



CoCA RESOURCE:

TOP TIPS FOR REINTERPRETING AND REIMAGINING CERAMIC COLLECTIONS



York Art Gallery

York Museums Trust

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Who is this resource for?

- 1 Curators who work with ceramic and other craft collections, who are interested to consider new ways to present or interpret them.
 - 2 Ceramic artists and makers who are interested in creating work / exhibitions / installations in response to a contemporary or historic collection in a museum, gallery, historic house or other cultural institution.
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How will this resource help you?

The resource is designed to help you consider and identify:

- Different approaches to reinterpreting and reimagining ceramic collections.
- The benefits of reinterpreting collections.
- Further sources of information and inspiration when considering this area of practice.

The information presented reflects ideas shared and discussed at the CoCA Symposium **The Curator's Challenge – Reinterpreting and Re-imagining Ceramic Collections**, hosted by Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, on 30 January 2020. Films of the presentations and discussions that took place at the event can be viewed on the [CoCA website](#).

What is the value of rethinking approaches to displaying and exhibiting ceramics?

There are scholarly and museological conventions that have and continue to influence the ways in which collections are presented in cultural organisations. These have traditionally guided how objects are arranged (for example chronologically, stylistically or by maker) and interpreted (for example using text-based captions and photographs).

Expanded thinking and research in the field of cultural and heritage interpretation recognises that traditional approaches to presenting collections can mean an exhibition or display appeals to one audience type but can leave other audiences disengaged.

We make meaning when interpreting anything we encounter by relating it to our lived experiences, built up through every aspect of our lives. This is known as contextual meaning making¹. If a visitor cannot find a way to relate to an exhibition or display it will be uninteresting to them.

If an exhibition only communicates with a visitor in one way, for example through written text, those who prefer other styles of learning, such as auditory, kinetic or visual, are less likely to have a rewarding experience.

Rethinking approaches to the display and exhibition of ceramics is essential to engaging and diversifying audiences, as well as connecting contemporary makers with collections and expanding the field of scholarship concerned with the making and meanings of ceramics.

¹ 'The Museum Experience Revisited', 2012, by John H. Falk and L. Dierking

The benefits of reinterpreting a ceramic collection

Include:

- Engagement with a collection by new and different audiences, including those who traditionally under-represented or whose stories and histories have not been visible.
- New experiences encouraging repeat visits and engagements by your core audiences.
- Opportunities to create and develop projects collaboratively (see also CoCA's Collaboration Resource on the [CoCA website](#)).
- The chance to develop and broaden your knowledge and understanding of the collection e.g. through the input and perspectives of collaborators of different types.
- Providing developmental opportunities for contemporary makers.
- Demonstrating ways in which contemporary ceramics is connected to and can be inspired by historic ceramics.
- Introducing a range of perspectives and narratives, so broadening out beyond the authoritative, faceless museum 'voice'.
- Raising the profile and reputation of the collection / institution / artist(s) through dynamic activity.

Working towards any of the benefits detailed above can also make your organisation / collection more likely to be eligible for funding and successful in receiving funding, as at their heart is a desire to make the collection more relevant and accessible.

The most appropriate approach for a specific moment in time will depend on the audience(s) you wish to engage and the outcomes you would like to achieve.

The reinterpretation and re-imagining of a ceramic collection can take many different forms

1 An intervention or response by a contemporary artist or other creative practitioner in an exhibition space, historic house etc. e.g.

- [Layla Khoo: Change in Attitudes](#), Nunnington Hall, [Bouke de Vries: War and Pieces](#), Belton House and [Clay Stories](#), Leith Hill Place. Three examples from the National Trust's, [Trust New Art](#) programme, that has commissioned 300 artists to respond to historic houses and heritage locations, over the last ten years.
- [Matt Smith Flux: Parian Unpacked](#), Fitzwilliam Museum.
- [Jennifer Lee: The Potter's Space](#), Kettle's Yard. The exhibition included the display of some pots amongst the collections in the house, alongside the show in the contemporary galleries.
- Bethan Lloyd Worthington: [Windswept Baby](#) at the [V&A](#), and a range of [responsive installations](#) in house, gallery and other environments, with Studio Manifold and independently, including with the National Trust [Willow Road](#) property.
- Students from the Royal College of Art Ceramics and Glass Department, responded to and exhibited works at the [Soane Museum](#) and [Freud Museum](#).
- [Chatsworth House](#) have commissioned a range of permanent contemporary ceramic installations for period rooms, including pieces by Edmund de waal, Gwyn Hansen Pigott, Pippin Drysdale, Felicity Aylieff and Natasha Daintry. The most ambitious installation is '[The North Sketch Sequence](#)' by Jacob van der Beugel.
- Waddesdon Manor have collaborated with ceramic artists to create temporary installations and exhibitions in period rooms, in response to the collections, including [Michael Eden](#), [Edmund de waal](#) and [Kate Malone](#).

