

The
Fitzwilliam
Museum
CAMBRIDGE



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Connections Through Collections

Participatory museum
research with local
residents



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Summary

Connections Through Collections is an action research project exploring how participatory methodologies can catalyse organisational change. Over three years of close work with ten local residents as co-researchers, the project has delivered public programming, a co-curated display, and collaborative research outputs. The projects findings demonstrate the need for sustainable audience engagement and participation in the life of the museum through inclusion in organisational development and the need for continued opportunity for audience participation in the Museum space.



Project Team

Isaac Ayamba, Anasuya Chattopadhyay, Kath Gilfoy, Rob Hales, Jacqui Lam-McArthur, Susan Lister, Tim Lister, Sue Nelms, Rick Nelms, Jade Pollard-Crowe, David Farrell-Banks, Kate Noble.

Photography: Cover image: My Linh Le/Fitzwilliam Museum; Contents page image: Ruth Clarke/Fitzwilliam Museum; Table/Chairs graphic Rose Dryzek; Tim image R Clarke/Fitzwilliam Museum

Participatory Research in Museums: Why?

The International Council of Museums' definition of museums states that they, "operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities" (ICOM 2022). *Connections Through Collections* is an action research project that ethically centres participant agency, knowledge and expertise, seeking to deliver sustainable participation and long-term change for the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Delivered by a diverse group of ten community co-researchers working with Fitzwilliam staff, the project resulted in the Museum's first fully co-curated display, *Tensions of Belonging: Connecting Cambridge* (November 2023 – June 2024).

This research builds on national participatory museum research (e.g. Boersma 2023) to extend the Fitzwilliam Museum's strength in this field (see Wallis & Noble 2022; 2023) and provide potential for transformative action in the Museum and across the University.

Research Questions

- How can the Museum centre participant agency, knowledge and experience through listening, exchange, careful invitation and active participation?
- How can participatory methodologies catalyse organisational change?
- What happens when we place communities at the heart of how we expand, develop and use our Museum collections?

Approach

The project utilises participatory action research to develop museum projects that are actively relevant and responsive to a wide range of audiences (see Boersma 2023). We seek to adopt a collective pedagogy of care, where we centre empathy in our work by continually reflecting on our practice and its impact on those we work with (Morse 2021: 194). We work across the institution and alongside community members to actively critique and question the functions and demands of the museum.

The emotional labour of our work (Motta and Bennett 2018) reflects the affective capacities of museums (Smith, Wetherell and Campbell 2018). We continually and proactively reflect on the impacts of this work on ourselves and colleagues, and the transformative capacity of our work to fundamentally shift the practices of the Museum as an institution (Berlant 2022: xi).

What We Did

- 30 participatory workshops with 10 community co-researchers, working with 25 members of Fitzwilliam Museum staff including the Director and Deputy Directors
- Co-curated the *Tensions of Belonging* display
- Co-created and delivered two drop-in family days, reaching over 500 people, and two public talks (60 visitors)
- Collaboratively analysed data with our community co-researchers (see Rix et al. 2020)

Data Collected

- Recordings and transcripts of all workshops
- 36 semi-structured interviews with co-researchers
- 800 written responses and over 3,000 drawn responses to the *Tensions of Belonging* exhibition
- 52 visitor surveys and 101 visitors tracked
Meeting minutes and feedback from co-researchers

The project is "transformative...for how we understand and engage with research impact in the arts and humanities"

(Ben Earley, Senior Impact Coordinator for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Findings

Project findings have captured impacts on both the Museum and the co-researchers. The centring of participant agency, knowledge and experience through collaboration between co-researchers and Museum staff is enhancing the Museum's local relevance, role within the University of Cambridge, and position as a sector leader in participatory research. Placing communities at the heart of our research and use of collections is delivering positive impact on the agency and skills development of co-researchers, demonstrating the potential for participatory research to evidence organisational change alongside positive impacts for individual co-researchers and community groups.

Participation in public events is “affirming”, “confidence building” and a “great development opportunity”

(Jade Pollard-Crowe)

Enhancing the Agency of Community Participants

Co-researcher Tim initially felt the project “would take place without [me]”, yet “two years later, [I am] still involved”. Our careful approach to participation and reflection enabled Tim to take a leading role in designing activities for family-days in 2024 and 2025, reaching families across Cambridge with accessible activities inspired by the collections.

