

In Depth - Focus on Access at The New Art Gallery Walsall

Collections Curator Julie Brown discusses access and inclusion at The New Art Gallery Walsall, and how the gallery makes its collections accessible for different audiences in different ways, physically, digitally, and intellectually.

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Collection: The New Art Gallery Walsall

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Access in a 21st Century Gallery: first steps

The New Art Gallery Walsall is fortunate to be housed in an award-winning twenty-first century building, designed by Caruso St John architects, which opened to critical acclaim at the turn of the Millennium: next year (2020), marks the Gallery's twentieth anniversary. Having a 'new build' means physical access is less of a problem than for some of our regional counterparts, who occupy grand but more austere Victorian buildings.

However iconic the architecture though (and architecture students still visit regularly), it is not without its pitfalls: for example, access audits have shown that first-time visitors sometimes feel intimidated when they encounter the dominant staircase in our foyer, and there is also a lot of concrete and wood, which in parts might resemble a prison or sauna, so it is not to everyone's tastes!

The polished concrete floors can be tricky for those with dementia or visual impairments, and the 'unique selling point' of the intimate, domestic-scale rooms of the Garman Ryan galleries can be a tight fit for wheelchair users, particularly when large groups are visiting. Also, after twenty years there are, inevitably, upgrades and maintenance required to keep the building at its best (for example, maintaining fire doors, lifts etc.), yet we don't have easy access to the necessary budgets to provide for this and allow the building to run as smoothly as it should.

A visit to the Gallery, however, may not start at our doors: for some visitors, our website may be their first port of call. We use this platform to help people prepare for their visit and better access the building. We were fortunate to be able to partner with [Autism West Midlands](#) to develop a [Virtual Gallery Tour](#) (available on both organisation's websites) to encourage potential new visitors to familiarise themselves with the building layout, and to make coming to the Gallery for the first time a less daunting experience. We also publish online information about our events, exhibitions and any temporary Gallery closures.

Once visitors enter the Gallery, they are met by our friendly, welcoming Front of House team- who are regularly praised in our visitor's book. Our reception is visible at the

entrance, to acknowledge and provide reassurance and direction for visitors on arrival. As well as a well-stocked range of visitor information in printed form – from Exhibition Guides, What’s Ons, Family leaflets and Schools guides, which we are happy to provide copies of in Large Print – we also have a dedicated resource area, in which we show subtitled introductory films about our exhibitions, as well as providing books and other reference materials. In addition, we have a dedicated art library on our mezzanine, which is well stocked with magazines, catalogues and other publications, and offers a free public reference resource and as well as internet access.

The next stop for visitors is the galleries. Roughly 7% of Walsall’s public art collections are on display at any one time, and we physically rehang and refresh the displays on an annual basis.¹ An annual events programme linked to each themed re-display provides educational opportunities, from practical artist-led workshops, to curator-led tours. A number of events also promote the use of our collections for health and wellbeing, such as [Feelgood Fridays](#) and [Sketching Sundays](#).

Our collections spaces hold approximately 250 objects at any one time.² Any member of the public can, however, make an appointment to view works in the collections that are not on display, and we also have a dedicated [E-Museum](#), hosted by Gallery Systems, which provides digital access to information on our TMS collections database, including whether or not the work is currently on display.

Why accessibility is so important- meeting our access responsibilities

Digital technology has been particularly useful in improving access to our Collections. I have recently trialled the use of Livestreamed collections tours via our Periscope and Twitter platforms, which have been surprisingly successful and have attracted an international audience. In addition to making our Collections more accessibly generally, digital technology has also been useful in improving the way we connect with and meet the needs of different audience groups. For example, I have worked with the organisation [Vocal Eyes](#) to deliver visual impairment awareness training and help with the development of an Audio Description programme focused on the highlights of the [Garman Ryan Collection](#), which are now available via our website and online collections database. These have been developed into dedicated Touch and Audio Description tours, incorporating live interaction with some of our Epstein busts.

