

Working with collections

Audiences say that access to primary sources – particularly objects – is the unique contribution museums can make to the teaching of history. However, there are distinct challenges when using them to illustrate aspects of transatlantic slavery.



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Set up a physical environment conducive to looking at objects that have a violent history. Beyond verbal explanation associated with instructions, are the cues that get sent from, for example; having learners sit down; keeping key objects or images removed from circulation and handled only by the facilitator; or asking the students to wear gloves or open a case in order to handle and question an object. These are actions that promote an awareness of the gravitas of the history. (Always think about why the object is required as an integral part of the learning outcome. Do you really need to show a whip? What does this object seek to convey to the learner?)

Museum Education Officer

Sugar-cane cutters
Jamaica, Caribbean

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Teaching approaches



- It has been imperative for the USI team to set ground rules when using the slavery-related handling objects particularly when working with the instruments of torture and 'correction'. Using them separately from the other historical artefacts has been essential in conveying the seriousness of this history.



There was a moment that struck me during an event here at the museum: during a handling session, an adult visitor picked up a leg-iron and in that moment something resonated for him. The object seemed to trigger something immense for him. You could show image after image of the torture associated with the transatlantic slave trade and the gravitas may not sink in, but for that one individual, it was that object that made its mark.

Museum Head of Formal Learning

I remember the sheer power of our collections. We could have an argument, we could have a debate and we could stimulate passion around inert objects because they told such a history.

Museum Director

If you want to use collections to engage audiences, if you want effective exhibitions, if you want to have real learning taking place around collections you have to have respect for what's coming back at you. And I don't mean in a kind of woolly-focus group way: I mean from people who ask hard questions and who want intellectual answers. If you approach your practice in that sense you will get to something that is challenging and enjoyable. And very dynamic.

Museum Head of Learning and Interpretation



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- Using one or two handling objects in a session, rather than everything available, has proved very effective in promoting deductive, analytical, curatorial and discursive learning.
- Handling-session participants should be invited to touch the objects but some participants may decline as the impact of handling the object can often evoke strong reactions.



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- Much of the visual material (paintings and prints) depicting African people is derogatory. In some cases that may have been the original intention, but in others it may not: in the latter case any offence caused today is because views have changed. It is essential to point this out and also to remind audiences that the works are artistic impressions and inevitably reflect artistic or societal views at the time of creation.
- Some collections have relatively little to offer in illustrating the impact of transatlantic slavery on Britain, the Caribbean and Africa. Images can be gathered from other sources but it has proved essential to broaden the range used to avoid reinforcing stereotypes about Africa, the Caribbean and multicultural Britain.



My ideal model for schools would be:

1. Preparation at school based on museum collections, creating a format to discuss the sensitivities of the subject and the right language to use, ensuring that pupils feel safe in the group to be honest and emotional if need be and that respect is instilled.
2. A museum session which offers an overview through the museum's collection and discussions with breaks for reflection.
3. A forum at school to process what has been learnt.

Museum Head of Formal Learning



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