Jade, Isaac and Anasuya have subsequently contributed to the design development of the upcoming *Rise Up: Resistance, Revolution, Abolition* exhibition, while Rob participated in the Barkat Trust funded Hands on Islamic Art project.

Supporting Professional Development

Co-researcher Jade has subsequently interned with and contributed to work across University of Cambridge Museums. Rob has developed his confidence in public speaking through research events, including speaking at a national conference for the first time. Jade, Rob, Sue and Jacqui have all been contributing to co-authored academic articles. The foregrounding of participant agency throughout the research process embeds opportunity for impactful skills development.

These four themes provide a useful framing for thinking about how to make the most of the unique affordances of the museum to improve the welcome for families.

Impacting Health and Wellbeing through Meaningful Participation

Rick reflected on his experience as “an artist in a failing body” and how his curation of an artwork by the disabled artist Shawanda Corbett helps “whenever I struggle with my own work”. For Kath, participation created a feeling “that in my last years I was able to contribute something” to the museum and its visitors. Through creating an inclusive model of participation, Connections delivered positive impacts for participants experiencing significant health challenges.

Increasing the Relevance of the Fitzwilliam Museum to Local Audiences

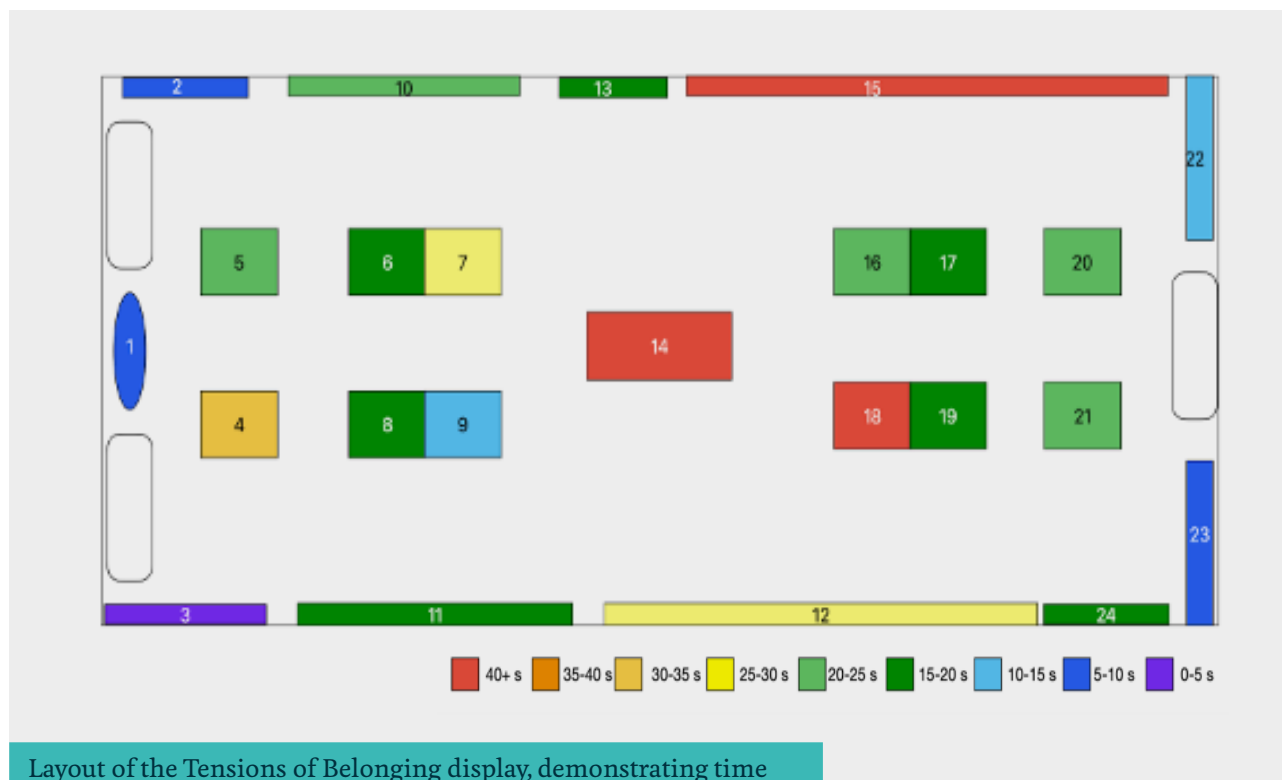
Over 250,000 visitors came to the Fitzwilliam during *Tensions of Belonging*. The display inspired over 4,000 visitor comment and activity cards, and increased the percentage of local visitors, from 20% to 26%. One visitor from Fenland commented, “how much it meant to have that story [of Fenland cultural heritage, told through the Jessie Wine sculpture *AS I AM NOW ONE DAY WILL YE BE I* (2021)] represented in the Museum”.

