

Museum Thinking: Orchestrating Exhibitions

Introduction for teachers

These exercises are useful in developing critical thinking, research skills and independent learning. They can help with:

- Following and evaluating a museum exhibition
- Creating a history trail or exhibition
- Carrying out research for a Leaving Cert project.



A model of one of the bells of St Audoen's church, ringing here since 1423.

Life, Citizenship and the Leaving Certificate

The sheets are designed to be used either as a series of lessons or as individual exercises. They are devised to encourage students to look at history from different perspectives. They encourage investigating all available evidence, while being mindful that history is a dynamic process.



Medieval Dubliners had food on their minds!

The Nature of History; sources and evidence

Think like a historian

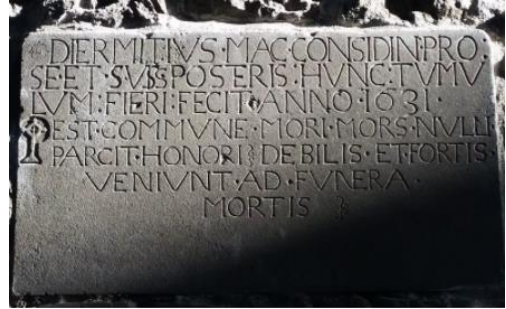


Grave mapping at Ennis Friary

Creating a historical source:

In October 2015, Aoife Kennedy and Edel Green embarked on a project to map the graveyard at Ennis Friary, Co Clare. An earlier mapping of the graves was found to be incomplete, and they set out to create a complete and accurate record of the graves. Visitors to the Friary will use this record to research their own family history as well as the history of the Friary and the town of Ennis.

Aoife and Edel drew, mapped and numbered each grave. They transcribed the text on the stone. They photographed each grave. Finally, they have put their list online and shared this new historical source with the world.



The Grave of Dermot Mac Considine

DERMITIVS MAC CONSIDIN PRO / SE
ET SVIS POSTERIS HVNC TVMV / LVM
FIERI FECIT ANNO 1631 / EST
COMMVNE MORI MORS NVLLI /
PARCIT HONORI DEBILIS ET FORTIS /
VENIVNT AD FVNERA / MORTIS

This was translated by the late Fr. Senan Hedderman OFM in 1991 as:

Dermot Mac Considine for him and posterity this tomb caused to be made (in the) year 1631. It is common to die, death spares no one. The honourable, the weak and the strong come to the funeral rites of death.

Look around your school or home. Find evidence of something from the past and record it here. What does it tell you about the past?

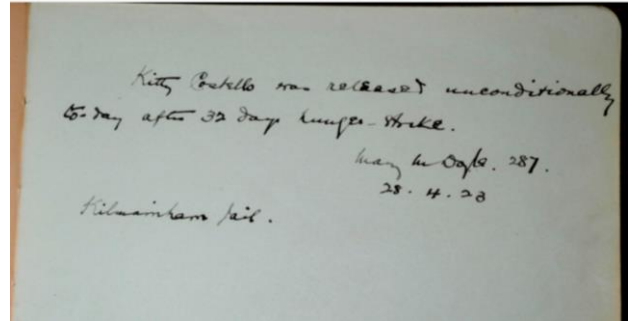
Primary sources of history

Kilmainham Gaol has a collection of graffiti on cell walls created by prisoners held there during the Irish Civil War in 1923. Some of the prisoners also kept autograph books, recording prisoner names and executions, as well as daily life and anti-Treaty views.

These primary sources tell us about the prisoners struggles to get enough food and how they use hunger strike as a tool in their struggles.



This piece of graffiti lists cocoa, butter and Bovril beside a drawing of a distraught male prisoner.



This excerpt from Nellie Fennell's autograph reads:

'Kitty Costello was released unconditionally today after 32 days hunger strike
Mary m Doyle 287
28.4.23
Kilmainham Jail'

Compare and Contrast these primary sources.

How are these sources similar and how are they different?

What is a Museum?

A museum is a places where objects of historical, scientific, artist or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.



The Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre is an unusual museum. It's exhibition contains one unique artefact, the remains of an Iron Age oak Trackway that was built between 148-147 BC. It is believed the trackway lasted about 10 years before the bog swallowed it up. Thanks to the wet acidic low oxygen conditions, the bog preserved this unique trackway for over 2000 years before it was dug up during industrial peat extraction in 1984.

The trackway was preserved and studied because we value the knowledge that it can show us, even if it has left us with more questions than answers. We can study how it was built and what materials were used. But the question as to why it was built remains to be fully answered. Archaeologists and historians compare what was found at Corlea to other sites and this unique trackway becomes part of a larger picture.



