Colour Space 2 at the V&A

The Gilbert Collection

November – December 2016

Review Report

“The simple imaginative mind may have its rewards in the repetitions of its own silent workings coming continually on the Spirit with a fine suddenness.”

- John Keats

Background

In 2014 Lemos&Crane published a paper, Re-imagine: Improving access to the arts, galleries and museums for people with learning disabilities which drew attention to the relative lack of progress in widening access and participation for adults with learning disabilities into the arts generally and specifically museums and galleries. Since then the City Bridge Trust have supported Lemos&Crane in working with mainstream arts organisations and museums to
promote and support a series of projects as pilots and exemplars of approaches to improving access and participation. Our partners include V&A, National Gallery, Tate and LSO.

**Colour Space and the Gilbert Collection**
Lemos&Crane and V&A jointly developed the idea and concept for *Colour Space* in 2015. The first programme focused on the V&A's photography collection. A programme was devised and delivered that would encourage appreciation of serious photography as well as participation in taking photographs in more than a casual way. Tablet photography was the main creative activity of the first programme and proved popular, accessible and effective with participants. Some remarkable and original images were produced and a selection of them have been published in book format and online. These publications gave participants in the workshops an important sense of completion and fulfillment. It was therefore thought appropriate to continue to use tablet photography as a creative medium for the second *Colour Space* programme built around the Gilbert Collection.

“The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection celebrates some of the most beautiful objects ever made, many in precious materials, and often on a small scale. It is famous for European and British masterpieces including gold and silver, gold boxes, painted enamels and mosaics.” – from the V&A website

The Gilbert Collection has a number of important attributes relevant to this programme and group of participants. We welcomed the opportunity to work with objects rather than images or pictures. This meant that participants could experience the specific and important psychological and emotional benefits of object handling as well as the emotional attachments to the ‘transitional’ object theorized by psychoanalysts and others, notably Donald Winnicott and, similarly, by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*.

The opportunity to work with the Gilbert Collection of precious boxes and miniatures also created the opportunity to explore notions of aesthetics and beauty, valuable materials and representations of personal meaning and significance. The boxes were also an opportunity to explore imagination and story-telling. The gold, silver and jewels also represented an unusual opportunity for people with learning disabilities to experience a close encounter with rare objects with high material, personal and emotional value. The subtlety and miniature scale of the boxes and other items also demanded a focus and intensity which was also not necessarily part of participants’ day-to-day experience.
Objectives
The following objectives were set for the Colour Space programme.

1. To familiarise participants with visiting the V&A generally
2. To introduce participants in a concentrated, reflective and discursive way to some original valuable objects of artistic, aesthetic, historic and emotional significance with a view to enhancing their ‘ways of seeing’ when visiting museums and galleries.
3. To provide an opportunity to discuss those works and to express preferences and ideas of their own about the work in the gallery, as well as about their own experiences, observations and discussions.
4. To cultivate enthusiasm for the making of photography as a way of expressing intention and meaning, instead of seeing photography as a casual and fairly meaningless immediate pastime.
5. To introduce participants to tablet photography and the skills associated with it and to enhance and expand their previous use of mobile phones and tablets for photography and self-expression.
6. To encourage participants to visit and experience all parts of the V&A in the future under their own steam and out of choice, alone or with supporters, friends or family.

Evaluation criteria
The following evaluation criteria were established for Colour Space.

- Is there demand for activities at the V&A from adult social care and supported housing organisations for adults with learning disabilities?
- What would be meaningful methodologies for introducing and involving adults with learning disabilities to the V&A, its collections and activities?
- How can the museum ensure a positive visitor experience for this group of participants from arrival to departure?
After the planned activity, would participants have a desire to return? What support, if any, would they need to visit the V&A independently?

Would they want to involve friends and families in visits to the V&A?

In the long term could they perceive the V&A, and be involved with the museum, like other visitors and citizens?

Could participants see the V&A as an open and public space for themselves?

