

Wouldn't it be easier if we did it ourselves?

Experiences from the Frontline of Co-creating Displays

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Over the last decade, many museums, particularly those with large ethnographic collections, have begun to embrace multiple voices (polyvocality) and shared authorship as alternative approaches to storytelling and exhibition creation. Driven by inclusion and diversity agendas, and by commitments to more productive representations of those often hidden or ignored in historical interpretation, these co-creative methods are helping to re-imagine what a 21st-century museum should be.

Background to *Object Journeys*

From 2015 to 2018, the British Museum ran the *Object Journeys* project, which sought to explore how national museums in the

United Kingdom, working in collaboration with community groups, could generate alternative ways of researching, interpreting, and displaying collections. It was conceived as part of the development of the museum's new World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre, which aimed to help more people explore, access and enjoy the museum's collections.¹

¹ *Object Journeys* was part of the larger World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre (WCEC) development, which enabled the British Museum to provide first-class facilities for visitors and researchers during the building of the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery, Conservation Studios and Science Laboratories and new world-class collections storage. The WCEC Activity Plan, which included the *Object Journeys* project, Behind the Scenes Conservation & Science tours for the public, a Collections Skills Training program, a World History Lab and a volunteer's program. The project was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which distributes lottery funds in support of heritage projects across the United Kingdom.

Somali Object Journeys

when in the lighted light of evening
the sky's collecting clouds
the exact hue of henna
bearing the sun's brand;
when the sun itself is clothed in
the contours of cashmere,
when rain-promising rays hang on its neck:
your looks are cousins to all this
and who if not accustomed to it
could tell you two apart?

From *Cajabey* (Amazement)
By Maxamed Ibraahin Warsame 'Hadraawi'
Translated into English verse by W. N. Herbert

Literal translation provided by Said Jama Hussein
and Maxamed Xasan 'Alto'
Translation provided by The Poetry Translation Centre

Objects of survival: the beauty of Somali craftwork

The Somali region has a rich, diverse cultural heritage dating back over thousands of years to the ancient kingdoms of Punt and Egypt. The beauty of Somali craftwork reflects the creativity and skills of its makers, and often surprises when it is applied to practical everyday objects.

Until the late 1900s, many Somali people lived as nomadic herders, and the objects selected here reflect that lifestyle. Nomadic Somali people had, and still have, an innate understanding of their environment and landscape, and the items they chose to carry with them, while practical, were often richly decorated and ornate.



Dibadool - incense burner
For many Somali people these incense burners are made from a type of clay called 'Dibadool' which is found in the Somali highlands. The burners are made in a wheel and often feature intricate designs and patterns. The burners are used to burn incense during religious and social occasions. The burners are often decorated with geometric patterns and are highly valued as objects of art.



Libo - gourd water carrier
The vessel is made from a hollowed out gourd, a natural vegetable. Gourds, where they grow, are often used to make practical objects. They are light, durable and readily available in the Somali region. They are often used for transporting water for drinking and for storing water for washing or preparation for prayer. The water carrier is richly decorated in a geometric style.



Xawsho - vessel
Traditionally used to store and carry food, the vessel is both richly decorated and practical. With a leather strap for carrying, the vessel was primarily used by nomadic people on their journeys. It consists of an enriched ceramic bowl, which held the food. Below or underneath the bowl, a wooden board to cover and a lid and base made of leather. The ceramic bowl that decorates it signifies the wealth and status of its owner.



Dhal - milk vessel
Made of dark wood with a chequered pattern, the vessel still retains the shape only used to be used for. Males such as those were made by women and were used to store and transport curd and goat milk. To sterilise and make the vessels safe, the vessel is filled with burning pieces of wood from Kadi trees, preventing the spoiling of milk and spread of bacteria. This causes the vessels to have a shiny black colour on the inside.



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Fig. 1. Kiribati community group and British Museum staff exploring the collection and selecting objects for the Year 2 *Object Journeys* display.

By involving community groups in co-creating displays, *Object Journeys* was an opportunity to experiment with approaches that might bridge the divide between the museum and its communities. The project funding allowed a participation specialist to be hired to lead the project, and for museum staff and resources to be made available to work alongside the community groups to create object displays and a yearly series of events. There were three projects at the British Museum, one for every year of the project.² For the first project, we worked with London-based young adults with Somali heritage; for the second, with members of the Kiribati diaspora in the UK; and for the third, a multicultural group of Londoners. Recruited via the museum's established community contacts and/or through social media, all participants self-identified as being interested in their own history and cultural heritage, invested in better representation of diaspora communities, and keen to work in partnership with the British Museum. Each project had between six and ten community participants working on research and display development, although larger numbers were involved in the events programs that accompanied each project.