What other information or artefacts would you display at Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre to bring this oak trackway to life for visitors?

Reference:

<https://heritageireland.ie/visit/places-to-visit/corlea-trackway-visitor-centre/>



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What is an exhibition?

Exhibitions are public displays of artefacts, items of interest or art, often with a connection to each other.

Exhibitions are created by Curators. They decide on the idea behind the exhibition and what objects will best express that concept.

Performance Art is an artwork that utilises the human body as a canvas. The artist or other participants perform actions as a means of expression.

Exhibit B was a performance art exhibition created by Brett Bailey, a white South African artist, in 2013.

The work was based on the controversial 'human zoos' popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Imperial European powers promoted pseudo-scientific arguments to justify their theft of Africa's natural resources. These racial theories supported the white man's world view of his natural superiority and justified Imperial Colonies.

Bailey brings these stories to life using black people to perform the pieces. In each tableau, the audience is confronted with a black performer who casts an unsettling silent gaze at the viewer.

Scenes include a black man in a cage, a black man and women standing in a natural history display beside animals, and a seated black woman holding a skull and a piece of glass. Each story recalled specific experiences of black people at the hands of white colonists. He brings the work up to the present day by including a scene of an asylum seeker silenced in an airplane seat, hands and feet taped together and tape over his mouth.



Installation from **Exhibit B** addressing Apartheid in South Africa. *Mixed media: enclosure, Coloured man, sign, spectator, linoleum, chair etc.*

In September 2014, just as the exhibition was about to open in London, protesters gathered outside calling it 'offensive and racist'. They claimed the exhibition organisers did not consult black African people about their own history. They suggested that once again African people were being censored by a white person's view of their history. They argued that combining all those stories from different times and places suggests that there is one single 'African-ness'.

The organisers claimed that the protests were silencing artists and denying them freedom of expression. They said the exhibition confronts the appalling racist attitudes that existed and questions how far society has really come in the last 100 years. They acknowledged that engaging with these difficult subjects is always going to be controversial and that people may find it upsetting.

Watch the interview with Brett Bailey when the exhibition ran in Edinburgh in 2013.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/12ynxPVNKF1pYVrzZB9R2sM/exhibit-b-edinburghs-controversial-art-show>

Debate whether this exhibition should be shown in your local area.



Exhibits

Charles Byrne was born in 1761 in Littlebridge, Co Derry. He suffered from a growth disorder that resulted in his growing to 7 ft 7 inches (2.31m) in height. He became known as 'The Irish Giant'.



Charles Byrne's skeleton on display at the Royal College of Surgeons, London

In his late teens, he set out for Scotland first and then London to seek his fortune. In London, he entertained paying crowds eager to see The Irish Giant. He was said to have been a gentle friendly person and soon he became a celebrity.

However, the medical condition that gave him his unusual height also produced pituitary tumours. By the age of 22, Charles' health was failing and he started to drink heavily.

Byrne's unusual stature became known to the surgeon and anatomist John Hunter, who had a reputation for collecting unusual specimens for his private museum. Knowing that Byrne was coming to the end of his life, Hunter offered him money for his body.



Thomas Rowlands' etching of Charles Byrne published in 1785

Byrne refused the money, not wanting to be exhibited in Hunter's museum. Frightened that Hunter would steal his body and dissect it after his death, Byrne asked his friends to bury him in a lead coffin at sea in Margate. At that time, the bodies of traitors and murderers were dissected by people like Hunter. Charles Byrne did not want that fate.

In June 1783, Byrne died at the age of 22. On the way to his burial at sea in Margate, his body was snatched by men working for John Hunter. Over 4 years, Hunter reduced his body to a skeleton and displayed it in his private museum. In 1799, he sold the skeleton to the Royal College of Surgeons in London, where it has been on display for over 200 years.

In 2011 and again in 2018, campaigns to have Charles Byrne's remains finally laid to rest have failed. In 2020, The Royal College of Surgeons in London issued a statement saying that it was reviewing its displays as part of a refurbishment but declined to comment on The Irish Giant.

Museums today face many historical, ethical and legacy issues.

Debate topics:

1. This House believes it is time to bury Charles Byrne.
2. This House believes that Museums should take into account popular opinion.
3. This House believed that if European museums are forced to examine the provenance of every artefact in their collection, they would soon be half empty.

References:

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/oct/15/hilary-mantel-calls-for-skeleton-of-irish-giant-to-be-repatriated>
<http://surgicat.rcseng.ac.uk/Details/collect/4123>



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A Trail is an Exhibition that is not confined to a museum



The Glebe Gallery Robot Trail was designed to be Autism Friendly. A series of child size robots demonstrate their superpowers. Find the Glebe Gallery Robot Trail here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5PqT5i1DdA>

Discover what remains of Medieval Dublin



The Medieval Trail challenges walkers to find the remains of the medieval walls of Dublin.

