



OUT AND ABOUT

QUEERING THE MUSEUM



Exeter
City Council



Made possible with

Heritage
Fund

UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

ramm





INTRODUCTION

Out and About: Queering the Museum was a two-year project funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). It was run as a partnership between RAMM and the University of Exeter (2020-2022).

The aim of the project was to reveal and celebrate the rich LGBTQ+ heritage embedded in the collections at RAMM. Curators and engagement specialists at RAMM worked together with Professor Jana Funke from the University of Exeter and socially engaged artist and writer Natalie McGrath to empower lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities in the South West to uncover, create and share existing and new LGBTQ+ heritage at the museum.

The project built on a previous collaboration with young LGBTQ+ people from X-Plore Youth and Exeter College and RAMM, led by McGrath and Professor Funke, which resulted in the launch of the LGBTQIA+ Rainbow Trail (available as a physical or digital resource at RAMM) in 2019. Inspired by this earlier work, the museum committed to expanding its engagement with LGBTQ+ communities to reveal and celebrate the important LGBTQ+ heritage in the collections.

Central to the success of the project was our collaboration with a group of research volunteers, commissioned artists and interviewees whose insights and expertise allowed us to explore LGBTQ+ heritage through a range of different approaches.



Natalie



Jana

Links to project website:

<https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/>

The project built on an existing collaboration with young LGBTQ+ people and RAMM



Photo Jim Wileman



Ellie

QUEER RESONANCES

We decided to use the term 'queer' in a capacious sense to include diverse historically and culturally contingent expressions and experiences of sexual and gender nonconformity. This is an imperfect approach: as a Western term and as a word that has - for a long time - been used as an insult and slur, 'queer' cannot easily be assumed to refer to everyone. The term can only ever serve as a starting point for our investigations and conversations.

There is no single way to queer a museum.

Over the course of this project, we tried and tested many different methods to uncover LGBTQ+ heritage in the RAMM's collections. We began to work with the concept of 'queer resonances' to capture the rich and sometimes unexpected ways in which objects can speak to and allow us to access LGBTQ+ history, culture and experience. This made it possible for us to explore different forms of LGBTQ+ heritage through an open, playful and inclusive engagement with the objects and artifacts in the collections.



Finding LGBTQ+ Creators

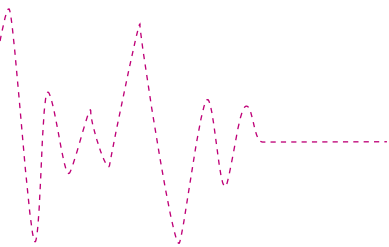
Perhaps the most obvious way of queering museum collections is to look for artists, collectors or other creators who can be situated within LGBTQ+ history because of the knowledge we have about their personal lives. As part of this project, we carried out new research and produced artistic responses to several individuals who can be considered as LGBTQ+.

Duncan Grant (1885-1978) was a British painter and designer. He was a member of the Bloomsbury Group and a co-director of the Omega Workshop. He had male and female partners, but was predominantly attracted to men. The RAMM owns one of his female nude paintings.

Mary Stella Edwards (1893-1989) and **Judith Ackland (1892-1971)** were British artists and life partners, who were together for more than 50 years. They spent much of their life in North Devon, painting and writing about rural landscapes and coastal regions in the South West. The RAMM's collections include several of their art works.

Ivor Treby (1933-2012) was born and raised in Plymouth. He was a biochemistry teacher as well as a gay literary activist, scholar and writer. Treby grew up at a time when male homosexuality was illegal in the U.K. Nevertheless, he was out to his family and friends. Treby traveled regularly and collected sand on his journeys. His sand collection is part of the RAMM's collections.





While it is important to try and identify LGBTQ+ people in the past, there are serious limitations to this method. It is often difficult or even impossible to access information about people's personal lives, especially considering that sexually and gender nonconforming people often had to be secretive about their experiences. Moreover, the labels and frameworks people have used to understand themselves and their relationships shift radically across historical periods and cultural contexts. It is also the case that it is not at all clear what evidence is required to 'prove' that someone was LGBTQ+. More often than not, this 'burden of proof' has been used to discount or erase LGBTQ+ voices and stories.



