

The Future of Museums: renewing and reimagining the creative and civic role of museums.

In caring for the past, museums are staking a claim on what matters in the future. Esme will share experiences and stories rooted in Manchester, grapple with the complexities and challenges facing 'encyclopaedic' museums today and propose a more equitable and values-driven approach to care and collections.

1 Introduction slide

Thank you and I'm absolutely delighted to have been invited to give the Brantwood lecture this evening. My thanks to the organisers and to all of you for being here to find out more about the future of museums and how they might renew and reimagine their creative and civic roles, something we are trying to do in Manchester.

2 Manchester and Ruskin

So let's head north, to that fine city. It's not looking the most promising start and Ruskin certainly had a complex relationship with Manchester. He gave some of his most important lectures there and his legacy continues today, with new generations discovering his work; most recently, just last year, in the publication and film *Everyone deserves space: Ruskin's Manchester Now*.

In her introduction to the project Dr Rachel Dickinson says,

"Looking to Manchester, Ruskin spoke of Manchester's 'devil darkness' meaning both its pollution fuelled effect on climate and also its laissez-faire capitalism that prioritised economic profit over life and freedom. Ruskin argued everyone deserves access to green spaces, good housing, creativity, employment, food and human contact. This new work by five poets, all new to Ruskin responds to his writings and resonates with both Victorian Manchester and our world in 2022" (and if you haven't seen this already, I would thoroughly recommend it)¹

3 Ancoats streets

Ruskin's hostility to Manchester, his sense it was beyond redemption, was shared. In *The Condition of the Working Class of England*, published in 1845, Friedrich Engels had described Ancoats in East Manchester, the first industrial suburb in the world, as "hell on earth". He spoke of

*"the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterise the construction of this single district, containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants...."*²

Forty years later, in the 1880s Ancoats remained the dirtiest, dreariest neighbourhood, though finally the streets of Ancoats were being properly paved and proper sewers installed. In 1883, here in London, a Congregational Minister, the Revd Andrew Mearns, published a sensational pamphlet *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, exposing the squalid conditions of life for the poor in East London.

¹ Everyone Deserves Space: Ruskin's Manchester Now, https://issuu.com/nbaa/docs/ruskin_anthology#:~:text=In Lockdown, Ruskin's phrase 'there,employment, food and human contact.

² Friedrich Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, London, 1891.

Four years later, JH Crosfield published *The Bitter Cry of Ancoats and Impoverished Manchester*. (It was indeed grim up north).

4 Manchester Art Museum

Enter Thomas Coglan Horsfall and the Manchester Art Museum, specifically formed for the purpose of giving effect to Ruskin's teaching in nowhere other than Ancoats.

Nearly a decade ago I was asked to do a provocation on the future museum at a Museums Association conference. In part to burst the obsession with innovation and the new and to remind all of us who work in museums that we might want to be more curious and learn from museum practice of the past, I spoke about the Manchester Art Museum and University Settlement. This was a social and civic experiment. Located next to people's homes, open until 10 at night so working people could visit, with rooms displaying art and nature, with maker/ workshop space, a breadth of community partnerships, a resident lawyer and team called the Associates who offered support and advice to visitors; free music, lectures, local clubs and education programmes, disabled outreach scheme, schools loans service and a Youth Employment Exchange. In its first year, a local philanthropist Oliver Heywood had called it a 'Toynbee Hall' for Manchester.

Meanwhile, audience members at the Museums Association asked if it had really existed, it sounded so contemporary, so relevant. No one had ever heard of it.

5 Horsfall

Even though Ruskin had implored him to "spend his artistic benevolence on less recalcitrant ground", Horsfall's belief in the redemptive power of art and his commitment to social progress, moral beauty and spiritual enlightenment, especially amongst the young, took root in Manchester.³ Whilst today, his approach to civic philanthropy and many of his methods would be viewed as patronising or problematic, his vision of museums as engines of civic engagement is as relevant and powerful as ever. He expected his museum to be a force for good in the neighbourhood; to play a part in improving where people live, alongside better housing, more parks and recreational opportunities.