A core team of museum staff, including a participation specialist project manager, interpretation officer, designer, evaluator, curator, conservator, and a digital producer worked with each group. Taking place at the museum or in collection storage, the group sessions, usually one to two per month over nine to twelve months, were a mix of object explorations, facilitated discussions, training sessions, and content and design generation workshops. Each project culminated in a

co-created display in the British Museum's Wellcome Gallery of Living and Dying (a gallery mainly dedicated to the museum's world cultures collection) and a program of community-coordinated public events.

Reflecting on our *Object Journeys* experience, we will critically explore the complexities, challenges, and opportunities collaboratively developing displays can create. It will question the processes we adopted, and consider if our ambitions for innovative and more democratized interpretation were genuinely achieved or not.

Co-creation at the British Museum

While developing co-created displays with local community and interest groups is becoming common practice in the United Kingdom, it was relatively new at the British Museum. *Object Journeys* was an opportunity to test and push the boundaries of what co-creation in a large, international museum like the British Museum (which has 1,000 employees and over 6 million visitors from around the world each year) could be, and how we could represent new voices and perspectives in our interpretation. Expectations for what could or should be achieved, however, varied across the organization. Levels of exposure to, and appetites for, community-led collaborations were inconsistent, which led to immediate complications. There was no unilateral understanding of what co-creation with local communities might be, no clear sense of what communities would be looking to gain from the experience, and uncertainty about what community-led interpretation could look like and how, or if, it should differ from our existing approaches.

The museum was, in many ways, starting from scratch. We relied on the patience, good

² There were also three other projects hosted at regional UK museums in Brighton, Manchester, and Leicester. Although part of the *Object Journeys* project, they were treated independently of the British Museum projects and did not inform this article.



humor, and enthusiasm of both internal and external collaborators to try to figure out what best practice for co-creation could be and how to meet any challenges that arose along the way.

Training or Collaborating?

A primary role of the museum's interpretation team is to act as audience advocates, ensuring that projects are visitor focused.³ During the planning stages for *Object Journeys*, the role of interpretation was simply defined as "training and support." This was duly delivered over several classroom-style workshops at the museum in Year 1 in which our interpreters introduced the Somali group to storytelling techniques, audience behaviors, and text-writing skills. They were intense and, despite our best efforts to make them interactive by using various delivery methods, failed. The sessions were heavy on information, overly-structured, and provided limited

opportunities for the group to interrogate our processes or engage in meaningful dialogue with the interpretation experts. Recognizing these sessions as being beneficial, but too condensed and infrequent, the Year 1 participants reported wanting more "face time" with interpretation staff. In addition, the group felt that the well-honed exhibition process was both overwhelming and inflexible and sometimes felt forced into making decisions before they were ready. In particular, they wanted more time to select objects, conduct research and to come to consensus on text label edits.

In response to learning this, we changed the project delivery process, and interpretation staff attended most sessions in the following years, which relaxed the pace of all interpretation development. This included visiting the collections storage with the group and curators to explore and ask questions about potential objects (fig. 1), to consider likely stories, and to discuss what visitors may want to know or would best enjoy through a variety of interpretive methods.

³ Jane Batty, Julie Carr, Claire Edwards, David Francis, Stuart Frost, Ellie Miles, and Rebecca Penrose, "Object Focused Text at the British Museum," *Exhibition* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2016).

Fig. 2. (bottom) Interpretation staff member (right) developing display label text with Year 2 community group participants.

Fig. 3. (right) The Kiribati *Object Journeys* display (Wellcome Gallery of Living and Dying), including a short film produced by the community groups.

Embedding interpretation expertise from the beginning enabled us to better understand the aims of the participants and adapt our approaches accordingly.

