

**Museums
in Ireland
in 2020:**
reflections
from the
coalface



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy



About the Royal Irish Academy

- The Royal Irish Academy/Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann champions research.
- We identify and recognise Ireland's world-class researchers.
- We support scholarship and promote awareness of how science and the humanities enrich our lives and benefit society.
- We believe that good research needs to be promoted, sustained and communicated.
- We are an all-island, independent forum of peer-elected experts, run by a council of our members. Membership is considered the highest academic honour in Ireland. Drawing on our members' expertise we make a significant contribution to public debate and policy formation on issues in science, technology and culture.
- We lead important national research projects, particularly in areas relating to Ireland and its heritage. We represent the world of Irish learning internationally, have a unique globally recognised library, and are a leading academic publisher.
- We bring experts together to have frank debates on how to make Ireland a great place to learn, to do research and to use research.
- We use our knowledge and expertise to lobby government on education and research matters. We hold regular, free talks and other events to promote research and to introduce Irish and international experts to the public.
- Our library offers public access to important resources on Irish history, archaeology, science, literature and culture. It holds the largest collection of manuscripts in Irish in a single repository and is home to major book, pamphlet and drawings collections. A flagship manuscript is displayed daily—the oldest manuscript held by the library is the sixth-century Cathach—and there is always an exhibition on view. The library manages several databases, and organises lectures, seminars and masterclasses relating to its collections
- The Royal Irish Academy, founded in 1785, is one of the longest-established publishers in Ireland. We began publishing scholarly articles in our Transactions (later renamed Proceedings) in 1787—six journals are now published annually. We also publish books aimed at communicating scholarly material to a wider public.



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Introduction

At the Royal Irish Academy, we promote research and awareness of how science enriches our lives and benefits society. We bring academia, government and industry together to address issues of mutual interest, and in doing so, we contribute to public debate and policy formation.

The Royal Irish Academy's Culture and Heritage Working Group acts as a facilitator for discussion of opinions and ideas on contemporary Irish cultural and heritage policy and practice. It works in partnership with other cultural and heritage bodies and groups and has strong links to the government's Creative Ireland programme and the Heritage Ireland 2030 national heritage plan. Recent activities and outputs of the working group include a forum on future heritage policy and a series of discussion papers exploring aspects of creativity in the sciences, in music, and in the Gaeltacht, the Irish language, folklore and the vernacular. Most recently the working group has sponsored a discussion paper on the topic of libraries and archives.

The present paper is dedicated to the topic of museums across the island of Ireland as a whole. Significantly, it brings together a set of reflections provided by the leaders of three of Ireland's museums. By bringing together these reflections it breaks fresh ground, but it is also informed by working group discussions and a roundtable event held at the Royal Irish Academy in November 2019, as well as by the subsequent publication of a discussion document entitled 'Museums in Ireland: policies for the future', stemming from the engaging dialogue that followed with museum professionals throughout Ireland. The need for this present paper was further compounded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly disrupted and altered all aspects of our lives, including the life of museums. This situation has brought into focus the necessity to hear, directly from the coalface, how museums are being affected by the ongoing pandemic and are likely to continue being affected into the future.

Following the reflections of the three museum leaders, the paper presents concluding remarks from the chair of the Culture and Heritage Working Group, Diane Negra MRIA. Having been an active member of the working group for several years, Professor Negra was appointed as its chair in the midst of the ongoing pandemic and, like the museum leaders, is navigating through an unforeseen landscape, and leading on work devoted to Irish culture and heritage.

The museum leaders we hear from*

Simon O'Connor, Museum of Literature Ireland

Simon is director of the Museum of Literature Ireland—MoLI, a new cultural institution and creative collaboration between University College Dublin and the National Library of Ireland. A composer by training, Simon was the founding curator of the Little Museum of Dublin, building that museum from scratch in 2011 to manage its highly ambitious exhibition programme. Under his tenure, the museum achieved exponential visitor growth and won numerous awards, including the European Commission's Europa Nostra award for Cultural Heritage and the Business to Arts Judges Special Recognition Award, and was longlisted for the European Museum of the Year Awards. Simon has worked across the arts and creative sector and continues to be active as a composer.