It inspires me and I, for one, owe him a career in museum education. Horsfall was at the forefront of developments in art education - he lobbied parliament to ensure that learning in the Museum was valued. He obtained an amendment to the Education Code, after a meeting in 1894, which permitted schoolchildren for the first time to visit museums, art galleries, historic buildings and botanical gardens in school hours as part of their education.

6 Exterior Manchester Museum 1890s

Meanwhile, Still in Manchester, across town, another museum is about to open its doors. Manchester Museum, housed in a neo-Gothic building on Oxford Road, designed by Alfred Waterhouse and an integral part of the University of Manchester, was presented in 1897 as an appeal to "the civic spirit, scientific curiosity and devotion of the townsfolk of Manchester". From

³Stuart Eagles, *Thomas Coglan Horsfall, and Manchester Art Museum and University Settlement, the encyclopaedia of informal education, 2009.*

www.infed.org/settlements/manchester_art_museum_and_university_settlement.htm

the outset, it has been a university museum with a deep commitment to teaching, learning and research. Today it remains a critical part of the research infrastructure with many museum staff teaching and publishing widely.

7 Whale

Originally, it housed collections that had belonged to the Manchester Natural History Society, like the sperm whale pictured here (with taxidermist Harry Brazenose) which continues to lie above our Living Worlds gallery. Foundational collections and financial support came from early textile industrialist John Leigh Phillips whose success in textile manufacturing rested on slave-grown cotton. Manchester's significant involvement in the cotton trade and the geographical locations with which the city traded, meant that a large number of its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century merchants had connections to slavery.

8 Interior Manchester Museum 1920s

At the height of colonial power Manchester Museum grew significantly, usually to accommodate new kinds of collections - unlike the Manchester Art Museum, which declined as cinemas and other leisure facilities opened and in 1918 it separated from the University settlement and was taken over by the city, eventually closing in 1953 when most of the collection transferred to Manchester Art Gallery.

The early 20th century collecting frenzy and the critical role of Manchester Museum as a colonial repository saw botany, Egyptology, archaeology and anthropology collections grow at pace. Indigenous artefacts, ancestors and significant cultural heritage were taken, traded and studied, resulting in thousands of collections held by institutions around the world. Today, Manchester Museum has over 4.5 million objects and is one of the largest university museums in the UK. So, whilst Manchester Museum was indeed born of civic ambition, it was also born of Empire and our work to address this history is urgent, critical and I believe pivotal to our future.

I just want to set the context for the here and now. Because sadly many of our museums are in real trouble. Unlike our founding fathers, a collective sense of purpose, civic and social responsibility has been eroded. When I speak with fellow regional museum directors, we all agree on one thing - the traditional museum model is broken; multiple financial challenges result in less money year on year and a slow hollowing out of curatorial and collections expertise up and down the UK; our failure to address the threat and implications of the climate and biodiversity crisis mean we all too often just keep on collecting (profusion is king and we rarely dispose of collections) and ultimately, care more for our collections than either people or planet; we still fail to fully acknowledge, interrogate and address the impact, complexities and legacy of Empire, whether in our approach to caring for collections or in museum-speak, 'how we diversify and develop audiences'.

But we also agree that at their best, though perhaps all too rarely, museums are powerful spaces for identity-forming, attending to difference and truth-telling. They can ask "what is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves?" Andrew Simms describes them as "*physical manifestations of*

civilizations collective memories, inventories of traces left in us by the past".⁴ They remain amongst the few (often free) civic spaces that bring generations and communities together to learn and explore what it means to be human and live in this world.

8 External Manchester Museum 2023

I was appointed Director in 2018 to lead and support a transformative shift in the museum's culture, relationships, spaces and work.

Just prior to this, as part of the Greater Manchester devolution deal, I'd spent several months on secondment, as part of the public health Ageing Hub, exploring how to embed arts and culture in the population health plan, an *urgent task of renewal and reinvention*. The reform programme in Greater Manchester sought to reimagine services across the whole care system and had a different starting point to traditional health and care services that asked the question 'what makes us healthy?' rather than 'what makes us ill?' A life-course, asset-based approach encouraged a spirit of collaboration and new alliances and whilst the Royal Society for Public Health describes museums as members of the public health workforce, it was only through this work and conversations with policy makers, practitioners and patients, that I realised museums could and should be playing a more significant role in a shared agenda of tackling inequalities and re-imagining public health in the city. My late 19th century predecessors understood this more clearly than many do today I feel.

