

Queering the Museum

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Artist and Curator

Queering the Museum (2010-2011, [Queeringbrochure-web.pdf](#)) was an exhibition that aimed to explore how queer lives and experiences can be represented in museums. The exhibition consisted of a series of interventions throughout the collections at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

In the early 1990s, when I first started visiting the museum, there was one mention of same sex relationships. It was a label that accompanied Simeon Solomon's painting of Bacchus. Whilst I was delighted to see gay histories in the museum, the label linked the artist's sexuality with him being arrested and spen-

Queer has a number of meanings. Its primary use in the exhibition was as an inclusive word for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. However, its dictionary definitions also include: 'differing from the normal or usual in a way regarded as odd or strange' and 'to be put in a difficult or dangerous position'. This ambiguity is one of Queer's biggest allures.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is one of the largest regional museums in England and has a diverse collection including archaeology, fine and decorative art, natural history and social history collections.

ding the end of his life in a workhouse. I remember thinking that there must be other ways for museums incorporate gay lives.

England was a difficult place to be gay in the 1990s: Clause 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting same sex relationships had been in force since 1988; the age of consent for gay men was different to that for heterosexual men and civil partnerships – ‘gay marriage’ - hadn’t been dreamt of.

Before civil partnerships were introduced in 2005, there was no positive state recording of same-sex relationships. Particularly pre 1967, when being a gay male could result in criminal prosecution, most gay men and women kept their sexuality a secret. Since one of the best know gay men in England - Oscar Wilde - was married with two children, a degree of judgement needs to be taken by curators basing their interpretation on written accounts. Historical ‘facts’ and records of ‘bachelor uncles’ who were ‘married to their work’ sometimes need to be questioned to get a true picture of the past.

Most museums have been slow to represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities. Even when there is willingness on the part of museum staff, few objects can relate to all sections of the diverse queer community, and museums rely on material culture – objects, things – to tell stories.

It is often the connection to the owner that would cast a queer light on an object, and much museum documentation focuses on the material and date of the object, not the emotional ties and links between an object and its owner(s).

This lack of material culture created a dilemma when we were developing the exhibition. A more lateral – and fragmented – approach to the subject matter was needed. If an exhibition of ‘queer’ objects wasn’t possible, could we ‘queer’ the whole museum instead?

Interventions using the existing collections and galleries enabled us to draw out queer stories and themes, exploring subjects that a queer viewer might overlay onto objects the museum already held. I was keen that queer objects were

placed throughout the museum, and not in one gallery, thereby placing a queer seam throughout the museum displays.

Same-sex pairings were an obvious starting point. Once we started to look, male and female pairings were everywhere. Sometimes these pair-

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rings were decided by the maker of the work, on other occasions it was curatorial decision-making that paired sculptures and images of men and women together.

In some cases we swapped female figures with male ones from the collections, in others I made new figures, and same sex couples, which were placed with their heterosexual counterparts.

Using craft to tell these stories seemed a natural decision. Craft has strong gendered links – woodwork for boys and sewing for girls – as well

as a domestic connection. Its homely connotations make it an ideal vehicle for conveying potentially unsettling messages.

Clay was used repeatedly in the exhibition. It has an ability to take on form – casting allows for similar, but slightly different, copies to be made

- and coupled with its permanence after firing, clay is able to fill the invisible gaps in the collection with permanent reminders of missing histories.

During the development of the exhibition, the museum allowed me access to its stores to



Dandies in Love. Birmingham Museum Trust.



*Civil Partnership Figure Group.
Birmingham Museum Trust.*

search for objects which could be brought out to tell other queer stories. Museum objects are usually categorised by material or subject matter. It was therefore a rare privilege to be able to select objects from across a museum's collections.