Lynn Scarff, National Museum of Ireland

Lynn studied Natural Sciences at Trinity College Dublin, specialising in zoology and natural history and holds an MSc in Science Communications. Working in environmental education across a range of projects, including the Ballymun Regeneration, Lynn's work is embedded in collaborative practice. As part of the initial development team of Science Gallery Dublin at Trinity College Dublin, she developed a programme of compelling cultural experiences that explored the boundaries of art and science and connected with a target audience of 15–25-year-olds. In 2012 she was part of the leadership team that established the Global Science Gallery Network, bringing the vision of Science Gallery to eight cities globally by 2020. In 2014 she was appointed director, leading Science Gallery Dublin through a process of organisational change, strategic planning and development.

In 2016 she was awarded a National Arts Strategies Kresge Fellowship, completed over one year at Harvard, Michigan Ross and Berkeley Business Schools in the USA, which

* Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed by authors are their own and do not reflect the position of the Royal Irish Academy.

focused on the critical elements of sustainable business development in the cultural sector. Lynn served on the board of the National Museum of Ireland through 2016–17 and is on expert panels for a number of public engagement trusts and awarding bodies, including the Wellcome Trust. She took up her current position of director at the National Museum of Ireland in May 2018.

Kathryn Thomson, National Museums Northern Ireland

Kathryn has been chief executive of National Museums Northern Ireland since March 2016. Prior to that she was chief operating officer at Tourism Northern Ireland for 11 years, and before that, she worked in the senior finance team within NHS Greater Glasgow, where she was primarily involved in business and financial planning. Kathryn holds a BCom (Hons) degree in Business Studies from the University of Edinburgh, completed her accountancy training at Price Waterhouse Coopers, and has a professional qualification as a Chartered Accountant with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. In addition, she holds a public appointment as a director of the Strategic Investment Board. She is chair of Visit Belfast and is on the board of Tourism Ireland, as well as being a director and trustee of the Grand Opera House, Culture Perth & Kinross and Open House Festival.

Simon O'Connor Director, Museum of Literature Ireland

Stopping occasionally has become a necessary means of avoiding burnout in the twenty-first century. As we drift in and out of pandemic lockdowns and restrictions in Ireland, time drifts in and out of slow motion. Yet, elsewhere it is accelerating at warp speed. How can 'slow institutions' like museums feel at home in this world anymore?

How we experience and process time and information have certainly changed dramatically—the news cycle and attendant media machinery have created a permanent information race, with constantly updated trivia, compounded by user interfaces that trap us in a psychologically (and physically) addictive cage of alerts and screen swiping. We need to be reading, all the time, yet we are losing our capacity to read long-form. The paradox of focus is felt in the museum—exhibition word-counts continuously decrease in line with the human attention span, while our capacity as a species to continuously read bite-sized information increases.

Although the fast pace of contemporary life halted for much of 2020, there is huge pressure on individuals and cultural institutions to keep up with developments in technology, trends in the media, new obsessions and new platforms. Museums cannot, fundamentally, keep up with everything; yet we cannot ignore change. What museums are perfectly placed to do is observe change, capitalise on it where it is useful to our core mission, and offer alternatives to what does not seem to be serving humanity

particularly well, while amplifying those characteristics of ours that stand in direct opposition to the whitewater rapids of the ‘always on’.

The museum sector has suffered nearly three shutdowns at the time of writing in October 2020—first in March 2020, followed by an early reopening in July; another shut down in Dublin in September 2020; and this month there has been another countrywide shutdown. Perhaps surprisingly for many, museums and galleries were well placed to react to the needs of a society in lockdown, of a nation of sudden home-schoolers: the sector has long been improving its offer of informal, access-focused education across age-groups, with a keen eye trained on curriculum links. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, museums across Ireland created innovative online programmes to assist parents, teachers and schools in educating and entertaining their children and themselves. The Irish government actively promoted much of this activity, alongside the sector itself.

Rather optimistically, I maintain this rapid and holistically useful response has served the often-secondary digital activities of museums well—funding bodies have realised that the cultural activity they support has a whole other side to it that is public, useful and promotable. At last, it may become a common metric to track digital audience as well as physical visitors. Online engagement is real engagement; the silver lining of the pandemic for museums is at the very least a broader awareness, both publicly and politically, that our cultural institutions represent a major online educational resource and have done so for some time.

