

Comment

Are museums doing enough to address LGBT history?



Stuart Frost

The question of whether museums are doing enough to address Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) audiences has been debated in *Museums Journal* before (*Museums Journal*, December 2009, p15). It was previously suggested that few museums or galleries had addressed the need to collect, frame and interpret the lives of LGBT people, and that few institutions had integrated LGBT material into their permanent collections.

Since then, there have been some notable events and displays. *Gay Icons* at the National Portrait Gallery (2 July-18 October 2009) was one of the most high-profile initiatives. References to LGBT history and people within a general exhibition or gallery narrative have become more frequent. In *Family Album*, for example, a National Portrait Gallery partnership exhibition that travelled to Sunderland, Plymouth and Sheffield, the inclusion of one portrait meant that same-sex relationships and civil partnerships were part of the changing concepts of family explored in the show.

Queering the Museum at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (until 30 January 2011) is the latest example, and one of the boldest. Visitors arriving at the museum encounter Jacob Epstein's bronze statue of Lucifer, the head of which was modelled on a woman, the body on a man. The statue now holds a green cape, a contemporary artwork

adorned with green silk carnations, a flower worn by men in the 19th and early 20th century as a symbol of gay identity. Artist and curator Matt Smith has created a series of 18 further interventions that visitors encounter as they move through the permanent galleries. Each display, identified with a green carnation logo, raises different questions about aspects of LGBT history or experience.

A Civil Partnership Card from 2005 has been added to an existing display that explores celebrations. Elsewhere, new ceramic artworks sit alongside historic museum objects, creating imaginative juxtapositions that suggest alternative histories. Some of the displays are humorous; others are more serious, raising issues such as homophobia. Collectively, they highlight the diversity and complexities of LGBT experience rather than offering a simple linear narrative or progressive history.

Queering the Museum will close 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. Although it is a temporary exhibition, it underlines the potential that exists for museums to reinterpret their existing collections in thought-provoking ways, and to integrate LGBT experience and history into permanent galleries.

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