Through bringing their lived experience and a strongly place-based approach, the co-researchers achieved their aim to reach local audiences through their disruption of traditional curatorial interpretation.

The co-researchers’ ambition is for the Fitzwilliam to be “a museum which is valued by a wider audience from its local area, so that the range of Cambridge and [people from the] surrounding areas who come through the door is larger than it was when we started”

(Rick Nelms)

Creating a Space to Dwell



The project team aimed to create a welcoming space for visitors, in particular families, to stop and dwell.

The addition of a table, chairs and activities in the Lower Marlay gallery dramatically changed the feel of the space. Visitor tracking demonstrated that visitors who stopped at the table (no. 14 in the diagram above) spent more time here than the majority of the rest of the gallery. Over 4,000 visitors engaged directly with these activities, demonstrating a clear desire to engage directly with the Museum's displays and collections.

Catalysing Organisational and University Change

Through incorporating a table, chairs and activities into the display, the project created space for reflection that allowed visitors to "feel part of this museum" (Visitor feedback). The model of activating displays, through the inclusion of space to make and create, has been redeployed in Botticelli in Cambridge, which reached over 100,000 visitors. These new methods of collaboration in design, interpretation and display

development have been incorporated into the major exhibitions *Glenn Ligon: All Over the Place* (2024-25) and *Rise Up* (2025). The Museum's collaboratively-created 'Participatory Practice Manifesto' and Mission to, 'use art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire reflection, connection and creativity' are ensuring that these changes are embedded into the organisation long-term.

The co-researchers are undertaking collaborative data analysis, with co-authored publications forthcoming. The project's success has supported the delivery of participatory research training to 100+ researchers across disciplines ranging from museum education to environmental science, career stages, from PhDs to senior academics, and institutions, including University of Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin University, University of Northampton and research support staff from Cambridge and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Recommendations:

“More light, more noise, more activity”

Sustainable Audience Engagement

Ensuring ongoing creation of active spaces in exhibitions, displays and permanent galleries

Co-researcher Susan describes the CTC project as a wedge, opening up a small space for participation from community members. This reflects her hope that the project is part of a wider shift to transform the Museum, helping it become more accessible to a wider range of people. The ambition of the co-researchers is now to ensure that this is “going to be the beginning of something” for the Fitzwilliam Museum. The successful use of furniture and activities in Tensions of Belonging supports the activation of gallery spaces in future Museum activity, creating invitations for audiences to creatively and sustainably engage with our collections.

Capturing a Legacy, Ensuring Sustainability

A model for archiving community participation and collaboration should be collaboratively created to capture pioneering collaborative work across the Museum.

Jade describes the group’s work as seeking to be “pioneers of the [Fitzwilliam Museum] making that connection with community groups”. The work should be “archived so it could exist as an online legacy” of the group’s achievements and as a repository of evidence to support future research and museum activity.



Tensions of Belonging Display
Photo: Lewis Ronald, Fitzwilliam Museum

Showcasing Relevance and Creativity through Visible Participation

Provide time, space and opportunity for participation in visible Museum outputs and developments.

The co-researchers are ambitious in seeking to produce future displays and research projects. They exist to challenge the status quo of the Museum, not to upset or disrupt, but to offer new and alternative ways of working. The Museum should support this ambition across participatory and collaborative projects. Actively demonstrating a commitment to participation supports the continued development of an engaged, relevant Museum for all of our audiences and extends the Museums role as a leading civic space in Cambridge.

Next Steps

- Collaborative data analysis and co-authorship of publications
- Co-development of guidance for including community participant voice in collections databases
- Supporting organisational change and the development of the Museum's new Research & Impact Strategy
- Engagement in the development of future displays for co-researchers



Tim leading a family day activity in the Tensions of Belonging display

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