This presents a two-tiered problem: museums competing with producers of professional online and broadcast content, and the more serious issue of digital exclusion. Early in the first pandemic lockdown, the Irish national broadcaster responded with a rapidly produced

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and focused, successful home-schooling support programme. Adopted instantly by schools and families around the country, the RTÉ Home School Hub represented, as one would expect, excellent production values and a strong emphasis on audience engagement. Museums are well used to the latter, but even at their most adaptable they cannot compete with the production values of broadcast professionals. Nor should they be expected to—right now. While museums clearly have an ability and desire to engage with audiences at home, the gap in technical capability that the pandemic has highlighted presents a useful roadmap; technical gaps can be overcome with spending and training.

Perhaps more challenging are the issues of access to these offerings that the lockdown has amplified—while many households have multiple digital devices to share and use, many do not. As a sector that takes access issues seriously, museums immediately developed initiatives to reach audiences beyond the digital sphere. This included the sending of physical activity packs to children without smartphones, and utilising open-air/on-street advertising space as exhibition platforms—many cultural institutions were mindful that not everyone, least of all very young people, can make use of Zoom. While the sector's ongoing embrace of the digital is beneficial, any cheerleading for a dominantly digital future for our organisations rather misses the point. Online content is an important route to the audiences who benefit from our services, but it is not what sets us apart.

Of course, museums are always, whether they acknowledge it or not, vying for public attention. Within the evermore digital world, we must focus on the unique suite of experiences we can provide, their potentially profound and socially useful impact, and in turn exploit technology to meet audiences where they are.

So, what, in this spinning world, do museums possess that Netflix doesn't? Museums have real physical objects of cultural value—the original, actual, physical object or work of art remains attractive and enthralling for visitors (despite the cries of its demise nearly a decade ago with the advent of Google Art.) Major contemporary art galleries continue to be among the most visited cultural institutions in Europe. There is no digital alternative to this physical proximity to the materiality of our subjects. Museums and galleries also often occupy sites of significant architectural interest, from period buildings to 'starchitect' monuments. More often than not, they do so with minimal commercial and marketing intervention, paying attention to the integration of all aspects of their environment across what we in the sector call the 'visitor experience'. The holistic design of exhibitions/food offerings/retail services/facilities largely

prioritises a positive visitor experience over manipulated commercial potential. Contrary to the popular cliché, very few museums force you to exit through the gift shop. Even with the advent of affordable virtual reality technology, there is no online alternative to physically walking through a beautiful space with your living, breathing body, a space that is at once both social and private; there is no online alternative to the gentle, unplanned engagement with friendly, knowledgeable museum staff and, in what seems from this vantage point impossibly luxurious, being quietly alone with other people in a gallery. Museums are businesses, and often a collection of different businesses operating under the same roof, yet they are mostly either state funded, not-for-profit, charities or some combination of each. While they need to balance the books and generate income, they usually remain committed to doing this in a way that treats museums as a public service. Within commercial practice, this makes them noteworthy, and emphasises their capacity to offer a respite from the world outside. Finally, museums are for everybody. Many of us in museums acknowledge that a large part of our audience is captive—they will find us of their own accord, they are already willing to engage with us and already have easy access to culture in their lives. A greater challenge is presented by harder-to-reach audiences; often those from marginalised backgrounds. These audiences are in turn the ones who stand to gain the most from engaging with us, and us from them. The museum sector in Ireland encompasses contingents of educators, curators, artists, administrators and learning professionals who tackle this challenge vocationally, continuously developing and innovating programmes that share the jewels of our culture with as broad a public as possible.

Museums today have, in these ways, come to represent something of the opposite of the world outside their walls. Although we are in the pit, competing for public attention with many other professional sectors, there is a limit to how much we can truly compete on their level. We can, however, learn from them to amplify what it is that truly makes us unique and useful in the world. Continued support around innovation and experimentation is essential, as is ensuring that the governance and systems of our institutions do not preclude us from acting in this way.