Within public health, museums were especially valued. Evaluation of museum-based volunteering (particularly amongst older people) in Greater Manchester found that in museums;

*This connectedness to human experience over time has enhanced the level of self-awareness, belonging, imagination and ability to narrate and relate better to others, and thus improve social relationships.*⁵

The English

Longitudinal Study into Ageing identifies that social connectedness, above anything else (including medical intervention) made the most significant difference to longevity, wellbeing and quality of life.

Today, wellbeing and equity goals sit at the heart of Greater Manchester's strategy for its fairer future. For Manchester in 2023 is an all too familiar tale of two cities. The growth, wealth, energy and international ambition sits alongside persistent health, educational and racial inequalities, with a shocking 42% children under 16 living in poverty.

Against this backdrop, aligned with the University's commitment to social responsibility, our mission to build a more sustainable world and understanding between cultures has never been more urgent or necessary.

⁴ Andrew Simms, *Museum of Rapid Transition: museums in a world facing existential crisis* <https://rapidtransition.org/commentaries/museum-of-rapid-transition-museums-in-a-world-facing-existential-crisis/>

⁵ *Inspiring Futures: Volunteering for Wellbeing. Final Report 2013- 2016*. Retrieved from website http://volunteeringforwellbeing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/IF_VOLUNTEERING_FOR_WELLBEING_REPORT_2013-16_SROI_IWM.pdf

10 Welcome panel

Our values – a **commitment to inclusion, imagination and care** – drive everything that we do. In a hyper-diverse city like Manchester (200 languages spoken), a commitment to **inclusion** – beyond the veneer of inclusion that museums and galleries can be so good at – requires greater collaboration and new forms of relationship building.

A commitment to **imagination** means playing an active role in the research, dreaming, learning and ‘imagination infrastructure’ of as many people and organisations as possible.

And a commitment to **care** means extending our stewardship and care beyond collections ... to people, ideas, beliefs, place and relationships so that we can take action to build understanding, empathy and love for our world and each other.

11 Iftar

Put simply, we want the museum to be a place where people feel they belong. This is an image from our first Iftar in 2019, the first ever held in a UK museum (an Iftar is the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset and in the museum, we also highlighted Islamic collections) – open to all faiths and none, a partnership with the Manchester’s University Muslim Chaplain. Over 500 people came, there were a lot of queues and a lot of goodwill. Against a backdrop of growing Islamophobia in the city, people told us we were true to the spirit of Ramadan, the month of hospitality and sharing. They said “it means so much that Manchester Museum has done this”, that it was a “brave display of cultural intelligence”, and one student wrote “now I know I am safe here and belong”

If we want a deeper sense of emotional and communal engagement, belonging and ownership for everyone, we have to create the conditions that enable and encourage that.

For us, this doesn’t just mean programmes like the Iftar, it includes new multi-lingual galleries and a host of new co-designed inclusive spaces that didn’t exist previously – including a prayer space, picnic area, quiet room, therapy room and fully accessible Changing Places toilet.

12 South Asia Gallery entrance

One of the new galleries is the South Asia Gallery you see here. Driven by a spirit of collaboration and co-production, bringing lived experience and collections together, with a new commission by artists The Singh Twins – an emotional map of British Asian experience – that sets the tone and welcomes you in.

A partnership with the British Museum, it was originally conceived of as a professionally curated chronological gallery aimed at attracting more South Asian audiences, traditionally under-represented at the museum. “Build it and they will come”, as Horsfall noted all those years ago, is not enough. Soon after I started we paused the project and asked whether it was really as inclusive and imaginative as it could be. Over a memorable lunch, we brought together over 120 local people, mostly of South Asian diaspora, and asked them the question that really mattered most – what is it you really care about? The invitation made clear that the South Asia Gallery now sought to be a creative, collective and social endeavour. What if we could build the UK’s first permanent gallery dedicated to exploring the experiences, cultures and contributions of South Asian diaspora? Together, we reimagined it as a space that would tell new stories, that they would curate.

