

Interview Date:	23-07-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Daniel Martin	Organisation:	Royal Museums Greenwich
Position:	Head of Collections Services		

Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Daniel Martin, Head of Collections Services, Royal Museums Greenwich. 23-07-2020

Tom Crowley 0:00

So, this is Tom Crowley from Cambridge University speaking to Daniel Martin, from the National Maritime Museum on the 23rd of July 2020. And Daniel. Yeah, obviously, you're speaking in a professional capacity. But obviously, some of what you say is going to be inflected by your own personal perspective.

I will start with the first question. Has your museum done anything which engages with the legacy of slavery or colonialism in recent years? And by that I mean, prior to the recent Black Lives Matter movement?

Daniel Martin 0:58

Yeah, we have taken part in in a number of projects and programmes directly related directly to the legacies of colonialism and Empire, including a project called Legacies of Empire. And so, we've been a part of those projects. We've also you may have seen from our website, we did something called the untethered project, which was where we did four new galleries. And one of those galleries was our Pacific Encounters gallery [recording momentarily interrupted] South Pacific Ocean communities. And we engage directly with those communities in the UK, to make sure that the way we were treating objects in our collection was appropriate for those communities. And also that we were we were still able to provide access in a way that those communities needed for either religious or very personal reasons, you know, because with a lot of those situations, the taonga, the objects themselves, are the physical embodiment of ancestors, so they consider them effectively people, you know. And so, we want to make sure that the way we handle objects is appropriate for the communities that are going to be doing them.

And that really has shaped the way that RMG has been working the last three, four years now in particular, you know, we're very conscious of the makeup of our staff, we have a group of our organisation called the Collective, which is made up of different representatives from various BAME communities, as well as other interested members of staff. It's not exclusively staffed by people who actually work for RMG, of colour. So yeah, it's been at the core of what RMG's done for a long time.

We were actually in the process of reviewing our Atlantic Worlds gallery, which is where we deal with a lot of the direct legacies of slavery that the Black Lives Matter movement was addressing. We were in in the next phase of actually

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Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

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The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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redeveloping that and that was going to be a co-produced phase where we were asking for people's feedback and their emotional feedback and what they felt was appropriate in the gallery and the sort of terminology that was being used, as well as working with artists of colour to actually do interventions in that gallery and challenge some of the historic narratives that were portrayed in there.

So yeah RMG had done a lot prior to this and with lock down it was a real shame because actually that would have gone live right at the moment for Black Lives Matter and actually would have been a massive opportunity while everyone was galvanised on a national level, to really ask those questions and get the responses on a scale that would have made really meaningful difference. We've got a really, really broad understanding of what the kind of political and personal feeling was across the nation.

Tom Crowley 3:41

That's really interesting. Sorry, I'm not going to say much, but that yeah, that's very interesting.

Daniel Martin 3:44

No, it's fine.

Tom Crowley 3:46

It's a slightly one way discussion, I'm afraid, but I'm keeping, for the purpose of transcription, I'm keeping quiet. So the next question: has Black Lives Matter the current Black Lives Matter movement this summer, influenced your policy going forward.

Daniel Martin 4:04

I think really, you know, we've it's forced us to think about not only how we how we do more to represent those underrepresented communities in the organisation, but actually, it's given us a moment to pause and reflect on how we haven't necessarily foregrounded those voices. So, they may have been present in the museum, we have the Sea Things. And where, you know, the conscious aim of that gallery that was another part of that Endeavour project was to present and highlight voices from communities that are underrepresented in the museum's collections and displays elsewhere. And we worked with an artist called Eve Shepard and other community groups to create busts that directly responded to collections that were already there as well as working with a transgender support group for young people in there. So, you

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know, we've started that process, but that's not necessarily the same thing as foregrounding those voices and making sure that they're there in every gallery. You know and making sure that that narrative runs through the entire museum because the National Maritime Museum and you know, that's our kind of trading name, we're Royal Museums Greenwich, and we have five sites with the Cutty Sark. We have the Royal Observatory of Greenwich, we have the Queen's House Art Gallery and we also have PPMCC up the hill, which is our collections centre. And so, you know, what we need to do is be conscious of how those narratives move across all of those five sites with a consistency of voice so that no matter what your point of entry into Royal Museums Greenwich, we're doing multiple [recording interrupted] those voices, particularly in the borough that we sit in London, obviously, we are a national museum and we're very conscious that, you know, the Borough of Greenwich itself is a hugely diverse borough.

