

The Past is Now

Birmingham Museum and Gallery

Evaluation Report

This report is only the visitor responses to the exhibition,
taken from a full evaluation report by Dr Alison Rooke.

Dr. Alison Rooke



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1. Introduction

The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire is a temporary co-curated exhibition that takes as its focus the British Empire in the context of the Birmingham, Britain's second city of the British Empire. The exhibition runs from 28 Oct - 24 Jun 2018. It brings together objects within the Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) collection. The exhibition is the outcome of a pilot programme Changemakers, led by Sara Wajid and funded by the Arts Council England. Wajid carried out research into international best practice and brought together Birmingham Museum and Gallery (BMAG) staff and wider discursive communities, in order to shape, interpret and direct the BMAG redevelopment project. The Past is Now can be understood as an experiment in repurposing a major historic civic collection, in order to ensure that it becomes part of the common, shared heritage of the young, multi-cultural city it is located within.

The Past Is Now was installed within a museum space that functions as a display laboratory and is known internally as the StoryLab. In this space, BMT test various interpretive and collaborative methods, through a series of short-term exhibitions. The Past Is Now therefore had two parallel intentions; first, to experiment with, and evaluate, methods for 'telling the story' of Birmingham as the second city of the British Empire; and second, to explore how to further engage black, Asian and minority ethnic (BaME) under 40 audiences by making the collection more relevant to the museum's potential city-wide demographic.

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2. Evaluating The Past is Now: Methodology

The evaluator worked closely with the StoryLab team in order to embed evaluative practice into delivery so that it informed their work iteratively. Through active involvement with project staff and the co-curation team, there were ongoing opportunities to reflect on the project as it unfolded, and to feed back to the evaluation team. The evaluation process itself provided an extant resource to support the project ambitions, providing opportunities for the curation team to review and reflect on progress and thereby shape and hone delivery of the project's aims. Whilst evaluation is pragmatically necessary in order to be accountable to funders, stakeholders and the wider public, this evaluation takes as its starting point a conviction that it is through engagement with the process of evaluation (and, crucially, the learning that emerges from this engagement), that the maximum benefit can be drawn from evaluative practice. This in turn enables the real achievements and learning to be understood and articulated, informing and sustaining future strategy alongside sectorial development.

The evaluation of The Past Is Now focuses on:

- The process of co-curating the BMAG's Story Lab space
- The opportunities it offered for experimental display and testing of new approaches to interpretation
- The reception of the creative outcome.

2.1.1. The Evaluation Framework

The Evaluation framework (see Appendix 1) was developed in conversation with the delivery team. While the overall aims and objectives of the evaluation commission remained constant, the focus and methods had to necessarily adapt as the project itself developed and adapted to opportunities and difficulties.

Methods.

The following data gathering methods were employed:

- Reviewing project documentation and relevant literature
- Semi-structured interviews with ten members of museum staff
- Attending a Museum Detox session
- Attending interpretation and selection sessions
- Designing and analyzing an audience survey
- Analyzing data generated through the interactive Story Lab devices

3. Visitor Response

The audience response to The Past is Now was gathered in several ways:

- First, an audience survey was designed to capture visitor responses in the space. This was completed by 216 visitors and the data entry and collation was completed with the help of a team of Museum Enablers
- 50 evaluation forms were completed by Museum Enablers. These were completed at the end of each survey shift and asked:
How many people did you engage with today?

How many visitors knew about The Past is Now exhibition before speaking to you today?

Can you share any reactions to the exhibition? And Any magic moments you'd like to share with us?

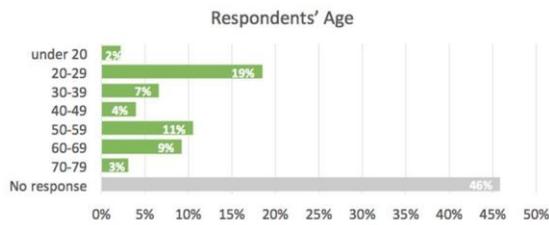
- The Community Advisory Panel were consulted on the exhibition and gave feedback
- Audience response was encouraged through:
 - Whiteboards and pens
 - The inclusion of questions on the interpretation boards. These included, for example "Can objects collected under colonial rule be used to tell a fair story? How many references to Chamberlain can you find in Birmingham? From these representations how much do we learn from the people in them? Why were people in Britain starving when the empire was booming?"
 - A mirror with the text "How do you see yourself" on the frame was included in the section on representation. Audiences were able to produce a self portrait.