Lynn Scarff

Director, National Museum of Ireland

In March 2019 the National Museum of Ireland (NMI)—Decorative Arts and History opened a new exhibition ‘Alison Lowry: (A) Dressing our hidden truths’. This exhibition was a moving and powerful exploration of Magdalene Laundries, Industrial schools and Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland through the exquisite glass work of artist Alison Lowry. The exhibition was a huge success, reaching numerous audiences and offering an important space for survivors of these institutions to tell their own stories. ‘Hidden truths’ represents what museums can often do best: tell multiple stories in powerful ways through excellent work and collections; collections that are not neutral but also not partisan, that engage and co-curate with underrepresented communities, and that offer space for reflection by engaging wider audiences with important parts of our history. The exhibition was opened by the then minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, TD, at a time when there was continued active engagement by survivor groups with government and new revelations in the media about their experiences. This was contentious contemporary history being explored in a national cultural institution, and as such the exhibition went a step further in doing what the secretary of the Smithsonian Museums, Lonnie Bunch, refers to as the ‘legitimisation of important issues’. In October 2020 the National Museum of Ireland was fortunate to be able to acquire the work of Alison Lowry, with the support of the Department of Tourism, Media, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, for the national collection on behalf of the people of Ireland.

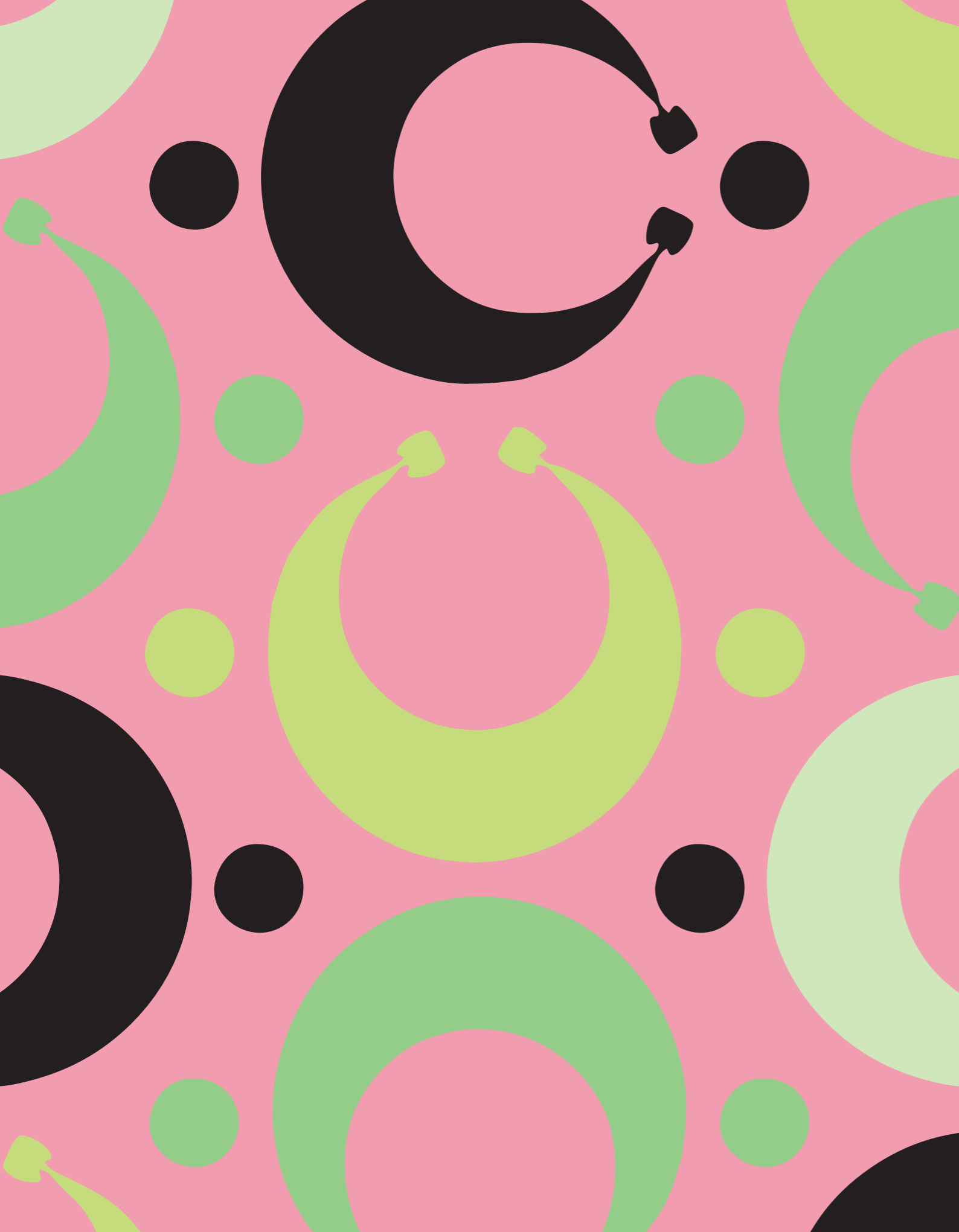
We are today at an interesting juncture in museum practice: the traditional late nineteenth-century model of a museum that sustained up until the middle of the last