13 South Asia Collective

The South Asia Gallery Collective was borne from this lunch – 30 educators, artists, community workers, scientists, musicians, students, business people, Greater Manchester folk have worked with us over the past 5 years. Its been quite a journey. We parted ways with the original design team and the Collective and museum staff together recruited a new team of diaspora architects and graphic designers. This is co-curation on a fairly epic scale. We appointed a Curator, Nusrat Ahmed, who had had years of experience working on heritage projects and community organising. She led on creating the conditions for collaboration and ensuring lived experience, research and storymaking are valued and at the heart of the process and design.

14 South Asia Gallery Project Space

Across the gallery there are 6 anthologies – from Past and Present to British Asian, Empire and Movement and Science and Innovation and the gallery showcases artefacts from the British Museum and Manchester Museum, alongside new contemporary commissions and personal objects provided.

15 WW1 contribution

At its centre is a project space for film, events, workshops and debate. They unearthed stories we would never have found or told; like Talat Farooq Awan's extraordinary discovery of his great grandfathers WW1 uniform on a visit to Pakistan, now placed alongside early 20th century posters recruiting people for the British Army in South Asian languages.

One of the reviews we received soon after opening, from the Speaker, a magazine for Urdu speakers, summarises why this approach and gallery presents a more inclusive future for museums,

The honesty of the impact of colonialism in our communities is one of the reasons I will be bringing not only my South Asian friends, family and my parents to the museum, but my non-South Asian loved ones too; the gallery shares a part of me that I may not have been able to express in words to them before. And this opens the museum up to a whole new audience, such as my mother, whose visit to this museum will be her first visit to a museum ever. I feel it's important for her to come here and there's something so emotional about that in itself. Places we have felt excluded from our whole lives and shield our parents away from because they felt like 'white spaces', I can now walk into proudly with my mother, whilst she wears her shalwar kameez, and allow her to learn about and celebrate her history.⁶

16 NY Times review

Alongside the South Asia Gallery, we opened a multi-lingual Chinese Culture Gallery in partnership with the University's Manchester China Institute, with a shared ambition to build understanding between Manchester and China, in the face of growing discrimination and an increasingly challenging geopolitical context. And our new Exhibition Hall opened with a blockbuster Golden

⁶ *Being South Asian at the New Manchester Museum*, The Speaker, <https://speakernewspaper.com/being-south-asian-at-the-new-manchester-museum/>

Mummies exhibition, which also highlighted the museum's colonial legacy and rarely discussed link between leading archaeologists and race science.

In a career first, we were profiled in the New York Times. Since reopening in February, over 600,000 people have visited the museum (in previous years 470,000 people was the highest ever number). Our visitors now reflect the city-region, with over a third from the global majority and for 12% of them, it is the very first time they have ever been to a museum.

17 Top floor

This desire to build empathy and a sense of belonging extends far beyond the exhibitions and curatorial work of the museum. Over the past 4 years, although we were often closed to the public as building work progressed, the museum has opened up and the entire top floor is now home to environmental, educational and social justice charities that share our mission to build a more sustainable world. It's an experiment to see whether and how we become the museum the city and its people need.

18 PINC college

For nearly 5 years, we've been home to an alternative arts college and proud HQ of an incredible award-winning charity PINC college who work with neurodivergent 16-25 year olds. There was limited provision across Greater Manchester and we had been actively exploring what new forms of education might look like. We've always done this – from Horsfall's Ruskinian experiment to the extraordinary way in 1918 Manchester Museum became the city's school almost overnight, as school building were commandeered for other uses, curators became teachers and children all came to the museum for school.

During the first lockdown in COVID, we formally registered as a specialist college to ensure that college (rather than museum) rules applied and from that moment on (and in the three lockdowns which followed) we could and indeed did remain open for PINC students. It has grown from a couple of tables and desk spaces in 2018 to a studio, classroom and dedicated therapy space (also home to Greater Manchester young people's mental health lead). PINC has now expanded to more than a dozen other heritage venues across Midlands and the north.. In Manchester, PINC students are involved in museum programmes, including internships and we have a dedicated Quiet room, learning programmes, partnerships interpretation and staff to learners beyond PINC. In fact, 17% of our visitors identify as neurodivergent.

