

Museums for Peace through which we have not only improved our knowledge of this area but also made links with a number of key peace museums. We hope this will form the basis of broader international links which feed into The Herbert's work in many different ways.

Education and Events

We are keen to develop on our international links with school groups. An important part of this will be video conferencing equipment in adjacent education spaces. We have explored how we should focus our core education programme and worked with the Citizenship Advisor and local teachers to try and identify gaps in current provision and the kinds of sessions and resources we could offer. We have also trialled a few different ideas for sessions and projects with different schools groups.

The partnerships which we have made have been vital to the gallery development. The organisations and groups we have worked with also form a key part of the visitor base we hope to attract. However we also hope that they will continue to play an important role as the gallery changes and develops in the future.



Natalie Heidari pour

Project Officer
Peace and Reconciliation Gallery,
The Herbert,
Coventry
Email:
natalie.heidari pour@coventry.gov.uk
Website: www.theherbert.org

The Pollard Trail

Clowning around with museum objects

In recent years, the issue of underused collections in museums has increasingly come to the fore. The Museum Association's report, 'Collections for the Future', was particularly important in addressing this issue. Since then, there have been discussions, conferences and projects which have tried to find solutions to this difficult problem.

Many organisations are becoming more daring in their approach to getting collections out of store and making them more accessible to the public. In 2006, The Herbert was able to use some of its collections in a way which they had never been used before...

The Herbert is a local authority museum and art gallery, situated in the heart of Coventry. It is currently undergoing a phased, multi-million pound redevelopment, which will result in new sculpture and performance spaces, 7 exhibition spaces and a spectacular two level glass covered court.

Since November 2000, The Herbert has been host to a theatre company, Triangle, with a formal partnership agreement since April 2001. Triangle's productions are firmly based on personal stories, some of which are rooted in the city of Coventry. Their work has toured internationally and won a number of awards including, in collaboration with The Herbert, the Museum and Heritage Award for Best Educational Initiative.

Triangle, supported by The Herbert, have worked on a number of projects in recent years, often stimulated by objects in the museum's collections. The most recent of these, The Pollard Trail, was innovative and daring, taking museum objects out into the community in new and challenging ways.

This collection was donated to The Herbert in 1987 and consists of a range of material, all of which was owned by local man, Irving Pollard. Pollard was a photographer in the motor industry, but in his spare time was involved with many local groups, including amateur dramatics. He often performed as 'Chico the clown' and much of the collection was related to these performances, including costume, props and photographs.



Members of the CMP Soc on the Pollard Trail.
Photo by David Remes.

The most fascinating part of Pollard's story relates to the Coventry Blitz. During this terrible event, Pollard was so traumatised that he lost both his memory and voice. He began the recovery and healing process by recreating some of the objects he had lost. The project therefore not only focussed on a performer whose story was firmly rooted in the city, but also explored issues of memory, identity and loss. In addition to this, it was an extremely valuable chance to use a collection which had mainly been kept in store since its donation. Although it contained some fascinating objects, many were unusual and difficult to interpret in traditional museum contexts.

The project has developed massively since 2004, when Triangle first discovered the Pollard collection. In this time there was much experimentation with various sites and ideas in collaboration with the local community and surviving associates of Pollard himself. The Herbert's curatorial team were integral to this process from the beginning, and were part of the evolution of the project.

The culmination of this work was The Pollard Trail, a very different 'tour' around the area of Hillfields where Irving Pollard lived and worked. Hillfields is an inner city area, which is due for large scale redevelopment over the next few years. Different sites around Hillfields were used to



Irving Pollard as Chico the Clown. The costume he wears is now in The Herbert's collections and was used on the Pollard Trail. Right: Objects from the museum were used throughout the trail in unexpected ways.



tell the story of Pollard's life. In some instances, parts of Pollard's life were enacted at the site of their original occurrence whereas at others, sites were used as physical metaphors for events. For example, the hospital at which Pollard recuperated was actually in Bromsgrove so a rehabilitation centre in Hillfields, was used to represent this time in Pollard's life. The tour was led, and much of the project was planned and organised, by the 'CMP Soc', a group of alternative personas created by Triangle artists, described as amateur re-enactors and entertainers. Members of the public found themselves interacting with CMP Soc and from there were able to decide how far they would engage with the trail.