century has been questioned, tackled and re-imagined for a twenty-first century audience, as Professor Graham Black would say.¹ This has brought some new and exciting practices to our sector, but it has also at times overlooked some of the core aspects of what makes a museum ‘great’. Museums are under pressure to be more agile and responsive yet also to preserve their traditional roles as guardians of collections and trusted sources of information. Funding for new museums or new museum developments is often linked specifically with increased cultural tourism and assessed primarily against key performance indicators closely aligned with that sector, such as visitor numbers and potential commercial income; if not carefully handled, such assessments can overlook the more qualitative aspects of the museum experience embedded in non-formal learning experiences and greater community engagement. Collection and learning teams are at times exasperated by the impact these approaches have on their collections and on exhibition development. Unless these tensions are addressed and resolved collectively, visitors can have a museum experience that is primarily dependent on who they engage with or the specific exhibition galleries they visit, as opposed to being a cohesive and holistic museum experience.

I propose that the issue is not that simple. The future of museums does not rest on choosing one model over another, and our relevance is not based solely within cultural tourism or on meeting the needs of one target audience alone. The tensions outlined above are fundamentally healthy and exist because museums are not an easily packaged visitor experience but something more complex and nuanced that is willing and able, with adequate supports, to be responsive and relevant. The museum of the future is not one ideal but rather a spectrum of experiences that traverses different types of practice. It might be the best kind of hybrid, that nurtures its strengths while remaining responsive and open to new approaches and ways of working. Or it could be a nineteenth-century model that subverts through offering intriguing interpretation and unique models of depth on demand. Fundamentally, it is diverse—just like our audiences, focusing on the objects within our collections and the human connections that make a museum visit a standout experience. If this is our vision for the future what is the mechanism to achieve it? Below is a fundamental, five-point manifesto I offer as the bedrock upon which we can build innovation in our sector. This is the essential investment required for the sustainability and relevance of museums into the future, and upon which we can build diverse, community-focussed, technology-enabled, contemporary and instructive visitor experiences.

‘The museum of the future is not one ideal but rather a spectrum of experiences that traverses different types of practice’

¹ Professor Graham Black is Professor of Museum Development at Nottingham Trent University, UK.



Invest in people

Museums need museum practitioners, not just CEOs. There is no doubt that the job of running a museum, whether at the local or the national level, requires corporate governance expertise, strong financial knowledge, HR experience and marketing savvy, but these functions, although vital, cannot come at the expense of expertise within our collections and learning teams; their work brings the collection alive, and conserves, protects and interprets it through exhibition and education programming. We need strong, progressive leadership, but we also need to advocate for more serious recognition of the role of museum practitioners and how the practical role differs from academic expertise. We need continuous professional development programmes for our teams, that begin with well-paid graduate internship programmes and evolve into recognised pathways for progression within the museum sector or further scholarship, if that is the chosen route.

Invest in the collection

‘It’s about the objects, stupid’, a commentator said at the Royal Irish Academy’s roundtable event on museums in November 2019. This comment was direct but accurate—our role is to collect, preserve and interpret collections, be that at the scale of a national museum or a museum devoted to the collection of one thematic area or historic individual. The objects steer the course; they provide the content that enables us to explore again and again the multiple stories that illuminate pockets of our history. They allow us to be relevant by giving us an anchor in our exhibition programmes.

COVID-19 closures have illustrated how museums can pivot and meet audience demand for online content, but to maintain this on a longer-term basis requires funding to digitise collections, beyond just capital investment for hardware and with a focus on resources for people to do this work. This opens up public engagement and research access on a significant scale, and all the research shows that it, in turn, can increase engagement with and onsite visits to the collection. We can be responsive with our collections, we can be contemporary in our interpretations, but in addition to this we need a collection that includes new acquisitions, is conserved, stored securely, documented, digitised and accessible.

Invest in the institutions

We need buildings that function, that don’t let the elements in, that have WiFi, space and decent visitor services. Our museums occupy important niches in a vibrant cultural ecosystem. We need to map more clearly for policy makers and government how all of these elements interconnect and the symbiosis of our material, natural, built and cultural heritage. Our institutions can then, regardless of scale, be creative platforms for multiple communities.