And so, historically, I think it's fair to say that our model has been built more towards the tourist end of the spectrum, but now we're looking much more towards our local communities. And that really forces us to answer some of those more difficult questions around representation and foregrounding of Black voices but I would say that's one of the one of the main museum outputs. I think the other thing has been to renew our commitment to change on a human resources level. And we've done a lot of work in response to this, as I've already mentioned, that the Collective which predated this, I think it's been interesting that up until Black Lives Matter, that group was known as the BAME group. And, and then they were given the opportunity to reflect on that. And they decided that the name of the Collective was much more representative of how they felt about their experiences and the way they wanted to project themselves for the museum after that, so, you know, I think we're aware that from a BAME background, only 16% of staff are from those backgrounds across Royal Museums Greenwich, and only 9% of those are in our research and information team, which are often the teams that are tasked with the production of interpretation. So again, it's thinking systemically about where representation is in the organisation. And that's been one of the really big impacts at this current round of BLM protests.

Tom Crowley 7:10

So, this is a slight twist on the previous question, but has the pulling down of the Colston statue in particular, and the ensuing debate around that influenced policy going forward?

Daniel Martin 7:23

Not directly. We do have, we have objects up. I mean, the Colston statue was interesting from a museological point of view, because it really, what it forced us to ask ourselves was what is the difference for visitors between public space, true public space in a square, like where the statue of Colston was and a statue in a museum. Because oftentimes, the rationale given for pulling the statues down from a public space, a square, was that they would go into a museum and that would save it, because then they could sit as part of a wider narrative. And then of course, there was the statue outside the Museum of London Docklands that was then asked to be pulled down, which is kind of that liminal space between the

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museum and the public realm. And then the objects we have, we don't have any statues depicting any known slavers, in our grounds. So, for us, the focus seemed to move very heavily on to statuary, rather than sort of wider depictions through physical objects. And so, in that sense, we weren't effective, but it did make us think about the objects that were on display. I think the main response from us on that was less around the ethics of what's up because we are a museum and we you know, we do have these depictions up in our museum as talking points and as kind of moments to kind of bring to life some of the narrative by putting a face to it putting an object to it. But it did make us think about security. And what was interesting was a couple of incidents and there were only one or two but I'm sure you'd have seen there was a an instance in a Parisian museum, where some people tried to forcibly repatriate an object from a French museum back to the source community.

So, there's been awareness from us on a security level that you know, we've heightened our security we've really rethought about those objects that might be very contentious for people. Of course, we feel those objects for now should be on display because they're part of a narrative and we're placing them within a context. But I think, appreciating that it's not quick to turn around an entire museum. You know, we have over 40 galleries. That's just at the NMM. You know, we have all the other sites as well, to renew all of those galleries with costs 10s of millions of pounds, it would be an enormous undertaking. So, this is going to be a slower process than perhaps people might wish for.

The Colston statue is a very sudden you know, it's a flashpoint it's a moment where some direct action caused an immediate change to something that's been churning through Bristol City Council for a long time. We're in a different situation as an institution where we have made some direct actions. You know, we've decided, we thought about objects that should be on display, but a lot of that was part of processes that were already underway that have merely been sped up. But to actually make that change that I talked about earlier, where we foreground and embed those stories throughout the entire service, that's going that's going to take time. And it should take time because we need to engage the relevant communities in that process. It shouldn't be slapdash. It should take time. And then that should be reflected in the quality of the narrative that's displayed after that point.

Tom Crowley 10:24

Thank you. Yeah, so the next question is about the website Topples the Racists. Has that website influenced your policy?