Exploring LGBTQ+ Culture and History

To access the richness of LGBTQ+ history and culture through the RAMM's collections, the researchers on the project also explored other ways in which objects could speak to LGBTQ+ history and culture. We embraced the many different insights objects can hold once they are considered through LGBTQ+ lenses. Amelia Griffiths' (1768-1858) seaweed collection at RAMM, for instance, inspired research on the queer resonances of seaweed and ecologies more broadly. The 'quizzing glasses' owned by the museum opened up an examination of the ways in which people in early twentieth-century Europe used monacles to signal their belonging to lesbian and queer communities. RAMM's fossil collection led to work on paleontologist Mary Anning (1799-1847), considering how Anning's life and scholarship have been reframed over time and interrogating analogies between paleontological and queer research.

You can read more about these and other objects on our website: <https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/digging-deeper/>.

Celebrating LGBTQ+ Voices Today

The objects in the RAMM's collections also inspired a range of other responses from LGBTQ+ artists, writers, researchers and young people. The rest of the booklet will give you a sense of the knowledge and insight these collaborators brought to the project.



WORKING WITH YOUNG LGBTQ+ PEOPLE

Our initial work with X-Plore Youth and Exeter College demonstrated the urgent need to include young LGBTQ+ people within debates about museum spaces and heritage sites. The young people we worked with felt that aspects of history that resonated with them were often erased and invisible, and they had learned that museums and heritage spaces often failed to include or represent their stories. At the same time, the young people were often very interested in and passionate about LGBTQ+ history and understood the importance and relevance of sharing and celebrating LGBTQ+ heritage.

Building on the work we had done on the LGBTQIA+ Rainbow Trail in 2019, we continued to work with young LGBTQ+ people to explore the museum collections. For example, in November 2021, we ran a workshop with young LGBTQ+ people from YAY Cornwall in collaboration with Dr Ina Linge from the University of Exeter and the AHRC-funded Queering Climate Change project. We considered how objects related to the natural world, including Ivor Treby's sand, Mary Stella Edwards' and Judith Ackland's landscape and coastal paintings, and Amelia Griffiths' seaweed, can allow us to think about the natural world and queer ecologies. The workshop inspired young people to consider the ways in which LGBTQ+ people relate to the natural world and explore which roles they wanted to play within timely and pressing conversations about climate change.



QUEER COLLECTORS' CASE

LGBTQ+ people were asked to submit a picture, video and/or description of a queer object from home to become part of a digital collectors' case. These objects all mean something to the LGBTQ+ collectors; some of the objects are intimate and personal, offering affirmative insights into queer and trans lives and experiences. A selection of these donations have now been displayed in an online digital showcase on the RAMM website, and the full collection can be viewed on the Out and About website.

Kate's Lesbian Pulp Fiction

"The pulp fiction novel *Odd Girl Out* by Ann Bannon was published in 1957. This was the first novel Bannon wrote in the Beebo Brinker Chronicles, and it was the first lesbian pulp fiction book I ever bought. I was inspired to buy it after listening to a talk by historian Dr Amy Tooth Murphy on the golden age of lesbian pulp fiction. Dr Murphy's talk was the first time I had properly understood the LGBTQ+ history could be possible as an academic field. It helped me to develop a love of historical lesbian fiction and a pride in my own identity."

Sheena's Gay Fan

"I bought this as I liked the fact that it used the term 'gay' in it's 1950s context. I love that a term used to give a name to my tribe, also means happy or joyous."

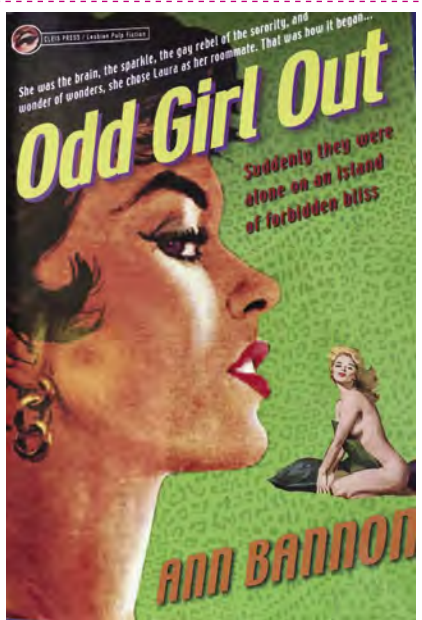
Mel's Unicorn Pencil Case

"Being a queer woman can be challenging, but Unicorns make me smile and feel free and silly. Who wouldn't want to be a unicorn in this crazy world?!? This pencil case brought a smile to my face everyday when I used it for my recent studies and continues to remind me to embrace the diversity of life in general, but also reflects my queerness and uniqueness in its bold and colourful way. Embrace your inner unicorn today and be silly and free! I love my big queer pencil case!"