Would the experience of such programmes inspire aspirations to artistic skills and activity and seeing themselves as artists with learning disabilities?

Format and approach

The programme was facilitated by Tania Batzoglou. Tania is an actor, performance artist, storyteller and a drama movement therapist. She works across different genres creating performances that merge personal stories and collective myths, movement, multiple senses and artefacts. Tania has presented her work in theatre venues, galleries, museums, historic palaces, hotels, old abattoirs, churches and houses.

She has designed and delivered multisensory and process-based events for the V&A, Hampton Court Palace and Discover working with elderly people living with dementia, young people and adults with learning and physical disabilities. In April 2016, she collaborated with Lemos and Crane in the first Colour Space programme. Tania has a PhD from Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

The programme ran over three sessions, so there was continuity and a sense of progression. The process began by visiting and being guided around the gallery appreciating and discussing the collection of gold and silver boxes and miniatures. Following that, over the three sessions, participants were encouraged to use the collection as inspiration for creative work focusing on objects and photographing
objects. Following the experience of the first Colour Space programme, the length of the session was set at 90 minutes with a short break. We also decided to seek about 12 participants from different organisations plus carers or supporters, all adults.

Demand, promotion, response
The project was promoted to Lemos&Crane's database of organisations in adult social care. It was only necessary to send one email as it elicited a big immediate response and the project was quickly over-subscribed, indicating considerable latent demand for projects of this kind for this group of service users. The programme was over-subscribed from responses to this single email. Responses came from far afield, including a response from an NHS organization in Scotland. In total we received responses from 15 organisations. Some organisations wanted to bring groups of 10-12 participants. However in the interests of fairness and equity and with a view to encouraging mixing and making new friends numbers were restricted to a maximum of three participants from each organization, with the opportunity to nominate supplementaries if there were last minute dropouts from other organization (a common feature of programmes such as this). We accepted 18 bookings, but could have filled the programme many times over.

General feedback
The general feedback on the programme was excellent as illustrated by these comments.

“I enjoyed taking photos, learning how to use the ipad, creating stories.”

“I really enjoyed taking pictures on the table of the gold boxes with pictures on.”

“I enjoyed imagining which person would have owned the boxes and learning the history behind them.”

“I enjoyed looking at the gallery – really enjoyed it, keep doing it.”

Facilitation
The feedback on the facilitation was overwhelmingly excellent.

“Tania was excellent – and all the staff were very helpful. Tania brought it to life and made it fun! Thank you very much!”

As well as Tania’s facilitation skills, people also valued the structure and process.

“Learning from the excellent teaching and facilitating of the group and the stages in the activity – photographing objects to help observe them; then linking with the students’ own personal objects; then developing into picture stories.”
The encounter with the Gilbert Collection, with its special aesthetics and sense of precious objects, was also well-received. This participant noted that it was rare for people with learning disabilities to be brought up so close to objects of such material and aesthetic value.

“Thank you very much! Very inspiring ideas – great opportunity to get close-up to the precious objects which we would not usually see. This is especially good for people with learning disabilities. Enriching to meet up with new friends from other places.”

Concerns
Two areas of negative comment were noted by a minority of participants. Firstly, that the group was too large and secondly that they would have liked the programme to last more than three sessions. Getting the right size of group is a complex logistical challenge. Demand for the programme was very great, so we sought to include as many people as possible, aiming for about 12 participants. There is also always some attrition through non-attendance and so there is a temptation to over-book, however there were fewer dropouts with this programme than with others. Enthusiasm beforehand was translated into enthusiasm on the day. While there were some non-attendees at the second and third sessions, attendance overall was high. The learning centre at the V&A is currently in temporary premises and the room the workshops were held in was smaller than the room we used for the first Colour Space. A smaller room may have contributed to a feeling of a large group and a larger room may have ameliorated that feeling.

With regard to only three sessions, possibly regardless of how many sessions the programme had run for, some would have felt it was too short! That is an indication both of the pleasure that people get from these activities and the relative paucity of their availability. Many people and organisations have commented to us that programmes such as Colour Space are few and far between.