A comprehensive analysis of social media responses has not been possible within the scope of this evaluation; however, a snapshot of Twitter responses over one week (07/02/18) showed the ten most recent 10 tweets made 59,735 impressions and had 1,233 engagements and the event web page had been viewed 8,077 times.

4.1. Audience data⁶

⁶ Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN 978-0-520-05454-7.

Who came to the StoryLab exhibition?



- Only about half of all the people who responded to the survey gave demographic information.
- 19% of respondents were in their 20s (20-29 years old), while 50-59 year olds were the second biggest age group (11% of respondents).
- There was a slightly higher proportion of females (31%) to males (21%).
- Only 44% of respondents gave information about their ethnicity – the remaining sample was predominantly white (37% white, 7% BAME).

Base: 227; NB: some respondents filled in one form but when giving demographic information they also included the details of the people they were with. This resulted in an additional 12 demographic responses.

4.1.1. General observations

Some of the more critical observation on the exhibition were in regard to the practicalities of the display, specifically signposting, lighting, legibility and access. The exhibition was not well signposted. A large number of visitors reported finding it by accident and suggested it needed more publicity. Even amongst those who had come intentionally, some commented that it was hard to find and there was insufficient flow into the space.

⁶ This data was gathered early in the exhibitions lifetime in December 2107.

4.1.1.1. Legibility

In general the protocol regarding mount texts is that they should be legible to a minimum age of 12. In this exhibition the reading age was higher (pitched to 18 year olds). This was a conscious decision to produce an exhibition that could engage well -informed but disenfranchised BaME populations under 40. This decision was made in recognition that simplifying the language required to tell the story of empire can be a form of erasure. The mount texts demonstrate how the work of critiquing colonialism requires engagement with the complexity of capitalism, its global impact and the politics of resistance.

Responses from the Community Advisory Panel, who were consulted on the display, design and interpretation, noted that the room was somewhat dark and some of the cases were poorly lit. (This issue of lighting was common in feedback however, it should be noted that this was this was due to the technical limitations of the space and not intentional).

The 'salon' hang of paintings was seen as the least accessible aspect of the exhibition. Criticisms here were in regard to the labelling panel being too small, too far away, and the fact that visitors have to keep going back and forth between paintings and interpretation panel in order to find information about the paintings.

The observations of the Gallery Assistants noted that the display texts in the exhibition contained a lot of information, and observed that many people (and young people in particular) made frequent photographs of the exhibition, and in particular carefully photographing the text panels and timelines on them. This raises some interesting points regarding the interpretation and reading age. As discussed above, the exhibition was 'dense', and these observations of visitor activity reveals the variety of engagements with the text, including reports of 'learning something' and taking something away (photographs) which indicates a desire to further process information and perhaps find out more. In this sense, the exhibition succeeded.

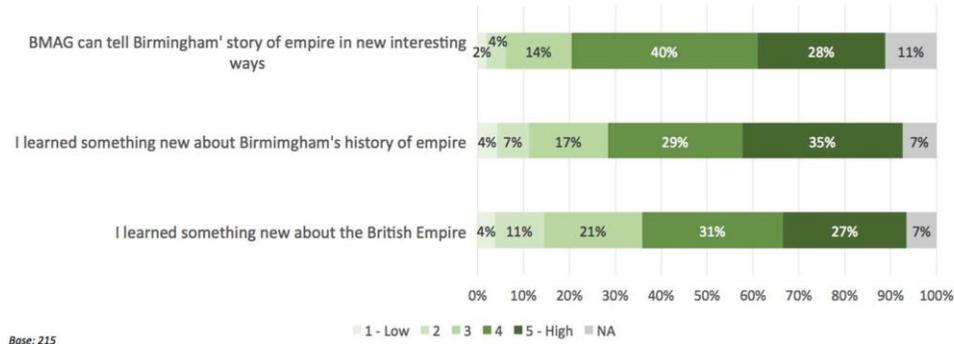
4.1.2. Displaying the Process

Given that one of the most significant aspects of the exhibition was its collaborative process and the ongoing dialogue and negotiation between staff and invited curators, there was little information in the exhibition about the co-curation process. Although a text was on display at the entrance to the exhibition, stating that the exhibition was co curated (and the co-curators were named), the details regarding the process and the collaborative process were somewhat passed over in the desire to focus on the content. (The Visitors responses gathered also requested more information about the people involved in curating the exhibition). This was an oversight and missed opportunity.

4.2. Visitor Response to the Content

What did the respondents think of the exhibition?

- Most of the survey respondents had a favourable view of the exhibition and the majority felt that they learned new things after having attended it.