Find the medieval Trail here:

<https://heritageireland.ie/assets/uploads/2021/07/Be-a-medieval-detective.pdf>

This Objects Trail takes place in just one room.

It's a great technique for telling personal history



This trail takes place in one room of a family home and tells the story of growing up in this house. The stories can be found in the descriptions of the objects and places.

Tell the story through the objects in a room



Create a Trail of your own.
Imagine your walk home is a trail. Describe it.

Check out this trails activity sheet for other inspiring trails and ideas on how to present a trail:

<https://heritageireland.ie/assets/uploads/2021/11/Create-a-Trail-TY-activity-sheet.pdf>



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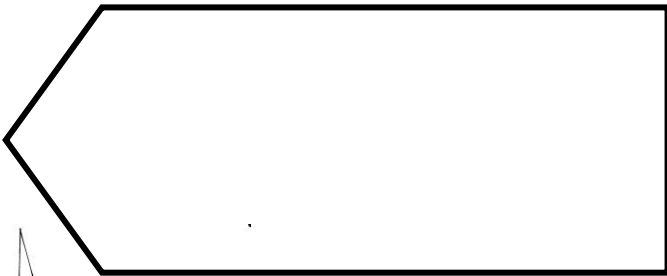
Look around you



What do we put on a pedestal?

Pick 2 small everyday objects. Imagine these are priceless artefacts. Draw them on the pedestals. Create labels for the objects. Describe them and consider; where did they come from? how were they collected? whose hands did they pass through before arriving in your museum? what stories can you tell about the culture they came from?

Jam Sutton's "David and Goliath" from the exhibition "On a Pedestal", Dublin Castle in 2018.



These are the statues of Fortitude (with the lion and spear) and Justice (with scales and sword) created by John van Nost (the Younger) in the 1750s for the gates at Dublin Castle. Justice is famous in Dublin for having her back to the people of the city.



The words we use matter



Wooden Spoon c.2021

These spoons were typically used by women throughout Ireland to cook an evening meal for their families when their husbands came home from work.

Can you see anything wrong with this label?

Write a new label for this exhibit

If a museum originated in a time when sexism, racism and homophobia were commonly accepted, how will we be able to see this in its exhibitions?

The words we use matter

Labels can reduce and debase the object. They privilege the words of the collector over the importance of the object in it's original context. They can be outdated and offensive. The shadow of the Pitt River Museum's colonialist past can still be seen on these simple labels.



Labels from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, UK

The Pitt Rivers is an ethnographic museum that is currently undergoing an examination of it's displays in an effort to decolonise it's catalogues.

Can you spot any problems with these labels?

In 2017, a curator from the British Museum in London said on Twitter: "Curators write the labels based on their specialist knowledge and they are edited by our Interpretation department. We aim to be understandable by 16 year olds. Sometimes Asian names can be confusing, so we have to be careful about using too many."

Check out people's responses:

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/sep/13/british-museum-says-too-many-asian-names-on-labels-can-be-confusing>

Reference:

<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters>



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The words we use matter

You are a museum curator preparing an exhibition on the Marriage Equality Referendum 2015.



Write a label for these badges

What objects would you include in the exhibition to show a balance of opinions on Marriage Equality?



The crowds at Dublin Castle as the result of the referendum was announced on the 22nd May 2015. The 'Yes' side won 62% of votes.

Photo credit: RTE archives

Narrative – the story of the object



You have been asked to research and create an exhibition about the Covid Pandemic in Ireland:
Describe the Narrative you would use:



What artefacts would you search for to illustrate your narrative?

Provenance – the history of the object



Statute of a Reclining Buddha figure
Marble statue with gold painting

Reclining Buddha represents the dying but beatific Buddha, preparing for his death and ascent into Nirvana.

This statue was stolen from a Buddhist temple in Burma by Irishman, Col Sir Charles FitzGerald. He stole it along with other statutes while on a punitive British imperial expedition in 1885-6. These statutes were spoils of war. In 1891, Colonial FitzGerald donated the statues to the National Museum of Ireland. Only this Reclining Buddha has even been on show. The other statues have remained in storage since 1891.

In 1904, the National Museum of Ireland bought metalwork objects that were looted during the British invasion of Tibet.

This artefact reminds us that the view of Ireland as a victim of colonial Britain, tells only half the story. Many Irish people were active participants in the expansion and maintenance of the British Empire. They served in the military, as civil administrators, missionaries, doctors and other professionals.

Debate:

This house believes that all looted artefacts should be returned to their place of origin.