

FOCUS ON CO-CURATION

A Museum Gives Power to Children

EMMA BRYANT

Shhh . . . It's a Secret! was a family-friendly exhibition with a difference. It was curated over the period of a year by 12 children aged 9-11 and staged in the main exhibition galleries of the Wallace Collection. It was the very first time a national museum had run such a sustained project in which school children selected works of art from the internationally renowned main collection, created a theme, and were involved in every aspect of the exhibition. It was primarily their creation, although the Learning Department was on hand to support and guide them throughout the project. It was a very public-facing and therefore comparatively high-risk project, but the children proved that, when trusted, they could deliver something high-quality and amazing. This article will explore what it was like for the institution to cede power to such a young group in their journey from museum novices to expert curators.

The Learning Department proposed this concept after having been given a slot in the exhibition galleries for a family friendly exhibition. It was argued that this plan was an innovative way to create a show that would be truly accessible to this audience.

The Wallace Collection's director Rosalind Savill responded: "Why did I agree? Because I have such faith in you and the Learning Department, because it sounded a really exciting experiment, because I have a child too and know how much she would have loved such an opportunity, and because I long for more young people to be

engaged in a hands-on way with works of art so that in the future we can have a glut of great curators to ensure [that] scholarship, learning and passion for museums survives!"

St. Vincent's Roman Catholic Primary, a state school, was approached purely because it was the nearest school to the Wallace Collection. Fortunately the school personnel agreed to take part with only a vague outline of the project to go on. They were asked to select 12 pupils from Year 4 and 5, and they chose to select children of varying academic abilities.

All museum departments were to be involved in the exhibition in order to show the children what an exciting place a museum is and the range of skills and experiences of the staff.

The project was a journey of discovery. The only definite aspect was the exhibition opening date. The children would, the museum hoped, take responsibility for all aspects of the exhibition: curating, interpretation, design and finance, while being guided and supported by the museum. The aim was for the children to redisplay the collection, making the artworks more intriguing to a family audience, and to tell the story of the objects using their own voices. The challenge was to strike a balance between maintaining the atmosphere of the collection, retaining its integrity, and presenting a high quality exhibition with interpretation suitable for everyone. The exhibition was a new concept, therefore there was no expertise at the Wallace, or in the wider museum community, to call on.

Emma Bryant (Emma.Bryant@wallacecollection.org), education officer, the Wallace Collection, London.



The Learning team had to think on their feet and to a certain extent make it up as they went along.

The museum had no idea what the outcome would be, so several questions arose about the theme, the content, or how the objects would be displayed. If the trust put in the Learning Department was misplaced, it might jeopardize future innovative projects. The press might think it was crazy to design an exhibition curated by such young people. How would the public react to the exhibition, given that all the objects were always on display anyway? Finally, would the children be able to shoulder such responsibility? Or was the experiment just too risky?

The Young Curators (as we called them) were going to be given as much power as possible, so the Learning team had to have a contin-

gency plan in case things went wrong. We would step in and take control of the project at any point, with the children's role becoming one of consultation rather than doing and decision making, the priority being for the exhibition to open on time and to adhere to a standard expected from a national museum.

On our first Wallace meeting I was surprised that the adults talking to us were going to let us choose objects around the museum. (Billy, Young Curator)

Weekly meetings were held during term time. The Young Curators were introduced both to the collection and to the staff. To start with they learned about what an exhibition is and what a curator does. (None of them had

heard the word “curator” before). They had several tours around the galleries with different curators. They met staff from the conservation department, retail, and press and marketing, as well as freelance gallery educators and guide lecturers. Agendas, written before each meeting, helped guide the pupils and structure the project. This was important, since there was no preconceived plan for the project—nor could there be. This approach meant it was possible to respond to different issues as they arose and to allow the children’s voices to be heard throughout. It soon became clear that these were very capable children, and the museum’s faith in their abilities grew with each meeting.

The Young Curators were included in the decision-making process of the exhibition, from choosing the theme of the exhibition to writing the text panels. They worked closely with and consulted all staff involved the project. This level of involvement became crucial to ensuring that the pupils retained ownership of their exhibition.

I suspect that almost no-one initially thought that the show would be so good, the children so pro-active, and the whole so well-received . . . the real stars of the exhibition were the kids themselves, our “guest curators.” It was enormously satisfying to work with them, and to realize their ideas. It was particularly gratifying to see the initially quiet ones come out of their shells, as they became increasingly engaged and passionate about the project. (David Edge, Armorer and Head of Conservation)

In museum terms a year was a relatively short time to make an exhibition, especially when there were 12 curators involved, and we were trying to run as democratic a process as possible. But in children’s terms it was a really long

time, which meant sometimes they did not concentrate and got bored. At these points the agenda was abandoned and a more entertaining activity substituted. It was important to be flexible and react quickly to keep the team engaged, but this added to the stress of looming deadlines.