All accredited museums are now required to have a Collections Access Policy, following the accreditation review conducted by Arts Council England (ACE) in November 2018. As a recipient of ACE National Portfolio Organisation funding, we are also under a number of obligations to improve and develop our inclusion and access work. The recent re-evaluation of the Accreditation Scheme has led to greater emphasis on access in museums, which can only be a good thing given that just one-fifth of accredited museums have an Access Policy

at present, or provide detailed access information on their websites- and even then there is often only a focus on physical access.³

With responsibility for a civic collection, owned by the public, for the public, I'm committed to keeping access at the top of the museum agenda. Museums have a responsibility to ensure there is 'something for everyone' and that no groups within the community miss out. Sometimes this is difficult to balance with more rigorous academic research, and that's why projects such as Midlands Art Papers are so important. Such projects encourage and enable academics to use public collections in their work- which leads to a greater understanding of museum and gallery collections and so benefits all parties.

Curation and Collaboration

The role of Curator has changed so much in the last decade. As budgets dwindle and staffing is stripped back to one or two essential roles, curators have had to respond by working across different remits, such as audience development and community outreach, as well as being fundraisers, registrars, and promoters. The delivery of so many different duties means that we are spread too thinly, and have little time to devote to collections research. National museums, which have the luxury of larger departments with more specific, dedicated roles, fare better in this respect, and partnership with such organisations offers one way for us to develop our work and gain fresh insights into our collections. Recently at The New Art Gallery I have partnered with the British Museum on a Rodin spotlight display, linked to our [Garman Ryan collection](#). I have also worked with Tate to borrow an iconic alabaster statue by Jacob Epstein, *Jacob and the Angel* (1940-1) to add a new dimension to how we are representing his work at the Gallery this year (2019), the sixtieth anniversary of his death. Similarly, I developed a project around Holbein's masterpiece *Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling* (1526-8, National Gallery), re-presenting the work in a less intimidating, family friendly space alongside linked interactive activities and a display of much more recent works from our holdings, which utilised key collection themes such as 'Portraits' and 'Animals and Birds'.

We have also partnered several times with [Art UK](#), and were the first venue who worked on the [Masterpieces in Schools](#) project, featuring on BBC Breakfast news, when our Monet painting *The Sunken Road in the Cliff at Varengeville* (1882) visited a rural Shropshire primary school for the day, in a village in a farming community which has no near access to cultural institutions.

Co-productions with community groups are also a great way of exploring new interpretations of our collections, and offer new ways to connect with diverse audience groups. For example, in recent years I have worked with dementia specialists including [Pathways 4 Life](#) and [Mindful Gifts](#), a Community Interest Company who work with people with dementia and their carers. Together we created the *Scenes of Walsall* project, which used our collections to promote reminiscence. We created an inter-generational space in

the form of an immersive retro 1960s inspired living room, where visitors were encouraged to participate using a range of tactile objects. It also featured a bunting aesthetic that enabled visitors to contribute their own memories as interpretation to the display. This, along with dedicated training sessions for our Front of House staff, has enabled the gallery to gain '[Dementia Friendly](#)' status.

Comparably, for an exhibition of work by Quentin Blake, I worked with the [Walsall Young Writers' Group](#), who selected related works from our collections about which to write their own short stories and poems; these then went on to be used as interpretation in the Blake exhibition space. For the same exhibition, I developed workshops with Birmingham Conservatoire who created musical responses to the works, and I also worked with a comedy singer-songwriter, who produced participatory experiences for children and families.

I've also worked with a number of students on work placements, supporting them with different projects from archiving, to a Birmingham City University Fine Art student's project that used the development of an exhibition from our collections at the Gallery as part of her degree show presentation.⁴ Similarly, a Walsall College student was inspired our collections of work by Dorothea Wight and Marc Balakjian. I helped her to develop contact with Marc, who then delivered a workshop at the Gallery, spent time with other visiting students, and provided a mentoring for this individual student as she explore the process of making mezzotints.⁵ Collaborations such as these have enriched how we use our collections. They are also mutually beneficial for our participants, who get the opportunity to develop and realise key personal and professional goals.

How gallery collections can improve wellbeing

Works from the collections have been used for a variety of mindfulness and wellbeing inspired projects. During the 2018 *Artists in Focus* project, I programmed a number of wellbeing activities that related to the works on display, from yoga, to reminiscence-themed tours, and mental health awareness tours. This coincided with the launch of the new Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance, and Museums and Wellbeing month, which kicked-off with a 'Wellbeing Weekend' of events.

As well as developing Dementia Friendly venue status for the Gallery, I've also trialled some BSL tours of the Collections. For example, as part of the Masterpieces in Schools project, our Epstein sculpture *Esther* (1944) visited a school with an attached hearing unit in a deprived area of Birmingham, where we did sessions for all the children that were BSL interpreted.