For example, it is usual practice at the museum for curators to lead on and narrow down object choices significantly before interpretation is involved, so being present during the selection of objects was a different way of working. Object selection remains the role of curatorial staff at the British Museum, but we felt it was important to support the community partners earlier than we would in-house staff in order to supplement their expertise and build their confidence in museum processes. Being more present also meant that knowledge exchange was gradual and informal, enabling a trusting and equal partnership to develop, which was more about collaboration and support than training. At the same time, the groups shared their own understanding and experiences

in relation to their chosen objects, which supplemented and contextualized our in-house information. The Somali group, for example, highlighted the significance of incense in Somali homes during discussions about an incense burner they were displaying, while the Kiribati group shared a nuanced understanding of traditional dance and storytelling as we explored the display of a dance costume (fig. 2).

Experimentation and Decision Making

Object Journeys presented opportunities for the museum to do things differently. The existing cases and fixtures in the gallery where the *Object Journeys* displays were installed did not allow for a great deal of variety in two- and three-dimensional design as they are tall and narrow with fixed shelves, but digital media was a significant area for interpretative experimentation (fig. 3). From the outset, the Kiribati group, which



Te Mauri, Te Raoi Ao Te Tabomoa Health, peace and prosperity



The strength of Te Raoi, the Rarua Te Raoi O

Dancing and singing is an important way for Kiritiati communities to bond and connect to their culture when living away from the islands. The traditional song and dance is performed by members of the Kiritiati community in the UK. It celebrates the importance of the sea and land, and through distinctive body movements and expressions the dancers represent the spirit of Te Raoi.

The Okeanos Discovery Project is a joint initiative between the British Museum and partners who are interested in sharing and learning about the world's oceans. The project aims to raise awareness of the importance of the oceans and the role of the British Museum in supporting this work.



Kiritiati Flag, Bureviti Kiritiati

The golden sun (Okeanos) rises over the sea on 17th June, marking their independence from the United Kingdom. The flag shows three white waves in a blue sea which represent the three groups of islands: Gilbert, Phoenix and Line. The flag is a national symbol and is used to show the strength, power and resilience of the Kiritiati.

Image: BBC, Wikimedia of the past and Museum and other sources. The flag was designed by an artist from Okeanos, Gilbert, Phoenix, and Line Islands of the Kiritiati.



Clava necklace, Bora of Bora

The Clava necklace is a traditional necklace made of dried palm leaves, which are woven together to form a thick, braided band. It is worn around the neck and is a symbol of status and wealth.

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Fig. 4. Year 3 *Object Journeys*: Celebrating the Work of Families display with Nicholas Mukomberanwa sculpture.



Working in collaboration with our partners... affirmed the importance of retaining an essential cultural element over a more agreeable design solution.

included a talented filmmaker, wanted to display a dance costume and create and show a film to bring it to life. They made a short film featuring members of their community performing a traditional dance, backed by UK based Kiribati singers.

We had intended to play the soundtrack through a handset, but on failing to find a suitable location in the display case the museum designers suggested removing the film's audio. The group, however, advocated for the cultural significance of experiencing their dance both visually and audibly. While imperfect from the perspectives of design we decided to listen to the group and so installed a speaker under the case. Some staff disagreed with this approach, arguing that the sound quality would be compromised and dominate a space intended for multiple displays. Working in collaboration with our partners, however, affirmed the importance of retaining an essential cultural element over a more agreeable design solution. This "noisy" digital element has proven to be an engaging and popular exhibit among visitors.

Text Writing and Sign-off

Object Journeys was designed to be experimental in who we worked with and the methodologies we used to do this. In the third year, instead of working with a specific diaspora group, we worked with eight multicultural Londoners (all long-term community partners) and were led by a topic, *Family*, rather than focusing on one area of the collection. This topic – informed by what was important to the community group, rather than a particular collection – became the focus of the display and led the narrative production. This approach was both challenging conceptually and practice-wise for many museum staff, as well as the group. Curatorial colleagues felt the narrative

approach lacked depth and tried to include too many different kinds of objects, while the partners themselves worried that they lacked collections expertise: "There were too many objects. Too many subjects..." The group wanted the family theme to elicit an emotional response in visitors, so their object labels prioritized feelings and questions inspired by the objects, rather than traditional object information. For example, *Family*, a sculpture by Nicholas Mukomberanwa, did not discuss the artist or his inspiration for its creation, as would normally be detailed, but instead asked visitors to consider what family meant to them personally (fig. 4).