We should encourage multipurpose use of our cultural spaces as spaces for new artworks, theatre, heritage initiatives and performance as well as for our own collections and programmes. As spaces that facilitate community engagement and co-curation. We are not community centres, but we are an important and vital part of the non-formal learning environment in the communities in which we operate, and we should ensure that we nurture and provide for that. To do this we need accessible, safe and open buildings.

Increase diversity

We need to be representative of our changing communities. We need to employ people from under-represented communities, and we need to develop programmes collaboratively with these communities. Collaboration has to become as important as our collection; in a future of scarce resources, our ability to reach out and work with different communities, different expertise, will ensure our relevance and open our collections up to multiple interpretations that reflect the changing identities within Ireland.

Strengthen the core

Financing for museums is precarious. Some smaller museums rely on basic grants to maintain their collections and open their buildings with a volunteer staff. Funding mechanisms are often programme- or project-specific and accompanied by additional requirements that are far beyond the scope of any small- to medium-scale museum. Larger cultural institutions are reliant on their commercial income to develop new exhibitions and programmes. One of the biggest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is how it has laid bare these vulnerabilities: reliance on ticket income and commercial income is always going to make us more susceptible to the next crisis. We need to develop mechanisms like multi-annual funding and grant aid for core functions and staffing, as well as other mechanisms to enable museums to plan for the future and ensure we are able to weather the storms—be they global pandemics, economic recessions, or climate catastrophe. This also opens up the possibility of income from commercial activities being our ‘risk fund’, not our core funding—this would allow us to get through a crisis or, in better financial times, to develop new approaches to programming and take risks that core funding can’t always support.

The biggest demand on museum leaders at the moment is perhaps no different than it was 50 or 100 years ago. Our role is to pull up to the bigger picture and plan strategically for the future. No doubt over the next 100 years museum practice will change—new technologies and visitor demographics will demand it—but there are some underlying principles of museums that will continue. The above points are the core upon which we can build a contemporary and relevant visitor experience, and they apply to all museums regardless of scale or location.

Kathryn Thomson **Chief Executive,** **National Museums Northern Ireland**

National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI) is a group of four museums on three sites (Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk Museum, Ulster Transport Museum and Ulster American Folk Park) with hugely diverse collections, visitor experiences and a mix of free and charged entry. Established as three separate entities, the group was formed through legislation in 1998. Our organisational response to fulfilling what we believe is the role and purpose of museums has been the primary focus at NMNI since I took up post in 2016. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a fresh set of challenges, and we have had to rethink further, and relearn, how we run our museums and engage with audiences in that context.

The truth is, however, that we were already on a journey of change. In the last few years, we have been embedding new ways of thinking and new ways of acting across the organisation, so that we can maximise the civic role our museums play. Driven by what we believe is the powerful role that culture and heritage can play in our society—across community relations, educational attainment, health and wellbeing, skills development, creativity and economic development—we have been reengineering our operations so that we are set up to reach as many people and communities in Northern Ireland as possible.

The starting point

I joined NMNI in March 2016 against a backdrop of protracted funding cuts over preceding years. These resulted in an almost 50% reduction in government grants, leading to a 30% reduction in staff. With no meaningful strategic response by the organisation, from a sustainability perspective it was fast approaching a cliff edge.

The importance of museums to society and the impact that their work can have is well documented—museums across the world can provide case studies and evidence to support the benefits of engaging with collections, heritage and identity, and of how engagement improves health, wellbeing and life chances. Therefore, the bigger challenge for me on taking up my role as director was not understanding the role museums can play, but having the confidence that our organisation was fit for purpose to deliver on it.

Our response

That is why, four years ago, we started with two key questions: ‘what is the role and purpose of museums in our society today?’ and ‘what does that mean for what we do and how we do it?’. The answers recognised the need to transform both what people think of us and how they experience our services.

Our change programme is one that has begun from the inside, with NMNI’s people, leaders, culture and way of doing things. Thinking differently, talking differently and acting differently, as one team across the organisation, has allowed us to make a much stronger external connection with audiences. Most importantly, our approach has been holistic and all-encompassing, not a series of projects or initiatives.