The analysis of audience responses to the exhibition address several questions at the heart of the evaluation. These are addressed below.

4.2.1. Should the museum take a neutral position when displaying empire?

The Past is Now exhibition was deliberately provocative. The co-produced texts purposefully avoided a neutral museum voice. The inclusion of short questions within in the display interrupted a passive or casual gaze by directly addressing the viewer and asking them to think. These had the potential to spark conversations between visitors. There were many audience comments relating to the curating of the exhibition, with people appreciating the variety and interactivity of the exhibits, the articulation of the stories of empire in a nuanced, yet clear way and with a good level of detail. Some of the respondents spoke about the ways these aspects making the exhibition more inclusive:

“Experiment is very interesting. Like playful approach.”

“Objects create immediate rather than abstract narratives, decision to not translate is more inclusive”

“Good Interactivity. The diversity but not enough explanation. Easy to follow room-good narrative.”

“I loved the nuance and honesty of the information offered alongside the artefacts. Brilliantly written and I learnt so much from this exhibition.”

4.2.1.1. Avoiding Neutrality

The Past is Now avoided a tone of museum neutrality in both the selection of objects and the crafting of the story of empire. The respondents to the survey were, in the majority, very positive about presenting the history of the British Empire from a different point of view:

“Complex topic, important to examine in new ways that aren't necessarily taught in school. Make history less exclusive and more multi-cultural”

“Education on new perspective”

“Refreshing not to be neutral”

“The empire had a really negative impact, but glad that it is being presented in this way at a museum.”

The open questions in the survey drew direct responses acknowledging the importance of this critical perspective. About 29% of the 166 comments to this question made some mention about the enduring repercussions of Britain’s colonial past:

“Colonial atrocity is ignored in history and its repercussions endure.”

“That there was no 'glory' in Empire - felt that what was taught in schools should be more honest about the realities of Empire.”

“Birmingham, as a centre of colonial economy, needs to be self-reflective in understanding its role.”

“Deals with difficult issues in a good way. To talk about something doesn't mean to condone. We can't pretend these problems don't exist.”

The responses were fairly positive on acknowledging the past, and there were a few comments about the need for this to be a permanent exhibition, as well as a desire for other museums to engage with decolonising.

“Something that should remain available in Birmingham to reflect on.”

“I want to see more challenges like this in the BMAG spaces. This is very exciting.”

“BMAG is prepared to ask hard questions. Hope some feedback is interesting and a diverse enough/representative audience from Birmingham sees it.”

“That museums can genuinely educate and inspire visitors. Other museums should follow the lead of The Past Is Now especially connecting with the community

The exhibition was generally received well, with a significant number of respondents praising the museum for putting this exhibition on. The Gallery Assistant’s observation reveal many incidents of positive appreciation amongst professionals such as schoolteachers, historians, but also amongst the general public. Gallery assistants recorded:

“Strong appreciation towards challenging museum conventions today”

A young lady who is a teacher was very pleased to see the exhibition and said, ‘Actions speak louder than words’ i.e. by putting on this exhibition the Museum + Gallery were demonstrating a commitment to being inclusive and diverse.

One visitor felt that he was living the stories shared by the exhibition, but the fact they were shared made him feel ‘empowered’, and he appreciates how the space is being used

4.2.2. What sparks conversations about Empire? And what do people understand about Empire by engaging with the StoryLab?

One of the significant aspects of The Past is Now was the combination of contemporary art and historical objects. The responses to these two aspects of the display are revealing. The display of historical objects from the museum collection were interpreted with the collaboratively produced texts which present historical facts, empirical labelling and provide historical context, and contemporary relevance. The striking display of art works in the ‘salon’ section of the gallery offer an alternative interpretive way to access the history of empire. The inclusion of Lubaina Hamid and David Rodney’s work, for example, offered visitors a way of engaging with the human stories and experiences of Britain’s postcolonial population. The section on ‘Representation’, which included the work of Black British Artists was particularly

popular with visitors. When asked about the most interesting aspects of the exhibition, about a fifth of the respondents specifically mentioned the artwork. Many were genuinely interested in specific works of art that were displayed: Rodney's *The Land of Milk and Honey* and the paintings impressed a number of visitors. Others, were interested in art as part of the narrative:

“The use of art to show social history.”

“The artwork - seeing people's perspectives + stories. Expressions of colonialism.”

“The art is good as it is moving + shows the individual experience.”