The methodology we were following went beyond simply improving access by familiarizing participants with the gallery and introducing them to a few objects on display. As well as the access objective, we also had a creativity objective. The primary purpose was always to encourage participants and supporters and carers to view the whole museum as a resource for pleasure and learning to be used at times of their own choosing and in ways they wanted. That was the access objective. Our aspiration was also to inspire a creative response from participants that could be captured through tablet photography and then shared more widely. This relatively demanding and intense programme was knowingly over-ambitious for a three session programme.

“More weeks in which to create an object (in this workshop a box) as a mini craft project. It was so interesting it was hard to come to an end.”

However, it was never intended that this programme would lead to the establishment of a continuing group.
Specific responses to the Gilbert Collection

Lemos&Crane’s experience of running these programmes at the V&A and elsewhere is that the particularly part of the museum or collection that is the focus of the programme always elicits specific responses from the participants. Since these participants are not students of the history of the decorative arts, their responses are not in relation to the artistic or aesthetic cannon. Instead, their responses are more personal, relating to memory or pleasure, family or emotions. The encounter with the Gilbert Collection was certainly no exception to this general experience.

Some of the specific aspects of the collection to which people responded included the precious metals and diamonds that had gone into the making of the boxes and the fine craftsmanship and artistry which drew their attention to questions of what make objects valuable beyond the emotional attachments to the owners. Other responses were to the emotional significance of the boxes: what they might have had inside them? who owned them? were they gifts from one person to another? There were also responses that elided the idea of a box and its contents with ideas about personal secrets and stories being collected and stored for safekeeping because of their significance.

Other reflections

Since the programme has a clear progression and structure, it is evidently important that there is a sense of a shared journey within the group. This applies to the supporters as well as to the people with learning disabilities. Support workers who attend these programmes should attend consistently without chopping and changing to fit in with rotas. They should also be encouraged to see themselves as full participants, not observers or simply there for accompaniment.

As already noted, there is overwhelming demand for these programmes, so one would expect adult social care agencies to be frequent users of the museum without a specific invitation to a programme such as Colour Space. Since many of the support staff, as well as the participants, had not visited the V&C before, there is clearly much to be done to encourage self-managed visits by people with learning disabilities and their supporters and families.

Recommendations

1. Social care and supported housing agencies should be encouraged to make self-guided visits to the museum. The museum could produce resources in easy read and picture format to help them to achieve that. Similarly the museum could enhance its marketing effort to adult social care organisations.

2. It should be made clear to support staff and carers that they are not just invigilators and helpers. They should attend these programmes as full participants alongside service users, so as to strengthen the group process and solidarity during the programme, as well as develop skills and insights in support and care staff to allow them to develop their own creative practice in ways that integrating working with the collections in museums and galleries, by for example using the resources available digitally as well as organizing visits to museums and galleries.

3. There may also be benefits from ‘training the trainers’ workshops on working with museum collections exclusively for support staff without service users.
4. Social care agencies should go beyond seeing museums and galleries as entertaining and diverting pastimes for their service users. Their ambitions should include encouraging the long term creativity of participants as a ways of strengthening identity and self-confidence as well as building on potential and capability.

5. Access and participation are important objectives, but they are only the first stage. The more long term objective should be to use the museum’s collection to inspire creative and artistic responses from which aesthetic objects of lasting value can be created and the person who created them begin to see themselves as an artist. This focus on creative goals as well as access and participation means there is a need for more long term programmes focused on nurturing creativity and artistic endeavor and identity.