In better understanding the potential of museums, the business model and audience engagement, the analysis demonstrated that we had a gap—first between what we knew to be true about museums and what many perceive and think about them (relevance gap), and second, with reduced levels of funding limiting investment in programmes we lacked the tools to re-engage audiences (funding gap). Combined, we had to deal with the scale of the challenge and the danger that our museums would get lost in the widening gap. This called on us to embrace change and do things differently.

From the inside out

The staging posts on our journey so far have been:

- **From what to why**
We began with being clear about our core purpose and stating our belief about how we intended to change the world for the better. A purpose that sits at the heart of everything we do. A common sense of purpose that for the first time brings a sense of unity to NMNI, reflecting the diversity of our collections, our expertise, our people and our offering.
- **A new vision**
By engaging across the organisation and with key stakeholders we defined our vision, mission and values to underpin our strategies and culture.
- **Structured to deliver**
We began rebuilding capacity and capability, and reorganising for greater alignment of functions and teams.
- **Driving through change**
We established a culture with a totally new way of working, defining and embedding new behavioural standards aligned to the values.

New ways of working

Achieving an external connection with our purpose then required us to work better together internally on a single, holistic, whole-team agenda focused on shared objectives, audiences and ways of doing things.

A shared responsibility demanded a shared and integrated approach to planning projects as well as programming activity across all sites. All audience activity is now assessed against five key themes:

- **Collections at the core**
Collections, which make us unique, sit at the heart of what we do.
- **Brand**
Our core purpose is at the heart of every decision taken, from creating content to delivering experiences.
- **Content**
Storytelling through knowledge-based content is embraced as one of our greatest assets.



- **Experiences**

Audiences desire experiences that are unique, authentic and memorable. Nurturing an agile culture of ideas and innovation, constantly renewing and refreshing the existing visitor experience, and, co-creating with each other, and with our audiences, is an increasing feature of our activity.

- **Income**

Seeking to create value and generate increased income through audience engagement activity is critical.

Taking stock and measuring success

To date we can demonstrate the green shoots of success as we have reset how people perceive and engage with our museums. With an enabling structure, culture and new ways of doing things we are increasingly moving from a position of imbalance and passivity to one in which our museums play a genuinely valued and meaningful role in the lives of all people and every community. For readers who want to learn more about this, our Annual Review 2019/20 highlights some of these achievements, outlining what we have accomplished so far.

Into the future

For the remainder of this contribution, I look to the future. The world is currently in the grips of a global pandemic that will completely redefine the future—both socially and economically. Our direction of travel is as relevant now as it was when we started out on our transformational journey four years ago, if not more so, and we are refocusing our priorities in that context.

Although we have laid important foundations and made considerable progress over the last four years, we recognise the need to be even more courageous and radical in our pursuit of further transformative change, to ensure greater inclusivity and diversity of audiences. Our key ingredients for long term success include:

- **A dynamic, accessible national collection**

Improving collections access requires a distributed solution, served by stores on all of our sites. For the collection to be accessible and dynamic—a living resource—it needs to be close to where it is needed. This will allow the conservation and curatorial processes behind the public exhibitions to be demystified—becoming part of a new conversation with visitors.

- **The co-creation of new collections knowledge**

Following the re-structuring process, we have a healthy, multi-generational curatorial team. We fuse emerging curators' new ideas with the knowledge and experience of more established curators. A new research policy is in place and new collaborative agreements have been established with local universities. Increasingly, through these and new partnerships, and by working alongside communities, we build and strengthen the knowledge base of our collections.

- **Building the workforce of the future**

Education is now located within the curatorial department, and we have a renewed and re-energised school programme. In response to the pandemic, a new virtual education programme has been developed, which is being delivered live by the team into primary school classrooms. This makes our programme accessible in a way that it has never been before, removing some of the barriers to museum visits, particularly for those from disadvantaged areas. We hope that this will be the platform from which to build our new programme as a key national resource for curriculum-based learning, and in doing so we seek to raise aspirations, develop skills and inspire creativity in our young people.

- **Growing social impact**

Over the last two years we have seen the potential for audience growth through temporary touring exhibitions such as 'Dippy' (National History Museum) and 'Tim Peake's Soyuz Capsule' (Science Museum Group), for which we applied new thinking and ways of working to powerful effect. In addition, new permanent and temporary exhibitions (for instance 'Troubles and beyond' and 'Games of Thrones tapestry') have demonstrated our ability to connect creatively to new audiences through collections, resources and local partners.