The hardest parts of creating our exhibition were when we had to complete all the homeworks in a short amount of time and to bring in our books every week. Having (extra) meetings with Mrs. Gardner-Sharp [Learning Mentor and project coordinator for the school] when we wanted to play. (Dylan, Young Curator)

However, the Learning team had to keep up the pressure on the children for most of the project’s duration. For example, Press and Marketing needed a title for the show in November 2009, which meant a theme had to be chosen. There was considerable debate among Young Curators, and they were forced to make a decision more quickly than they would have liked.

The hardest part was finding the type of exhibition it would be. First we thought of armor meets jewelry and then it soon became tremendous traditions. But after a while we came with our best, *Shhh . . . It’s a Secret*. (Jonathan, Young Curator)

In our early meetings we were let loose around the Wallace to see if we could come up with theme ideas and objects to put in. There was some quarreling about the differences between what the girls and boys wanted. If you looked in my book on the day we were discussing themes you would see (not very clear notes!) (Lola, Young Curator)

Team building was a priority, but inevitably there were some conflicts of interest, for



Photos 2 & 3. The Wallace Collection, Hertford House, Manchester Square, London, in exterior and interior views. All photos on these pages are copyright © the Wallace Collection.

example more of the Young Curators wanted to be in the press and marketing team than there were places. All of the pupils were curators, choosing the objects and writing text panels for the exhibition, but they were also divided into four teams who were given additional assignments. Each had to apply in writing by outlining what they thought their strengths were. Some were disappointed with the team they were put in. Dylan wanted to be with his best friend, Joe. He was upset and a bit moody about it at first.

First I wanted to be in the finance team with Joe, but because I had good ideas and would be good at it I joined the interpretation

team. I think it was a good choice because I did come up with some good ideas like having a tree to go with the “Souvenir” painting and having a fact file. I liked writing it, I put the facts in a fun way. I was amazed, I was proud to see my ideas being used. (Dylan, Young Curator)

But others were happy with their teams.

I got put in the design team and was quite pleased about it because it was the job that I wanted. Our role was to do most of how it would look. We all also got extra jobs; mine was drawing a portrait of Madame de Serilly, which I was really proud of . . . Our role was very important because we had to decide on the



layout, color, lighting, and much more.
(Jonathan, Young Curator)

As the group cohesion grew in strength, individual pupils learned to work together, share ideas, support and listen to each others opinions—in fact, becoming much more professional. Eventually they became a very strong team, but this took time and hard work by both the school and the Learning team.

I was put into the design team I had volunteered for . . . as I knew that I like art and I have lots of creative ideas. My team mates were Isabel and Jonathan. I think we worked well although Isabel had different ideas to Jonathan and myself, her ideas were strong and we used some of them. (Billy, Young Curator)

The Learning team was not given any restrictions as to what could or should go into the exhibition. This was an awesome responsi-

bility, as well as an incredible opportunity, for both the Learning Department and the children. The safety and security of the objects was paramount and the Young Curators had to shoulder this responsibility. Using such prized and precious objects did sometimes cause slight problems. When the director gave her gallery talks, for instance, she found it more difficult than usual, as some of the most important pieces of Sèvres porcelain were in *Shhh . . . It's a Secret*. However she enthusiastically sent visitors down to the exhibition afterwards to see them.

I would say that from the curatorial side it was very easy [to give up power] because Learning had such a good grasp of the need to protect the objects in the exhibition and the children were so sensible and accommodating. Because in the end we did not give up the final word and because the children were so mature but so imaginative and committed it wasn't tricky to give up power to an outside group.



Photos 4 & 5. The Young Curators meet to discuss design strategies. In the exhibition, children interact with a display.

(Stephen Duffy, Curator of Nineteenth Century Paintings and Exhibitions Officer)

The Young Curators decided to start the exhibition with a Wallace Collection secret, a snuff box with a button concealing miniatures of the French philosopher and playwright Voltaire and his mistress, not discovered by the Conservation Department until the 1970s. The exhibition uncovered secret stories, unraveled symbols, and discovered compartments behind some of the most enigmatic pieces in the collection. There were objects from across the museum: paintings, furniture, sculpture, armor and porcelain. Each piece had a text panel and activity which revealed its secret.

The three galleries explored different sub-themes. The sense of mystery was enhanced in the exhibition design: the wall colors and lighting went from dark to light, as the exhibition progressed, symbolizing the act of discovery. The exhibition ended with the Mystery Object—an object (a long silver bar engraved with leaping animals) about which nothing is known.

Shhh...It's a Secret! was on view for 54 days and was visited by over 14,000 people. It was the eighth most popular (daily visitor count) show ever in the exhibition galleries. It was very well received by all the staff across the museum, the wider museum community, press, and most importantly the public.



There were three opportunities for visitors to write or draw on postcards: they could put postcards on the Story Tree, guess the Mystery object, or use the cards as an opportunity for feedback.

The Story Tree linked to the Fragonard painting *The Souvenir*, in which a young woman is carving her lover's initials onto a tree. The Young Curators thought that people would enjoy having an opportunity to write something to their loved ones, and so the idea of the Story Tree was born. It was designed by Isabel, one of

the Young Curators, then painted onto the gallery wall. Felt pockets were added in which visitors could leave their postcards. Some of the hundreds of postcards contained very touching messages, especially around Valentines Day.