Daniel Martin 10:38

Very similar to the Colston statue really, the Colston statue forced us to look at Topples the Racists because that gave us a breakdown of where targeted direct action might take place. And while we did deal with some of our kind of near neighbours that have more contentious statuary around them, which I'm sure you'll be aware of. They are you know, we weren't directly affected by that, we were never listed on the website. We were listed on other websites. But what was

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interesting was that on those websites, there was a lot of misinformation. So, they would either cite objects that didn't really exist in the spaces that they had cited, or were so generic as to be quite throwaway. So, I think one website I think it was...

Tom Crowley 11:19

Sorry, just very quickly can you remember the websites' names?

Daniel Martin 11:22

Yeah, that was democracy... is it Open Democracy UK? They wrote something and put those on there. And they said about us, you know, it was a veritable hall of slavers and everything else. And we thought, well, that rather misses the point of the whole argument, which is that these objects that have been in the public realm, in you know, in parks and squares, where the messaging is very different to having those people in a museum and placing them within that context and asking those more difficult questions around them. And you know, we acknowledge that more can be done and more needs to be done. And that's about foregrounding. The alternative voices to these kind of master narratives of British Empire, but we are already actively engaged in that process. So, we felt that things like that were, they presented a security risk and were unhelpful to the overall dialogue.

Tom Crowley 12:11

Thanks. And yeah, has Museum Detox influenced your responses at all?

Daniel Martin 12:19

I can't say personally because I've not worked with Museum Detox at RMG. But I know that RMG does have a relationship with Museum Detox, and we have members of our staff who have worked with them directly, because we've undertaken a lot of reforms in our human resources department. We'd already started those processes. This is only just to double down on a lot of those processes. So yeah, I think organisations and you know, groups like Museum Detox are fantastic for us because they are a force for good. They're trying to change things for the better for underrepresented people in the museum sector. And for underrepresented narratives in the museum sector. So that's something we're committed to so you know, we would see them as an ally in that in that process.

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Tom Crowley 13:04

So we've covered quite a lot of this already. But I'm just going through these questions in quite a formulaic way, because that's the methodology we're doing every interview. So, do you plan to address the legacies of slavery slash colonialism in displays or other public areas in your museum? And then when you do that, what resources do you draw on? And who do you consult?

Daniel Martin 13:30

Yeah, I mean, we continually re-evaluate the ways that the museum represents historical events and people and I think that if there is one potential danger for museums with this, this moment with the Black Lives Matter protests, is that it looks like we all suddenly turned now, as if nothing happened up until this point, and that this was the moment when everyone made the change. I think that the truth to that is much more complex. A lot of museums have been doing a lot of work for a long time with source communities, with different communities local to the museum, with arts groups, with communities of interest to make sure that there is better representation in the stories that museums are telling, and that the faces that are being shown are more representative of the country that we live in today. So, I think that, you know, that's something we've already been engaged with. I mean, we recognise that all of our museum collections are partial. And the history often being told is often from a particular perspective that's necessary with any written history, you will write from a perspective, even if that's a broad perspective, it's impossible, you know, to meet the sorts of museum guidelines for the presentation of information, say, a panel next to something can only be 150 words, how are you going to tell every perspective of every side of one object in 150 words? It's simply not feasible. So, museums are hidebound by the traditional way, that up until now we've presented objects. There are of course, other ways of doing that which we've embraced.

I've mentioned already, we've worked with artists, we've worked with different groups. We've worked with different ways of reinterpreting our spaces. So, we have an event called Fierce Queens in the Queen's House. And that's working with a group of drag artists who come in and they take over the Queen's House. And they totally reposition that notion of what a queen is and what that space is. And they talk about gender, and it talks about sexuality. And it's a really interesting way of rethinking a space that doesn't use this traditional narrative-led written, way of communicating. So, I think, again, it's something that we've been committed to for a long time. So I think it's about really thinking about who you work with, you know, and really thinking about where that drive comes from for change, and then recognising that there will be this moment now where a big chunk of change gets made. And that's a fantastic opportunity. But that isn't an end, you know, unto itself, there will need to be a continual process of review. And as you know, we've seen it in the last couple of weeks with British citizenship as kind of formal understanding of British history changes. So, it must in museums as well and museums can also lead that and challenge that process in and of themselves. But, you know, I think it's a continual process. This has to be a continual process, if there is a legacy from this it is that we shouldn't wait for the next round of Black Lives Matter protest to make the changes, it should be continual.