6. One possible methodology going forward would be to establish programmes like this to improve access and confidence and then encourage more motivated and committed participants from these groups to join longer programmes with smaller groups of people committed to working together creatively and developing their artistry, with support and facilitation, to produce a body of artistic work of lasting value, beyond simply making photographs for themselves and their families and friends. These more intensive programmes are obviously not going to be as appealing as a more general access programme and therefore would need to be an element of nomination and selection for a more intensive creative programme. The ambition for these more intensive programmes would be that people with learning disabilities would begin to see themselves and be seen by others as artists with something unique to say and an original way of saying it.
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<th>Evaluation criteria</th>
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<td>Is there demand for activities at the V&amp;A from adult social care and supported housing organisations for adults with learning disabilities?</td>
<td>There is clear and evident demand for these activities. Only one promotional email was sent and elicited a big response. Responses came from far from London. The project was over-subscribed and several organizations which had sent in an expression of interest did not secure places. The promotion for this programme was done by Lemos&amp;Crane, not by the V&amp;A directly. This seems to have had an impact and benefit on the response and take-up:</td>
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<td>- Organisations in adult social care are accustomed to hearing from Lemos&amp;Crane, which is a familiar organization and trusted brand to them.</td>
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<td>- Lemos&amp;Crane have a large, up-to-date, well-maintained database of relevant organisations. It’s hard to imagine the V&amp;A maintaining such a database just for the occasional learning programme.</td>
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<td>What would be meaningful methodologies for introducing and involving adults with learning disabilities to the V&amp;A, its collections and activities?</td>
<td>Several specific methodologies seemed to be effective:</td>
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<td>- Invitation from a familiar source i.e. Lemos&amp;Crane</td>
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<td>- ensuring participants were in small groups of familiar people</td>
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<td>- focusing on how to ‘read’ a picture or object more closely than just looking at it in passing</td>
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<td>- participants being asked to describe and discuss why they liked certain pictures</td>
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<td>- making photos with tablets is an easy to use method even for those who hadn’t used tablets before</td>
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<td>- focusing on composition, colour, subject etc rather than seeing photographs as simply a way of taking casual ‘selfies’</td>
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<td>How can the museum ensure a positive visitor experience for this constituency from arrival to departure?</td>
<td>Participants and their supporters were very positive about the visitor experience, in particular the attitude, helpfulness and sensitivity of the staff. This seemed to overcome obvious difficulties of finding your way around a large and complicated building, finding the toilets, climbing the stairs and so on. The welcome people receive when they arrive in the building, particularly at busy times such as school holidays, seems to be especially important.</td>
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<td>After the planned activity, would participants have a desire to return? What support, if any, would they need to visit the V&amp;A independently?</td>
<td>People used attending the Colour Space programme as an opportunity to visit other parts of the V&amp;A’s collection and got a lot out of it. So it seems there is no impediment to independent visits once people are in the museum. That said, one could imagine some helpful explanatory material, perhaps in easy read, which both helped people to navigate the museum as well as providing information about the collection. Effective marketing is also needed to reach these non-traditional V&amp;A audiences. Some of this will best be achieved through partners like Lemos&amp;Crane and others, but the V&amp;A itself has a responsibility in its mainstream marketing to ensure that they reach less readily engaged groups, particularly for their free offer.</td>
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<td>Would they want to involve friends and families in visits to the V&amp;A?</td>
<td>Everybody seemed keen on that idea.</td>
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<td>In the long term could they perceive and be involved with the V&amp;A like other visitors and citizens?</td>
<td>Undoubtedly on the basis of this experience, though the mediation of a targeted welcome for ‘people like us’ and a structured, well-facilitated programme greatly enhances the experience, going beyond a pleasurable visit into a far more creative and developmental experience, inculcating ideas and thoughts not just about the collection, but which can also be taken back by participants into more domestic settings. Ideally</td>
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participants would have a choice between independent visits (perhaps with the help of a carer, family member or volunteer) and structured, facilitated programmes which focus on appreciation as well as creation.

| Could participants see the V&A as an open and public space for themselves | On the basis of the experience of this programme participants did see the V&A as a friendly and welcoming space, though see comments above on the specific benefits of a structured programme. It is also obviously a large and complicated place in which almost everybody needs help with navigation and wayfinding. |