While this is perhaps unsurprisingly, especially given Hamid's recent success in winning the Turner Prize, and a concurrent renewed interest in the Black British arts movement of that period, the inclusion of these artworks clearly has notable affective resonance and communicated the human story of the experience of colonialism and migration

4.2.3. Producing Exhibitions Relevant to Birmingham

Visitor surveys asked audiences to rate their response to the statement “I learnt something new about Birmingham's History of Empire”. This question received the most positive score with 35% percent of visitors stating that they strongly agreed, and 29% stating they agreed. One criticism of the exhibition is that some elements of it did not have obvious direct links to Birmingham, however, those that did (for examples aspects that focused on Joseph Chamberlain, and gun manufacturing) proved to be particularly popular. Visual artists from Birmingham (William Gear and Barbara Walker) were included in the exhibition, but this was not made explicit and perhaps Birmingham's visual arts history could have been emphasized more. The telling of the story of Birmingham from a fresh perspective also intrigued respondents. In the survey notable figures, such as Chamberlain, are mentioned often.

“Birmingham's history + critical evaluation of influential figures (e.g. Chamberlain...)”

“Learning about how Birmingham specifically fits into the wider narrative of British colonial history. Rethinking the role of Joseph Chamberlain in the history of Birmingham.”

“Joseph Chamberlain - points out the contradictions between the way he's remembered and the reality of some of his policies.”

The survey revealed that Birmingham's history of gun trade also piqued people's interest:

“History of gun trade in Birmingham. Found it interesting to see it in a larger context of Empire.”

“Guns in Birmingham - proud of Bham manufacturing trade in many industries particularly in Jewellery Quarter but history of gun making + its involvement in slave trade is often left out of the narrative.”

Gallery observations revealed that the large centrally positioned cabinet on Birmingham's gun manufacturing history was of particular interest to men and boy visitors who had come across the exhibition by chance. Events that defined the British Empire, such as the Kenyan Independence and the Partition of India received several specific mentions in the survey, with

many people expressing appreciation for the new knowledge they acquired. Many expressed surprise or shock at the level of violence the empire was capable of:

“The information on Kenyan independence. This is new to me - shocking at the thought of British run concentration camps in 1960”

“Kenyan Independence - remember it happening in the 1960s but had little idea about the damage and loss of life.”

“The Indian Independence section - had no idea how brutal it was.”

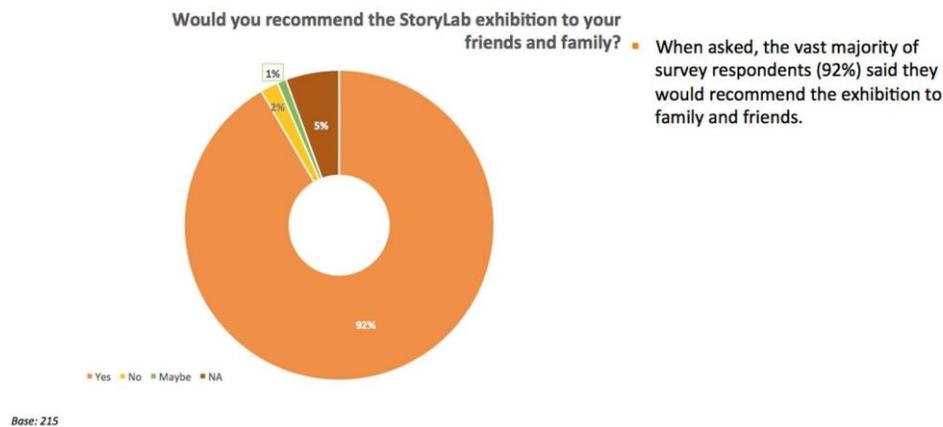
The issue of eugenics also appeared to interest people, although most did not elaborate on the aspect they found interesting about this part of the exhibition.

Birmingham’s history and its global impact during that period is something that some respondents identified as being interesting.

“Gun trade! It was interesting to see the link between the gun trade and slavery.”

“The 'localness' of the exhibits, with their global imperial connections clearly explained.”

Would you recommend the StoryLab exhibition to your friends and family?



4. Conclusion and Legacy: Going Forward

5.1.1. What does the process and exhibition tell us about how sensitive/difficult histories be framed?

The work of decolonising at BMAG does not only interrogate the history of empire in Birmingham, but also examines how the museum is itself inextricably connected to the project of empire and how it invites its publics into these conversations.

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Audre Lorde, 1978 (Wall text on display with in The Past Is Now).

You can’t take the building down until you build some scaffolding up around it”.
Community Engagement Officer, comment in staff meeting, (Researcher notes).