Key to this tour was the use of the actual objects which had belonged to Irving Pollard and their placement throughout the local area in shops, cafés and pubs. This, however, created a number of ethical issues for the curators at The Herbert. Although it was clearly very important to use the genuine objects, the areas where they were to be placed were very far from traditional museum galleries. There was no environmental control and very little security. How was this to be resolved?

A number of discussions followed, both within the curatorial team and with Triangle, leading to solutions that were acceptable to both Triangle and The Herbert. Firstly, it was decided that one person would be responsible for the museum objects at all times. This person would not be part of the tour but would place the objects in the correct positions at the start of the day, check on them at regular intervals, and also pack them away and secure them. This ensured the security of the objects.

Secondly, the objects were divided into those which were most vulnerable and those

which were more robust. Anything that was more fragile was displayed by CMP Soc only when appropriate to the performance and following curatorial advice - this included a number of textile objects which were obviously more sensitive to light. However, it was agreed that there were a number of objects which could be displayed in shops and cafés throughout the day, as they needed less stringent conditions.

Thirdly, as part of the process of display, the shopkeepers and café owners were involved in selecting objects and their placement. It was clearly explained to them the significance of the objects and the care that needed to be taken, and most were happy to be involved in this way.

There were obviously difficulties in this process, one of the main ones being the differences in mindset between the curator and the artist! While our aim was to preserve and care for the objects, viewing them as valuable resources, CMP Soc initially perceived the objects to be like other props in their performances. However, both groups had the same final objective, which was to allow greater access to the collections. With good communication we were therefore able to resolve many of the issues and emphasise the importance of the collections and their care.

The Pollard Trail was carried out over two weeks in August 2006 and had many outcomes.

Hillfields is home to many different communities, including a large Kurdish community. The project was highly successful in involving this community in ways that a traditional museum outreach project may not have done, particularly with regards to connections between objects and people. The Pollard collection included many photographs of the places where he

had lived and worked in the Hillfields and thus connections were made to the current uses of these locations. For example, an owner of a local sweetshop was shown photographs of the area after it had been bombed, which he knew nothing about. This led to further discussions and even an impromptu concert on the streets of Hillfields involving the CMP Soc and local people! By taking the museum objects out onto the streets of Hillfields, people were not expected to enter an unfamiliar and, for some, intimidating environment i.e. the museum.

The project also led to lots of new material about the museum objects being collected. New photographs and oral histories were collected which greatly added to the value of the original objects. These are now being compiled on new media, including the internet and DVD Rom and continue to develop.

Finally, in terms of care of collections, no damage was done to the museum objects. Due to the careful planning involved, all objects were safely returned to the museum.

Crucial to the success of the project were trust and communication between Triangle and The Herbert's staff. Due to the long-running relationship which already existed between Triangle and The Herbert, museum staff felt confident that Triangle were aware of the issues surrounding use of museum objects. Museum staff were also involved at every stage of the process and were able to voice any concerns they felt.

Although this was an ambitious project which used museum objects in totally new ways as well as a steep learning curve for the museum's staff, it proved to be highly successful. It allowed non-visitors to access, interpret and add to collections in a far more accessible format than many museum displays. It also added to The Herbert's knowledge of an unusual collection.

The success of this project has meant The Herbert may be more ambitious in the future with their use of collections - although collections care is at the forefront of every curator's mind, it must be acknowledged more readily that preservation is not an end in itself. With careful planning, more collections can be used in new and innovative ways, often with surprising results.

For more information on this project please contact Claire Selby

Email: claire.selby@coventry.gov.uk.
Alternatively, please visit:
www.triangletheatre.co.uk
www.ninaandfrederick.co.uk/blogs/pollard