Ashley's Rainbow Pride Badge

"To me, badges are declarations of the things we hold dear to us, so I love buying them to decorate my tote bags or denim jacket. As such, it was no real surprise that I gravitated toward the arts and crafts stall at Cardiff Comic Con in 2014. I remember rummaging through glass jars filled with different badges, stickers, and patches, whilst my friends browsed through racks of clothes at the stalls nearby. I even remember looking at badges decorated with designs of different animals, before coming across one that made me pause. It had stripes forming a rainbow across it, like a palm-sized Pride flag. It seemed strange to me, that something so small could be symbolic of an entire movement and moment in history ...

[Link to collectors case: https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/queer-collectors-case/](https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/queer-collectors-case/)



“It helped me to develop a love of historical lesbian fiction and a pride in my own identity”



ARTISTS

<https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/meet-the-artists/>

In addition to the creative responses by our Writer in Residence, Creative Heritage Producer and Co-Director Natalie McGrath, we worked with seven commissioned LGBTQ+ artists to produce a series of digital commissions. The resulting artistic responses explore otherwise hidden or obscure aspects of RAMM's collections and reveal LGBTQ+ heritage.

You can view the artists' work at the link above.



Caleb Parkin

Caleb's work explored the sand collection of Ivor Treby. Caleb was particularly interested in the sand samples that RAMM had chosen to catalogue, and the ones that did not make it into the catalogue.



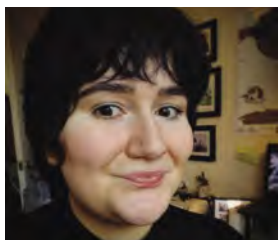
Charice Bhardwaj and Carina Miles

Charice and Carina were inspired by a match box, the Hedgeland model of Exeter and a balance stand. They produced a performance piece that shows the process of collaboration between the two of them - including joy, laughter and frustration - whilst also raising important questions about our engagement with objects, scale, and the roles that are performed in queer spaces.



Oren Shoesmith

Oren's piece responded to religious hymns from RAMM's collections and explored themes of faith, worship, devotion and transformation. It opened up the biblical story of the crucifixion and resurrection to queer and trans readings.



Rushaa Louise Hamid

Rushaa was inspired by a set of Sudanese prayer beads that appears to be missing several beads. She created a narrative for the missing 21 beads to explore forms of absence and erasure in queer and colonial archives.



Shiri Shah

Shiri focussed on a cup from Pakistan that has what looks like a hairline crack in it. The work explores the cup as a communal object and also a metaphor for fractures and connection within family relationships.



Sachal Khan

Sachal was inspired by a pair of sea snails from Karachi. In response to the objects, they produced an immersive series of poems and soundscapes based on the theme of home and exile.



WRITER IN RESIDENCE



Emily Faulkner
performing a
section from
Honeycomb;
dramaturgy
and direction by
Josie Sutcliffe,
February 2022



Photo Jim Wileman

Honeycomb will be
published by Slate
Publishing House

Writer in Residence and Co-Director Natalie McGrath wrote a creative response to the RAMM's collections, *Honeycomb*:

"It began with a response to translated letters between lesbian medieval nuns. These letters sent me in the direction of RAMM's medieval collections during the first lockdown, and throughout this initial offering as Writer in Residence I littered the text I was working on with references to objects from this time.

It brought about a new way of looking for me as a writer. Something that I had to do as being physically present in the museum wasn't possible for much of the project's initial duration. These objects included rings that medieval nuns would have worn here in Exeter. I found that fascinating as I searched the collections with my own queer lens, excavating layers of time and mud to weave an imagined narrative about lives from the past.

This was just a beginning, as I returned to listen in to the building itself. Trying to figure out what it had to say to me as a queer person, as I scanned the public collection cases. Finding other points in time through objects to consider and map narratives that have existed in the world, that have been either erased or made invisible. To take time to imagine and ignite new stories.

