Museum to develop a cross-curricular and creative workshop for students. They are starting their project with a presentation about the event to staff at the school with the museum and then seeing what happens!

Woodcote Primary School are going to be working on a collaborative project with the Pitt Rivers Museum and drama practitioner Louise Keyworth with funding support from Creative Partnerships who have also generously offered free throwaway cameras!

Watch this creative space!