

Queering the Museum

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

4th November 2010 - 30th January 2011

The question of whether museums are doing enough to address LGBT audiences has been raised on several occasions in *Museums Journal* and other publications. In October 2007 Jack Gilbert argued that most museums or galleries were not collecting, framing or interpreting the lives of LGBT people meaningfully. The Museum of London's *Pride Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay London* (1999) and *Queer is Here* (2006), along with *The Warren Cup: Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2006) at the British Museum, were significant temporary exhibitions but for Gilbert they were exceptions.

There have been some notable museum displays, exhibitions and other initiatives since Gilbert's article. *Gay Icons* at the National Portrait Gallery (July – October 2009) was a particularly high profile exhibition and some significant literature has been published recently (see below). References to LGBT history and experience within exhibitions or collections-based interpretation have arguably continued to become more frequent. The recent British Museum and BBC Radio 4 series *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, for example, included two programmes which addressed same-sex relationships in ancient and modern times. The question of whether museums are doing enough, however, remains pertinent and there is still plenty of scope for thoughtful critiques of the different approaches that have been adopted to date.

Queering the Museum at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (November 2010 – January 2011) is the latest addition to the growing corpus of exhibitions to explore LGBT experience and arguably one of the boldest and most innovative. Visitors arriving at the Museum encounter Jacob Epstein's (1880-1959) bronze statue of Lucifer, the head of which was modelled on a woman, the body on a man, creating a figure which suggests a merging of genders. The statue is a permanent feature at the Museum but for the duration of *Queering the Museum* the statue holds a green cape, a contemporary creation made by Matt Smith that is adorned with green silk carnations, a flower worn by men in the 19th and early 20th century as a symbol of gay identity. The transformed Lucifer acts as the introduction to *Queering the Museum*, an exhibition that features eighteen further displays distributed throughout the building and integrated with the permanent galleries. These displays are identified with a green carnation graphic and a distinctive label that reflects aspects of LGBT history and experience. Most visitors will encounter some of these displays serendipitously as they move through the Museum. On the other hand visitors who have come specifically to see the exhibition, or who have become aware of it on arriving at the Museum, will probably proactively seek out the displays, particularly if they have collected a *Queering the Museum* map from the holder next to Lucifer.

The nature of the displays is varied. In a *Tribute to Simeon*, works by the artists Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) and Lord Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) are displayed together in a freestanding case along with a new ceramic work by artist and exhibition curator Matt Smith. At first glance the display blends into the rest of gallery. It is only with a closer look that the distinctive carnation logo on the side of the case and the green strip on the label become apparent, revealing that there is something different about this case. The text explores the impact that Solomon's sexuality had on his work and career in contrast to that of Leighton. Solomon's same-sex encounters resulted in his arrest in London and later Paris, events that led to the collapse of his career whereas Leighton's

discretion meant that his career continued to prosper. Historically biographical references to same-sex encounters or relationships have usually been excluded from interpretation in museums and galleries: in contrast equivalent references related to the heterosexual experiences of artists and other figures are commonplace in many institutions.

Two male sculptures from the Museum's own collections, a statue of Ulysses and one of Adonis, have been paired together in the Medieval & Renaissance Room with a text that argues that curators have a tendency to unconsciously heterosexualise displays, for example by often 'pairing' unrelated male and female sculptures. Elsewhere a Civil Partnership Card from 2005 has been added to an existing display which explores celebrations. Both of these thought-provoking interventions, which utilise objects in the Museum's collection, underline the varied ways in which heteronormative assumptions have led to omissions in museum displays or subtle biases in interpretation.

The majority of the *Queering the Museum* displays feature new ceramic art works made by Matt Smith, and at first glance most of these look like as though they are 'antique' objects that have always been there. For example, it is only on closer inspection that Smith's *The Ladies of Llangollen* reveals itself to be a contemporary interloper amongst genuinely historic ceramics. The piece represents Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, two ladies who set up home together at Plas Newydd in rural Wales after running away from their aristocratic Irish homes. They received visitors as illustrious as the Duke of Wellington and William Wordsworth. The new piece creates an alternative narrative: the Ladies of Llangollen are included amongst the historic displays where they seem to be quite at home.

In other cases the new pieces are juxtaposed with objects from the Museum's own collections to create a stimulating dialogue between old objects and new artworks. Some of the displays are playful, others are more serious. Two half-man animal figures, titled *Contemplating Mr Buturo*, draw attention to the persecution that same-sex adults still face around the world. The title refers to James Nsaba Buturo, the Ugandan Minister of State for Ethics and Integrity who has campaigned for the death penalty for gay men. Other displays highlight issues such as the use of gay slang, stereotypes, the use of symbols and transgender experience.

The labels that support the displays in *Queering the Museum* are always close to the objects and in a clear visual relationship with them. The texts themselves are clear, concise, informative and thought provoking. However there is only one point for collecting the overall exhibition leaflet and plan, and this is discrete and easily missed. More leaflet holders elsewhere alongside other displays might have been helpful for visitors encountering *Queering the Museum* for the first time elsewhere in the Museum and in converting these chance encounters into a deeper interest.

The historian Robert Mills has argued that some recent LGBT themed exhibitions have offered an overly simplistic narrative and have run the risk of inadvertently reinforcing the idea that individuals are either completely heterosexual or homosexual, what Mills terms the "homo-hetero binary calculus". These are not criticisms that can be made of the interventions that form *Queering the Museum*. The integration of the displays throughout the Museum building with the main collection ensures that it is encountered by a large and diverse audience, including those who perhaps otherwise might not visit a self-contained exhibition with an LGBT focus. The exhibition's dispersed and subversive approach is likely to have posed challenges for some visitors but *Queering the Museum* succeeds on many levels, fulfilling the aims outlined in an essay in the online catalogue (available as a PDF). It is to the Museum's credit that it has embraced an alternative approach that will have elicited a wide range of responses from deep engagement to some bemused shrugs of the shoulders and confused glances.

Queering the Museum will close at the end of January 2011, just as LGBT history month is about to begin. By working with an artist Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has been able to look at its collections with fresh eyes, to make new connections between objects, histories and audiences that have usually been overlooked. Collectively the displays in the exhibition capture the diversity of LGBT experiences in an imaginative and creative way, arguably more effectively than many previous approaches. Although *Queering the Museum* is a temporary exhibition it underlines the potential that exists for museums to reinterpret their existing collections in thought provoking ways and provides another case-study for the museum community to consider.

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Select Bibliography

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Online Resources

LGBT History Month
www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk

Queering the Museum at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
<http://www.bmag.org.uk/events?id=1013>