It began with a typewriter. It has evolved with seaweed collections that still smell of the sea over two hundred years later; I found something daring in a top hat, got curious about the butchness of waistcoats, and saw hope lifting in time capsules holding sea horses.

Constellations of writing emerged to illuminate something about queer, trans and non-binary lives. To celebrate and honour them through something that I hope is poetic and beautiful."

*we are
like two doves
curled
in moonlight
eternity
our only
witness
captured
by the
faded light
of a
magic lantern*

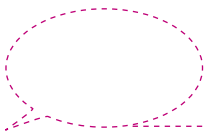


LIFE STORY INTERVIEWS INSTALLATION

One of the major outputs of the project is a new permanent installation in RAMM's Making History Gallery designed by project collaborators Stand + Stare. The installation contains extracts from 20 new life story interviews with LGBTQ+ people, which were collected as part of the project. Interviewees chose an object from RAMM's collections that spoke to them. The interviews cover various aspects of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences and demonstrate diverse ways in which the collections can resonate with LGBTQ+ people. They raise important questions about how museums can create and preserve LGBTQ+ heritage for the future.



Photo Jim Wileman



“Handcuffs spoke to me about the ongoing relationship I’ve had with how I feel about the law, the government, the police, and the relationship with the queer community. I came out as a lesbian in the 1980s at a time when the relationship between the queer community and the police was really strained and, really, it was a really difficult time. ... I think it was about fighting any kind of oppression and injustice in the end, and for me personally in terms of being a youth worker, which is my chosen profession, I’ve seen the injustice young people face, too, with transphobia, homophobia.”



I’ve chosen this set of Islamic prayer beads that comes from Sudan, but the thing I find most fascinating about it was that it has 78 beads which – for those that aren’t familiar with Islamic practices – most Islamic prayer beads have 99 beads or a multiple of 33. After a while, I ended up counting the beads and going OK, there are 78 beads here, this is not right. ... That object, the part of why I connect it to queerness is the sense that something has been missing and that hasn’t been noticed. ... I think on a broader level a lot of our conception of queerness is very white, it’s very influenced by Western cultural values. ... I would like people to know that there are many histories that they are not aware of, and those histories are very rich, and I find myself very reassured and grounded by the idea that there is a track record of people like me that stretches back for hundreds of thousands of years.



You can listen to the full interviews and read transcripts online: <https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/interviews/>

IMPACT AND FUTURE PLANS

The Out and About project has created and uncovered new LGBTQ+ heritage by embracing a range of research methods and creative approaches. It has centered new voices, insights and experiences and begun to reveal the rich queer, trans and non-binary resonances within the RAMM's collections. We hope that you enjoy exploring our new installation and archive of LGBTQ+ life stories, the research and digital creative responses gathered on the website, Natalie McGrath's creative response *Honeycomb*, and the LGBTQIA+ Rainbow Trail.

We also hope that our work conveys a sense of the vastness and richness of LGBTQ+ history and culture and that it will inspire you to consider the objects in the collections through a new lens. Queering the museum is an ongoing process, and our work is not done. We have begun to share insights and exchange ideas with other organisations and individuals as part of our South West LGBTQ+ Heritage symposium in December 2021. We look forward to future conversations, learning and collaborations to continue to make the museum a more welcoming space that truly represents our shared histories and cultures.

In addition to the collaborators named in this booklet, we would like to thank the NLHF for their support and guidance. We are also grateful to Dr Alan Butler, Sarah Campbell (Arts + Culture Exeter), Belinda Dillon (Exeter City of Literature), Sharifa Hashem Al Hashemy, Mary Schwarz, Gillian Taylor, Intercom Trust, Exeter Pride, and all of the interviewees and the research volunteers for their vital contributions to the project.