19 Top Floor

On the top floor, we also have a greenhouse, co-working hub and lounge for charities, researchers and activists, artist studio, seminar rooms and a series of display cases that share the work of our partners. We are bringing people together to learn, support, build community and capacity, redistribute funding and make plans. Socially responsible museums are nothing new but today, it is still unusual to find so much space and resource dedicated in this way.

But a shared commitment to environmental action and social justice locally as well as recognition that bleak uncertainty may well be the psychological reality of this moment frame our work. Our

mission is to build a more sustainable world and there is no time to waste - the scope, depth and accelerating pace of climate and ecological breakdown is an ever present, grim backdrop.

To date we have 18 partners, all committed to environmental action and social justice, including Ardwick Climate Action (a local community group who have lost 60% of their green spaces in the past 5 years), environmental charity The Carbon Literacy Project, Invisible Cities (charity supporting people with experience of homelessness), the Olympias Music Foundation and In Place of War (Manchester based global organisation that uses creativity in places of conflict as a tool for positive change).

We've partnered with Ardwick Climate Action, supporting the takeover of a closed section of a major road, the A6, to measure and raise awareness of the air pollution impacts beside their homes and draw on our herbarium collection to recommend and plant pollution combatting hedgerows. Last year, Arts Council England supported us, in partnership with the regional museum development team (who are based at Manchester Museum) and the global charity Carbon Literacy Project to launch Roots and Branches. The roots (somewhat confusingly) are this top floor hub that brings together educators, environmentalists, artists, researchers and third sector organisations. The branches are training and resources that support England's museum sector to become carbon literate. As the world's first carbon literate museum, we've co-developed an accredited Carbon Literacy toolkit and trained hundreds of museum professionals, as a first step on their museum's climate action journey.

Its action that gives rise to hope.

20 Social Justice Manager

Just after we reopened, we received all-too-rare transformative philanthropic funding to recruit a new role of Social Justice Manager. 11,000 children live in poverty within a two-mile radius of Manchester Museum and that number is set to rise. We consistently ask what does it mean to be a good neighbour, do we understand our local context and how might we usefully contribute? Are we equipped or resourced to do this? What needs to change?

Over the past two years 15 staff have been trained as social justice researchers and are working collaboratively with a nearby school, families and the University's Local Matters poverty research team to develop and deliver a pilot programme that addresses how poverty and disadvantage are understood and responded to within the museum and through its relationships and activities. So we'd started to lay the foundations. But by harnessing the museum's distinctive convening power and position – as one of Manchester's best-loved and trusted cultural venues, respected for its collaboration with communities across the city-region, and backed by leading-edge research driven by The University of Manchester – this new funding supports the museum's work on family poverty, inclusion and social mobility and the funder's belief that the museum might become a leading hub for social justice in our city.

When we advertised the role, there was some backlash as we were accused of being overly political and of moving beyond the acceptable boundaries of what museums should do. As historian Sadiya Qureshi stated in that NY Times article,

“A lot of people have assumed that museums are neutral spaces, when they are not, and they see any change as making them political,” “museums were, from the outset, deeply political ventures on the part of people who thought they were going to be educational for the working classes.”⁷

I will continue to challenge the persistent claim of institutional neutrality and not unlike, Horsfall’s Manchester Art Museum, continue to broaden our work and sense of civic and social responsibility.

21 Anindilyakwa return

Today, people tell us they want emotional connections, not civic commemorations. Yet so much of our work in museums takes place on grounds staked out by Western rationalism and we deny the laws, realities and belief systems of other cultures and people, many most closely connected to our global collections.

We have a Curator of Living Cultures, who cares for ‘ethnographic’ collections, his title a constant reminder that objects in museums are not just things, they embody the lives of their original makers and owners and have lives of their own. These “belongings” are filled with memories and stories and through them we can make emotional connections with people across different times and places. If museums today and in the future are to reflect the complexity of the human condition and people’s understanding of the world and each other, I believe we have to find more room for the emotional and spiritual.