The New Art Gallery is also signed up to the [Age Friendly Standards](#), and through this I was keen to develop a project that explores the benefits of the museum for older people in our community. My aim is to encourage them to use the Gallery and collections as a resource that can have a positive impact on their wellbeing, to provide links for social interaction to reduce loneliness and isolation, to offer a positive escape from home issues, and combat

anxiety and depression through non-medicalised means. I was therefore delighted to pair up with [Creative Health](#) on the [CreateSpace](#) project. Working across the region, in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Staffordshire, The New Art Gallery is the lead partner on this new initiative developed from past projects such as 'Still Lively' (based at Wolverhampton Art Gallery), which has created a real hub of regular over 50s participants at the museum. Other venues have different audience targets (for example, increasing BAME participation, or supporting those with mental health diagnoses), but at Walsall we want to increase adult participation in the widest possible sense.

By running sessions on Thursday mornings, CreateSpace does attract primarily older adults, who may be retired. But these events are not exclusive and are open to anyone who may benefit from attending, for example those who may not work due to medical conditions or mental health issues. After trials and recruitment over the summer supported by a Creative Health Creative Producer, our first block of five sessions recently started this autumn (2019), led by artist Sarah Taylor Silverwood. Each week we take inspiration from our collections and conduct practical making activities that seek to develop interests and knowledge, and promote discussion. This is already having a positive impact on the lives of participants, who are provided with respite from caring duties or medical treatment, or may have been experiencing difficulties with social isolation and loneliness. Participants are also encouraged to interact with the wider collections programme, for example by participating in the regular Sketching Sundays, Feelgood Friday's and Big Draw activities. The CreateSpace project offers a way-in to build confidence and to encourage participants to keep attending regularly. The project is set to culminate in an exhibition at the Gallery in early 2021, accompanied by a conference that will explore what we have learned.

Conclusion

I know, from discussions with colleagues across the sector, that regional galleries can struggle with the lack of dedicated resources for audience development. It is a challenge to develop audiences amongst groups with protected characteristics: it takes a lot of relationship-building to achieve this and gallery staff are often spread too thinly to sustain such relationships. In my own work, I have had to take a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to develop meaningful projects with real benefit (although I am disappointed not to be able to do more, and engage more community groups in participation with our Collections.) Our Arts Council NPO agenda chose to focus on 3 protected characteristic in particular, Age, Disability and Race, as well as trying to support disadvantaged and vulnerable communities in our local area, but I am always on the lookout for new ideas and interested partners!

By staying relevant to the needs of society, I believe museums can continue to be sustainable, and linking up with external partners, for example in the social care and health sectors, is crucial to develop joint initiatives which show real benefit, and promote museums

and the arts as essential resources for the wider community. With the growth of Social Prescribing, hopefully this will become recognised nation-wide, and museums can develop as safe spaces for the local community, providing resources to support social and health care and reduce the need for medical interventions, offering opportunities for reflection, socialising, the promotion of self-care, and developing the 5 steps of wellbeing: *Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give Back*.⁶ I am passionate that museums have a vital role to play and must develop and promote their social impact as part of the bigger picture.

For more information, and to sign up for future sessions of CreateSpace, please go to The New Art Gallery Walsall website: www.thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk, or contact us by phone: 01922 654400.

Julie Brown is Collections Curator at The New Art Gallery, Walsall and is responsible for the management and development of Walsall's public collections, including the [Garman Ryan Collection](#). Julie is passionate about connecting people with culture; access and interpretation; equality and diversity; and health and wellbeing. julie.brown@walsall.gov.uk, @JulieNAGWalsall.

¹ This is in line with the wider sector statistics, averaging around 5%.

² In addition we lend selected works to other accredited museums, providing access to our works far and wide, and creating new interpretative content (on average 10-15 works per year may be requested which we can facilitate).

³ Matthew Cock *et al.* *State of Museums Access* (2018) see <https://vocaleyes.co.uk/state-of-museum-access-2018/> [accessed October 2019].

⁴ We were pleased to find out that this joined-up approach enabled her to achieve a First Class degree!

⁵ We were also pleased to find out that this student received a distinction for her work and went on to achieve a Masters at the University of Wolverhampton. She has now displayed her own work at the Gallery.

⁶ See <https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/resources/social-prescribing> [accessed October 2019].