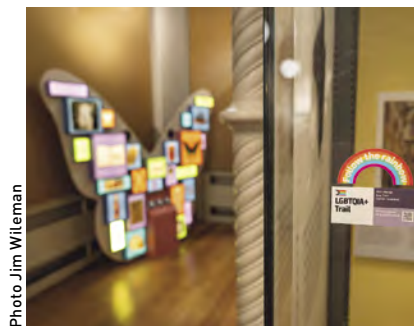


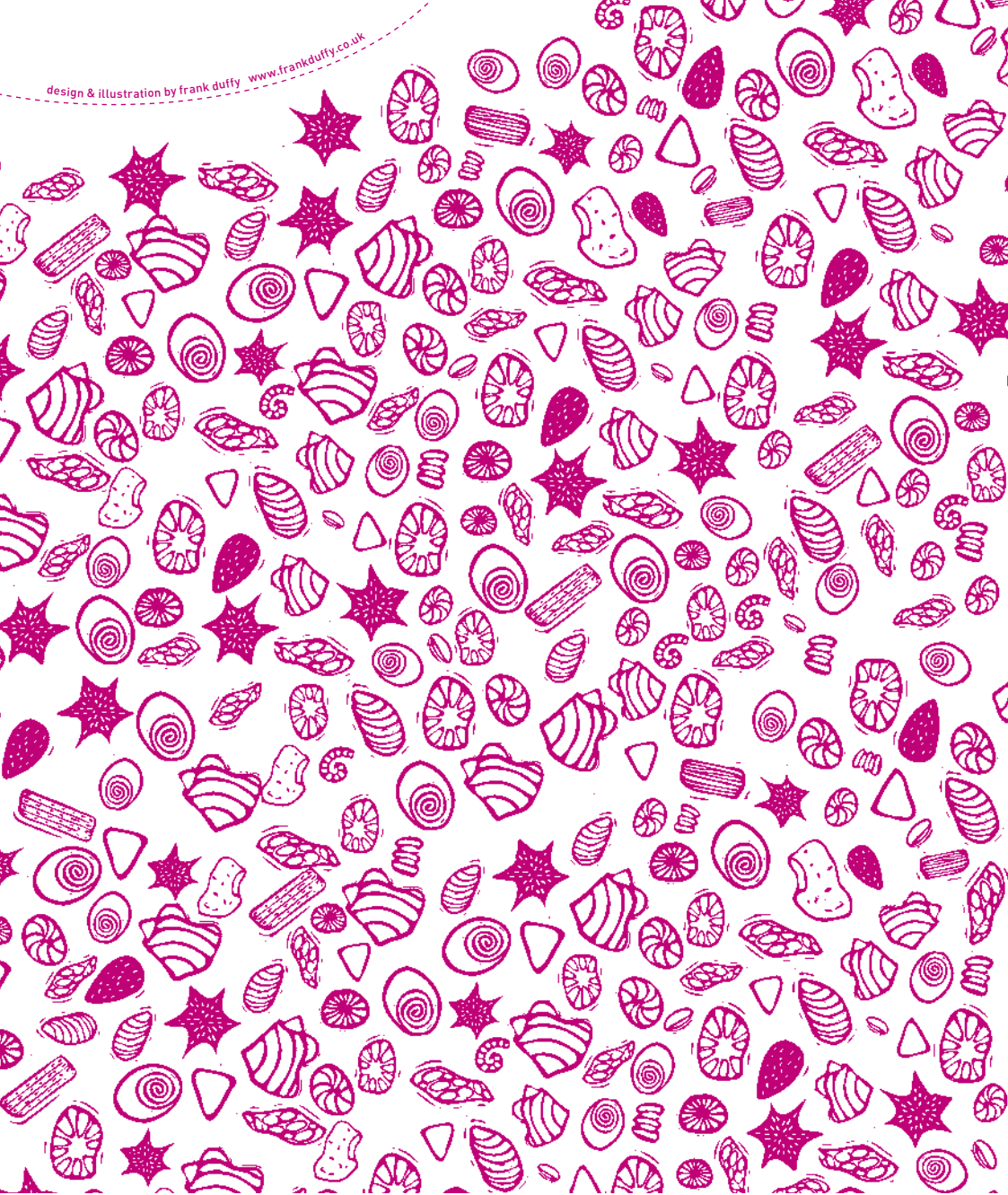
Photo: Jim Wileman

ramm

UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

Made possible with
Heritage Fund

 **Exeter**
City Council



Made possible with

**Heritage
Fund**

UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

ramm

Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Queen Street, Exeter, Devon, EX4 3RX <https://rammuseum.org.uk/>
[Out and About: https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/](https://outandabout.exeter.ac.uk/)

With thanks to National Lottery Heritage Fund whose generous funding made this project possible