Around the margins, for more than ten years we have been delivering important participatory programmes that support wellbeing. Recognising the profound impact such programmes have had on people's lives, these are the initiatives we now want people to judge us by. To realise our full potential in this area, we need to address the following questions: who still isn't coming to our museums and why? And what do we do about it?

Our long-term success entails growing our audience by creating converts amongst those who have never visited us before. To do that requires radical re-wiring of how we communicate to our audiences, how we welcome them, introduce ourselves and make people feel both comfortable and at ease, engaged and stimulated. Making significant investment in our places and spaces that will transform the functionality of our infrastructure will provide the essential springboard for the next phase of audience development.

- **Strategic economic development**

In 2018–19 NMNI achieved a record number of visitors across its sites: 905,000 people. This demonstrated that although our museums cannot be assessed simply by the conventional metrics of visitor attractions, they are, nonetheless, visitor attractions—and major league ones at that.

Like other visitor attractions, we generate additional income through commercial activities—income that we reinvest into the core business. As a publicly funded museum service, however, we are also different. The synchronicity of these activities poses important questions, which must be carefully considered.

How do we maximise access for the public while implementing financial barriers? What is our 'ask' for income support, and to whom should it be targeted? To what extent should we, as a publicly funded service, be in the marketplace directly competing with the private sector? Or should we be working in partnership with the private sector, identifying commercial opportunities within our business to be exploited by others to our mutual benefit? The answers to these questions are likely to be found in greater collaboration and partnership.

- **A philosophy of sustainable development**

Henry McGhie, as part of his 'Curating tomorrow' project, takes the UN Sustainable Development Goals and interprets their meaning for museums.² These goals not only embrace environmental rights, but also human and cultural rights. He outlines the critical importance of the connections between the environment, society and the economy in a six-step plan, arguing that a museum will be sustainable if these are kept in balance, supported and developed, with staff working collaboratively and productively.

As we look ahead to our re-emergence from this crisis, it is my wish that public service ways foregrounded here, rather than corporate models of thought, can provide us with a clear and a robust framework for future decision-making.

And finally

We are well down the road on our journey of transformation at NMNI. Evidence of change is to be found in new collaborations, improved teamwork, more cohesive leadership and more diverse audiences. We have much more we can achieve through thoughtful investment and cultivation of our international reputation. Above all, we will continue our fight for greater relevance and long-term sustainability in the years ahead.

² Henry A. McGhie, 2019: *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: a how-to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners*. Curating Tomorrow, UK. Liverpool; available online at: <http://www.curatingtomorrow.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/museums-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-2019.pdf> (21 January 2021).

Conclusion

Diane Negra

Chair, Royal Irish Academy Working Group on Culture and Heritage

Amidst the unprecedented duress of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish arts sector has faced particular challenges and tribulations. In this paper, testimonies of three museum executives reflect upon the conundrums of operations, planning and service at such a time.

These testimonies shed light on both immediate pragmatic concerns and broader philosophical dilemmas in regard to the provision of exhibitions and other modes of delivery to the public. Sensitive to the affordability and limitations of distanced and technologised modes of engagement, each reflects upon decisive financial, governmental and cultural frames that impact upon how they carry out their work.

Museums preserve and protect our past in order to bring it to life in the present and ensure that it will continue to be meaningful in the future. Museums on the island of Ireland have long suffered from lack of funding for innovative programming, for imaginative staff development, and for the basic maintenance of their heritage buildings. World-class collections have not been provided with adequate public or private investment aimed at moving what has at times been an insular sector into the European forefront.

The current pandemic has highlighted that, even when audiences cannot visit in person, there remains an enormous appetite for the knowledges and experiences that museums provide. Working from home, and often also burdened with childcare and home-schooling duties, the staff of Ireland's museums have been challenged to provide content about their collections when they cannot be directly visited, and they have risen to the occasion in multiple, exciting new ways. They have done this at a time when their usual revenue streams, from donation boxes, to shops, and cafés, have all been paused. Going forward, they must be supported at levels that allow them to develop ground-breaking ways of presenting their collections, without ever ignoring the fundamental conservation work that provides the necessary backbone for both physical exhibitions and content delivered digitally. Only then will they be able to meet their full potential, engage fully with diverse audiences of all ages here in Ireland, and present our rich visual and material cultural heritage to the wider world.

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