- Clare Twomey: [Manifest: 10,000 Hours](#), York Art Gallery, [Trophy](#), V&A, [Time Present and Time Past](#), William Morris Museum, [Scribe](#), Dr Johnson's House, [A Dark Day in Paradise](#), Royal Pavilion Brighton, [Exchange](#), Foundling Museum.
- Edmund de Waal: [Signs and Wonders](#), V&A, [White](#), Royal Academy of Arts.
- British Ceramics Biennial: Neil Brownsword's [Externalising the Archive](#) at the Spode Works site, [Cultural Icons](#) at The Potteries Museum and Gallery, Stoke on Trent and Artists Duncan Hooson and Stephanie Buttle's [22 Hands](#) at the World of Wedgwood.

2 Curation / arrangement / interpretation of a part or whole collection by a contemporary ceramic artist or other outside figure e.g. writer, poet etc.

- [Jennifer Lee: A Personal Selection](#), Fitzwilliam Museum.
- [Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things](#), Sainsbury Centre. The exhibition included the display of pieces from the historic collections that Magdalene Odundo had taken inspiration from.
- [Clay Fever](#), York Art Gallery. A play written in response to the W.A. Ismay collections and archive.
- Edmund de Waal: [Arcanum](#), National Museum Cardiff; the project combined a series of interventions in a gallery space, with a redisplay of porcelain from the de Winton collection by de Waal. [On White](#), Fitzwilliam Museum; the project combined the display of parts of the Museum's Chinese collection with objects by de Waal.

3 Interpretation or curation of a collection from the perspective of a specific community or demographic e.g. LGBTQ, age, origin, collective experience.

- [Queering the Museum](#), Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.
- [Children Curate](#), York Art Gallery. A group of 28 Year 10 students worked with collector [Anthony Shaw](#) and YAG to curate an exhibition included new ceramics, drawings, collages and sculpture they created during workshops with artist Susan Halls.
- [The Shadow of Sodiesha](#), National Museum of Ireland, a response by Japanese and Irish ceramic artists to the Sodeisha Group of Ceramics artists (the first Japanese potters to reject function as an ideal).

4 Cross disciplinary exhibitions and displays, drawing together objects and interpretations from other disciplines, perspectives, eras etc.

- [Yorkshire Pots and People](#), Lotherton Hall. An exhibition integrating contemporary and historic ceramics into a historic house setting.
- [Give & Take](#), V&A. An exchange of works / collections between the V&A and the Serpentine Gallery.

5 Curations of collections according to visual or thematic characteristics e.g. colour, pattern, motif

- [Wall of Pots](#), CoCA, York Art Gallery.

6 Programming interactive / participatory events that take inspiration from and connect to the collection e.g. making, object handling, drawing, writing etc.

- [Day of Clay](#), annual event at York Art Gallery. A day long participatory event with a range of activities, talks and presentations responding to the CoCA collection.

There is no limit to the range of ways in which a collection can be reinterpreted. It might be appropriate to combine interpretative approaches to cater for different audiences and create an effective experience. Or have a changing programme of displays that adopts different approaches over time to provide alternative perspectives on a collection.

Working with contemporary makers and artist to reinterpret a ceramic collection

Of the approaches outlined, one of the most predominant in recent years - supported by Arts Council England and other funding bodies - has been the interpretation of collections through artist commissions and curatorial projects. Projects of this type have been realised in historic houses and sites, as well as museums and galleries. One example of a long-standing programme of this nature is the National Trust's [Trust New Art](#) series of projects, which has been running for ten years.

Of the different approaches to re-imagining ceramic collections outlined, working with artists is unique in bringing a contemporary and personal perspective to the collection. This gives visitors license to share and develop their own views, and see a collection as having contemporary relevance and as a source of inspiration. Artists are also able to deal with topics and ideas in a way that does not require firm, definitive information, but rather can pose questions and open conversations.

Top-tips for working with artists to reinterpretation collections

- Define the parameters of the project at the beginning through discussion and a MOU (memorandum of understanding) and where appropriate a [Partnership Agreement](#) e.g. timescales, budget limitations, subject / audience sensitivities.
- Seek advice from experienced sector colleagues, funders and those within the sector who have led or taken part in projects of this nature.
- Visit examples of imaginative curatorial projects, as a stimulus for considering what would work for your organisation and you
- Be flexible and allow the artist / guest curator to be creative; if there have to be parameters or restrictions of any nature, ensure these are discussed and confirmed upfront, to avoid unnecessary changes and revision to the project
- Communication, communication, communication!

Further sources of information about the reinterpretation of collections

- [Fresh breeze in the depots —curatorial concepts for reinterpreting collections](#), Marjatta Hölz, see especially pp20–31.
- [Museum, the Artist, and 'Intervention'](#), James Putnam.
- [Trust New Art](#), National Trust.
- [The Ceramics Reader](#), edited by Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie, in particular the section of Ceramics and Installation from p222.
- [Interpreting Ceramics: Selected Essays](#), Jo Dahn and Jeffrey Jones.
- [Accessible curating](#).

Also see **CoCA Resource: Top Tips for Collaborative Projects for Ceramic Makers and Organisations** for useful information and links, if you are reinterpreting or reimagining ceramic collections in partnership with artists or other collaborations.