The object labels, limited to about 70 words each, had to work really hard to fulfill the group's emotional response ambitions and to meet the curatorial desire for more objective, content-specific kinds of information. It took much negotiation between curators, interpretation staff, and the group to find a suitable compromise. It raised the question, to what extent should curators be expected to let go of ingrained approaches to text writing, and at what level of seniority within the organization should this be advocated?

We embraced a form of co-creation that was acceptable, though still quite challenging, to the museum and also acceptable, though perhaps not as equitable as it could have been, for our community partners.

In post-project focus groups, each group was encouraged to be critical and open about their experiences, exploring issues around ownership, equity, and the balance of authority in the partnerships. Despite all participants feeling a deep sense of ownership and inclusion, they all noted a lack of power around the text editing process. Although each group produced the draft information panels and object labels, the final sign-off for text rested with our senior staff, as it does for all displays at the British Museum. In addition, there was some criticism, particularly in Year 3, that museum staff removed the warmth and richness of their non-museum voices in the process of adhering to house-style requirements. Likewise, one of the key concerns for the interpretation team became whether our presence helped or hindered the creative writing process. Was the sharing of institutional knowledge and best-practice approaches, which aimed to give participants a shortcut to understanding and, therefore meeting, visitor expectations,

too overwhelming? Instead of enabling them to get straight to the heart of what makes a good story or label, did our guidelines constrain rather than release their creativity?

We often debated relinquishing more power to the participants, especially around text editing, as, after all, the project aimed to explore if the look and feel of these community-led displays could potentially be different to what the museum had been producing on its own. Surely it was more important that the participants were able to realize their creative, cultural and intellectual ambitions than following guidelines? There was also a practical issue. If the labels and panels exceeded the standard lengths, they would not physically fit into the cases, causing problems for the graphic designers. The key issue here is whether the museum's house-style and visitor-focused guidelines should be applied to community-led interpretation, and to what extent the reins should be loosened on text interpretation in general to welcome individuality, nuance, and alternative approaches.

Outcomes

Object Journeys resulted in positive outcomes for visitors, partners, and staff. We conducted qualitative evaluation (in-depth interviews and focus groups) with the museum staff and community partners involved, and undertook visitor evaluation to seek visitors' responses to the display cases and related events.⁴ Our community partners found the experience valuable in terms of personal growth, cultural knowledge, and greater insight into museum display processes: "*Listening to us...actually listening to our ideas. We shaped it, we chose the*

⁴ We conducted in-depth evaluation of each *Object Journeys* project as part of the overall WCEC research plan. These can be accessed at https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/visitor_research.aspx

objects, we chose the theme.” Visitor evaluation, too, showed that some found the labels authentic and authoritative, and most were very supportive of the museum working collaboratively with communities (fig. 5, intro image). One individual stated that the interpretation “connects people and objects, something you don’t see very often.”

Staff members developed their knowledge and experience of co-creation with community partners. Each project group also positively added to the museum’s understanding of, and knowledge about, specific collections, and highlighted new approaches for researching objects. It also helped the museum understand how we could add a diversity of voices and nuance to our display interpretations. *Object Journeys* was an opportunity for the organization to practice some self-reflection. Furthermore, in answer to a question posed by participants at the end of the Somali project – *what happens now?*, the museum created a new staff role, Community Partnerships Manager: Participation and Collections, to build on the commitment and learning from the projects.

Was it co-creative? Yes, in many ways power was redistributed and shared between museum and community group, although the “lead” partner flexed and shifted at different stages of the display development process. We moved beyond the museum comfort zone of consultation and contribution models (as described by museum activist and former Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Nina Simon in her 2010 book, *The Participatory Museum*). We embraced a form of co-creation that was acceptable, though still quite challenging, to the museum and also acceptable, though perhaps not as equitable as it could have been, for our community partners. Partnering with communities to create new object

content and displays generated a genuine two-way exchange of listening and learning.

At times, the groups and museum staff might have thought that it would be “easier if we did it ourselves,” but *Object Journeys* deliberately sought to test the boundaries of what collaborative practice at the British Museum would look like, and adapted hybrid approaches to participatory practice, community engagement, and exhibition development. While more agency was given to the groups than in previous projects involving community partners, the process was often internally uncomfortable and tested the limits of our ingrained processes and ways of working. We learned to trust that things worth doing are rarely easy, and however varied our visions of co-creation, everyone involved was united by the desire to create the best visitor experience possible.

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