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Tom Crowley 16:23

This is the same question again, and again, you've already touched on much of this, but do you have any current or future plans relating to colonialism / the legacy of slavery, that do not relate to display? For example, education, the arts, recruitment, and again, what resources do you call on? Who do you consult?

Daniel Martin 16:47

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think you know, what we're trying to address at the moment is the imbalance of representation of Black history in the museum. So, a lot of it has come through the projects and programmes actually, rather than the displays. So, I'd say our displays are almost more challenging than the existing projects and programmes which are much more representative. But of course, more can be done. And what we're also trying to do is to use these projects, to become part of the fabric of who we are permanently because as I'm sure you'll be aware, the issue with projects and programmes is that often they come to an end. And then the legacy of them is so hard to actually embed in the organisation. The hope for us is that so much of the work that has been done over the last five years in particular, can really push the other areas of the museum, you know, into those changes. I think I've touched on a lot of the areas and risk of you know, I'm repeating myself, you know, about Fierce Queens, you know, the programming that we have, at the moment, we're looking at doing some exciting programming with the Cutty Sark, where we're working with a group of artists, many of whom are of colour, who are working on a sail that says about a response, you know, to the idea of a ship as something moving through time and space, as well as the transportation of ideas and people and that's being led by them, you know, the museum itself has created a very broad brief, and they've really taken with that. And they've decided what the narrative should be coming out of that. So I think that's an example of where museums will do more, is giving up the sort of entitlement to authorship, for projects, programmes and exhibitions, and actually allowing other people to have their voice through your platform, rather than it always being filtered through the institution.

Tom Crowley 18:28

Thanks. So this is, um, this is the last question. So yeah, um, just to give this a little bit of context, obviously, you conduct your own research, but this [the University of Cambridge Heritage Research Centre] is a research institution carrying out this project and this interview. And yeah, I guess we're interested in one way, in what kind of role we can play in this process we've been discussing, but the question is: what would you like to understand better in terms of making decisions concerning the legacy of slavery or colonialism?

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Daniel Martin 19:01

Well, I think we need to understand the kind of depth— clearly the thing that was missing was that depth of emotion connected to it. The, you know, one of the things that's very challenging for museums is to capture the raw emotion of a lot of these discussions, and how direct it often feels to people. You know, we are ultimately incredibly distanced from a lot of the emotion and emotive areas within these arguments as White people, you know, it is distant to us. And for a lot of people, it isn't, it's a daily lived experience. And I think we need to go through a process of really listening as White museum professionals, really listening to what different people's experiences are, even in our own sector, you know, areas where we would assume people have the same experience, they go to the same workplace, they work very similar roles, but actually they're experiencing them in a very different way. So I think we need to understand that internally, you know, first of all, from a staff point of view, and then we need to understand the same from a visitor perspective, and from really thinking about who our partners are, and who do we want to work with, and that's both good and bad. You know, there are people that we've worked with historically who have maybe contributed a great deal and may be very venerable, but are they necessarily the right people for the sorts of stories that we want to be telling in the future? So, I think asking ourselves those hard questions are about what and who do we want to be representative for our museum in future? So I think for us what we need to understand more, is more of that personal emotional feelings, I think a lot of the academic work a lot of the research work, you know, we are a research institution, we have a big research output. But a lot of that is academic research. And actually, what we probably need is a bit more balanced with a more human angle and a more human approach on that and how people feel. What's the emotive outcome of that? Because I think if we can somehow channel that into our projects, programmes, exhibitions and adjust the way that we work in our HR department, then I think we're probably going to come out a stronger organisation and a more relevant organisation. And that's institutional sustainability that's just going to make us last longer ultimately, you know, which we have to balance against all of this, you know, we're still a business at the end of the day, you know, we and we have to balance against that.

Tom Crowley 21:21

I'm going to stop the recording now, that doesn't mean I'm going to terminate this call unless there's anything else you feel like you want to add and that will go on the archive.

Daniel Martin 21:31

No, I think that's fine. Short of going into enormous detail on every project and programme and I don't think that's really what you need.

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Tom Crowley 21:39

Thank you very much.

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