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It brought up exciting connections including pairing a stuffed otter with ceramic bears to explore slang and stereotypes (a ‘bear’ is a large hairy gay man, an ‘otter’ is a slimmer hairy man). It also resulted in linking polychrome figures from a fairground



*Otters and Bears.
Birmingham Museum Trust.*

organ with ‘polari’, a coded language used by both itinerant travellers and also the gay community. Coded speech was used by gay men in England in the 1950s and 60s to communicate desire between themselves whilst avoiding detection by the police since it was illegal for men to have sex with each other until 1967. Bona arm was polari for someone who had an attractive dick, the installation merged the coded language with a ceramic figurine.

Other connections were quieter and more difficult. I used antique drug jars and the famous ceramic willow pattern to explore death and the impact of HIV. Elsewhere, ceramic sphinxes were created to highlight homophobia in Uganda – where gay men had been likened to animals and the death penalty for homosexuality is still in place. I felt it would have been deceitful to only concentrate on positive messages, and whilst painful, some of these less comfortable aspects of gay life also needed to be included.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery took a very positive and proactive step towards further social inclusion with this exhibition. Their commitment to the project is possibly best illustrated by allowing one of their most iconic objects – Epstein’s figure of Lucifer – to be ‘queered’. The sculpture was draped with a cloak of two thousand green carnations – a flower used in the 1800s by gay men in London to signify homosexuality and attract each other’s attention.



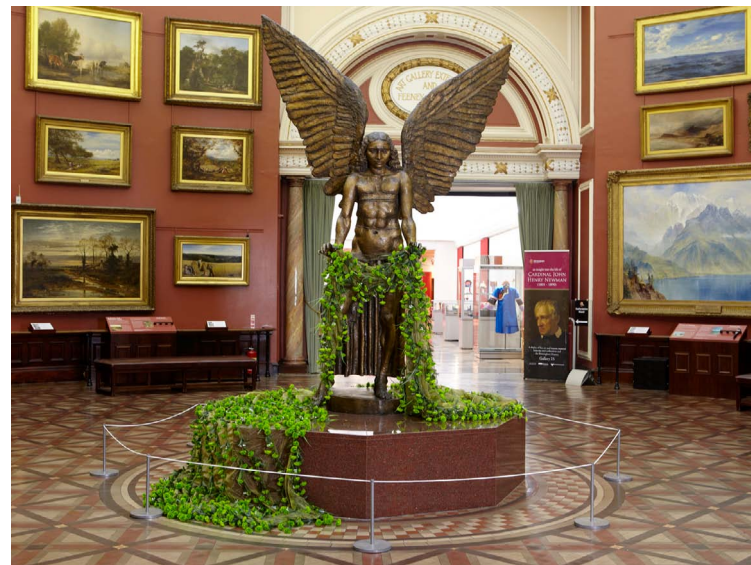
Bona Arm. Birmingham Museum Trust.



Drug Jar. Birmingham Museum Trust.



Contemplating Mr Buturo. Birmingham Museum Trust.



Lucifer. Birmingham Museum Trust.

Museums often present their collection within simple rationales - a brief history or description - which belies their rich and complex histories. This means that the messiness and diversity of human life can be difficult for museums to communicate, and until recently has often been neglected by museums seeking to present their collections with a single authoritative voice. The interventions were intended to confuse and question the conventional narratives of the objects on display and thereby gently question the absolute authority of the museum.

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No exhibition can adequately, or equally, convey the subtleties and complexities that are inherent in such a large and diverse group as the queer 'community'. Rather, I hoped that this re-presentation of the museum's collections reminded people that there is more than one story to tell about any one object.

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En resumen...

El artista Matt Smith comisarió en 2010-2011 la exposición "Queering the museum" en el Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery que, mediante una intervención en la exposición permanente del museo, tenía como objetivo analizar cómo experiencias y vivencias *queer* son representadas en las instituciones museales. Considerando la falta de cultura material *queer* en las colecciones, Smith decidió interpretar el museo en su totalidad en clave *queer*, estableciendo nuevas conexiones entre los objetos, sacando piezas de los almacenes, añadiendo elementos a las piezas o jugando con los diferentes niveles interpretativos de los objetos, cuestionando, en definitiva, la autoridad narrativa del museo. ■