A table was put next to the Mystery Object, by the exit. Visitors were asked to guess what they thought it was. The placard said:

The Mystery Object with Legs!

This is a very mysterious object. . . .

Nobody knows what it is! Not even our famous curators are sure! Have you seen a similar object? Do you have an idea of what it could be?

Perhaps you can help us solve the mystery!

This is what we do know:

It was probably made in Nuremberg, Germany. The designs of animals and plants are typical of Nuremberg work.

It was all covered in gold, so must have belonged to a rich, important person.

The little feet have special treads on them. The maker was expecting it to be used in situations where it might slip or slide.

It has a special fitting in the middle that looks like it is designed to hold something placed on it.

If you have an idea, write it on a postcard and post it in the box.

There were many imaginative guesses, one of the most popular suggestions being a boot scraper. (This interpretation is unlikely, however, since the object was originally gilded.) Well over 1,000 postcards were filled in, and there were many enthusiastic comments about the exhibition. Interestingly there were no abusive messages and the few negative comments were mainly that the exhibition should have been bigger and on for longer.

I'm from Taiwan and I've never seen this type of exhibition before. I love it, especially as children did it. What a good idea . . . thank you.

We are old children, 70 and 71 and enjoyed your Shhh . . . gallery.

Thank you—we are from the University of the Arts, we spent one hour with the objects and we loved it. Well done! Good work.

I think it was really good and I would recommend it to a friend. Clementine Whitcombe. Age 10.

The museum's fears about the press proved unfounded. There was a great deal of positive media coverage. The three Young Curators in the press team wrote press packs for the BBC Newsround website and wrote to journalists. They gave interviews, including to BBC TV London News and Central Chinese TV news, which apparently is watched by billions, including one of the Young Curator's grandparents. At the opening a journalist said that she had just been given a tour of the show and the Young Curator would not stop talking about eighteenth century porcelain. She found it extraordinary that they were so enthusiastic and interested in something that normally would not be considered of interest to a child. The press team along with all the Young Curators can be seen in action at <http://www.wallacecollection.org/education/specialprojects>.

Collaborating with a team of young children presented a totally new way of working. They changed my initial perceptions in many ways, bringing vitality, enthusiasm, and importantly, mature, well thought out ideas. This followed through into all projects I gave them, be they presenting or written. The end



Photos 6 & 7. Robbie, one of the Young Curators, gives an interview to a reporter from Chinese television. The Story Tree is prepared for its role.

result was a fantastic achievement on all sides and I think has taught us all a lot about working with children and family audiences—what they really want and how we should best be communicating it. (Danielle Cunningham, Marketing and Press Manager)

Because of the confidence the Learning team had in the children they were able let the Young Curators give tours to the public and assist in family workshops. They rose to the occasion and, for example, when two of them had to give a spontaneous extra public tour because there were too many people on the advertised one, they got a huge round of applause at the end.

I think that all family exhibitions should be curated by children or families because how can



you create an exhibition suitable for children if you are not one? People from all over the world—of every age—have come to see this exhibition, and it just shows how children can succeed if they want to, and that we are just as clever as adults. *Shhh...It's a Secret* is a brilliant exhibition and the layout, content and artifacts are what makes it special. (Chelsea, Young Curator)

The Wallace Collection staff felt very proud of the project and it has strengthened relationships across departments. This was partly because the children were so charming and everyone soon realized that they were doing something special and probably quite unique. The success of the exhibition has changed perceptions about the capabilities of the Learning Department and, more particularly, young peo-

ple. The level of thought, commitment, and the high standard that the children aspired to and achieved as curators was impressive.

Shhh . . . It's a Secret has been a highly rewarding project for the entire museum and also for the curators involved. The project has initiated necessary discussions about our different audiences and about the ways our exhibitions cater for them. It was fascinating to develop the ideas with the students from St Vincent's School. It has been a very successful experiment which will probably have a sequel. The Wallace has been the first National [museum] to seriously try out this new concept which we are very proud of. (Christoph Martin Vogtherr, Curator of Pictures pre-1800, Acting Head of Collections)

The Learning Department is still working with the Young Curators, who now give regular family tours to the public. They want to start a blog in order to act as ambassadors for the collection and they are working on a new display for the Porphyry Court.

I learnt about art, the history behind the objects, how to research, and that there is always a story behind any object. I have learnt how to speak confidently to the public and people. I have also experienced how hard the job is for becoming a curator. Although it was hard curating an exhibition by children I think our hard work has paid off!! (Chelsea, Young Curator)

Many lessons were learned, the most important one not to assume what children like and want from museums. The Wallace Collection discovered that the trust placed in the Young Curators amply paid off. The exhibition was far more imaginative and subtle than one the Learning Department would have curated without their input. It was vital that the staff, right across the museum, freely gave their time and expertise to help the Young Curators realize their dream. In taking the risk of giving up power to such a young and inexperienced group, an exhibition was created that exceeded the museum staff's expectations.

END



Photos 8 & 9. *The Souvenir* (1778), by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, supplied the idea for the Story Tree. The Mystery Object asked visitors to leave postcards suggesting its identity.