Nowhere is this more true than in healing or return work, often called repatriation.

So I’d like to end with a story that speaks to a more equitable future for our museums – and to be honest, any reflection on the future of museums that doesn’t grapple with this is ignoring the elephant in the room.

For many years, we have considered the return of collections not as loss but as a gain, an act of repair, healing, and relationship building that gives communities and our museums new purpose, strength and relevance. In 2019 we were the first museum in Europe to unconditionally return secret, sacred and ceremonial material to communities of origin. As Mangubadijarri Yanner, one of the traditional owners said,

“we share a dark history – but its moments like this, when we come together as one, united by our desire to do better, be better and to right the wrongs of the past, that we start to heal spiritual hurts and the intergenerational trauma that still exists today”⁸

On 5 September 2023, a delegation from the Aboriginal Anindilyakwa community of Groote Eylandt joined us for the formal return of 174 cultural heritage items – this included secular everyday items; baskets, maps and shell dolls.

We worked collaboratively with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Anindilyakwa Land Council over a three-year period to determine where these items should live and could best inspire future generations. For the first time, museum staff

⁷ *A Museum Pivots to become an Empathy Machine*, New York Times, 17 February 2023.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/arts/design/manchester-museum-reopening-diversity.html>

⁸ Mangubadijarri Yanner, at Handover Ceremony, Australia House, London 22 November 2019.

were present in person for part of the consultation process, visiting Groote Eylandt, in Australia's Northern Territory at the invitation of the Anindilyakwa People. Georgina Young, Head of Collections and Exhibitions shared her reflections,

“what is set on paper as part of a return request – no matter how comprehensive and nuanced – does not replicate embodied understanding. Indeed our formats and requirements for requests are deliberately designed not to feel like a conversation about kin, designed not to encompass the spiritual and emotional, the lived and the lore. This is human work”.⁹

For the Anindilyakwa community, awareness of the returned shell dolls has already unlocked a rich cultural history and inspired the Dadikwakwa-kwa Project – a contemporary art programme.. two of the artists were part of the Manchester delegation. Staff and visitors to Manchester Museum heard their voices and stories and the artists led a shell doll-making workshop for young women artists in Manchester. We're working on a larger display next year. People in Manchester engaged with historic collections and reflected on how they might be best cared for, but also with living Anindilyakwa culture.

22 Anindilyakwa embrace

This photo shows an embrace between the daughter of the anthropologist that collected the material we returned and Amatheia, one of the Anindilyakwa artists. UNESCO have been vocal supporters, *“This is a case we have shared with our member states because we felt it was exemplary in many ways. The return of the objects was not a transaction, but “a collaboration, a dialogue”, a project fuelled by “empathy, trust and love”*.¹⁰

As Dr Mike Jones recently summarised, this focus on relationships is relatively new in museums, and remains far from universal. But if museums are to remain relevant, trusted institutions, they will need to move beyond traditional models of authority¹¹. We have a dedicated Curator of Indigenous Perspectives who works with communities across the world and in Manchester to ‘imagine what the museum may be in the future as its social function shifts and people who previously had little power in its definitions reconceptualize it and foster a process and culture of reconciliation and humility’.¹²

Like many museums with similar collections, we're grappling with what an 'ethics of care' should be for an institution like ours, born of Empire and built on a series of extractive practices, in Manchester, a city that bears more than its fair share of responsibility for the climate and ecological crisis – but also a city proudly built by migrants, a city of sanctuary, known, loved and celebrated for its commitment to radical movements and social justice.

⁹ Georgina Young, Head of Exhibitions and Collections, Manchester Museum, the University of Manchester

¹⁰ Krista Prikkat, Director, Culture and Emergencies Entity, Culture Sector, UNESCO

¹¹ Dr Mike Jones, <https://theconversation.com/uk/topics/museums-78492>

¹² Dr Alexandra P Allberda, Curator of Living Cultures, Manchester Museum, the University of Manchester

We will never know whether, if Horsfall or indeed Ruskin were alive today, they would similarly embrace a progressive vision of the world that takes the idea of care as an organising principle seriously, but I like to imagine they would.