In conclusion, The Past Is Now provides fertile ground for future museum reflection and learning when seeking to acknowledge Birmingham’s role in building empire at BMAG. The exhibition itself has demonstrated, albeit on a small scale, some of the ways the collection can be reinterpreted critically and collaboratively. The museum has demonstrated its ability to work reflexively with the necessary conflict integral to decolonising, whilst simultaneously developing exciting exhibitions that are relevant to its local populace. Clearly, this kind of museum practice takes courage, a commitment to being open to conflict, the ability to respond ethically and reflexively, and the capacity to support staff in this often-difficult process.

In thinking about the ways that difficult histories can be framed, one important aspect of the exhibition is noteworthy: the display case on Kenyan history containing both a blood-stained knife, and a letter to the Museum describing how it was acquired and referring to it as an ‘amusing addition to the collection’. Placing these objects side-by-side placed the museum’s own history of empire into the exhibition frame. It pointed to the many hidden stories behind the collection. It offers an insight into the ways that the museum as an institution was fully implicated in the colonial project. Reframing these difficult histories is a task of ‘dismantling’ as Lorde explains. And while the ‘master’ cannot do this alone, the work of agonistic collaboration can provide a starting point for the decolonizing project. The Past is Now is an indicator of the kind of organizational scaffolding, mentioned by the Community Engagement Officer (above), that is needed to support such a task.

One of the concerns at the heart of the curation process was how to balance the desire to tell Birmingham’s story of empire without alienating audiences who view Empire as a positive. This is a difficult path to tread. For those with an active interest in the political matters at the heart of the project, there is a sense that the exhibition was not ‘gritty’ or ‘in your face’ enough, whilst at the same time a critical editorial in The Times newspaper suggested that the exhibition demonstrates the dangers of skewing the facts within a ‘wildly partial agenda’ which judges the past ‘according to modern scruples’. Ultimately The Past is Now trod a fine line. It offered depth and provocation for audiences who took a critical perspective on empire. Many visitor responses spoke of being ‘ashamed’ of the empire. At the same time, other visitors came away stating that the British Empire was ‘not all bad’, indicating that even the more skeptical or adversarial audiences were not completely alienated by the exhibition. When asked what was the most important message they took away from the exhibition, most people expressed appreciation at being offered a different point of view on history. For many the main take-home message was the importance of acknowledging Britain’s colonial past as a way of understanding today, and of the importance of remembering in order to learn and avoid making the same mistakes. Comments included:

“British Empire still an important topic + relevant to understand/appreciate multiculturalism + promote open minded society/tolerance”

“Empire lives with us, no choice in that. The question is how does it live with us?”

“Relevance of being aware of Empire. The Past is Now - very apt title.”

“Importance of broader understanding of past - what makes us British.”

These responses point toward future development opportunities for the museum , particularly given that the ambition for The Past is Now is that it is not ‘bolt on’ to ‘business as usual’ but rather part of BMAG’s broader ‘direction of travel’, informing a whole new museum approach and identity by 2022.

5. Appendix 1 The Past Is Now Evaluation Framework

AIM	OBJECTIVE	IMPACT/ OUTCOME	INDICATOR	METHOD
Through the Story Lab the museum engages diverse communities	Museum makes changes to display and curation that generate new audiences	Exhibition with displays that are relevant to Birmingham's diverse and young communities	Exhibition is developed with museum staff Objects relevant to Birmingham's history of empire are made available and displayed Object interpretation text is relevant to Birmingham's diverse and young communities More diverse audiences attend. Audience debate and respond to the content of the exhibition.	Audience survey. Roving data gathering at launch. Social media analysis (BMaG).
		Co-curated exhibition with diverse participants	No of BAME curators involved No of BAME Staff involved Co-curators experience agency and influence in regard to selection, display and interpretation	Observation. Reviewing documentation. Staff Interviews Review session with co-curators.
BMAG acknowledges Birmingham's role in empire.	Production of exhibition on empire. Discursive events on Birmingham's role in empire.	Museum staff learning regarding their position when displaying empire and other difficult histories.	Staff Learning and reflection in regard to SL exhibition Increased understanding of BAME people's requirements of the Story of Empire	Interviews with staff Staff take part in Open Space
	Museum sparks civic conversations about empire	Public debate on Birmingham's role in empire.	Exhibition Discursive events	Audience survey Social media analysis (BMaG) Roving data gathering at launch Open Space

6. Appendix 2. The Past is Now Audience Survey



The StoryLab exhibition “The Past is Now” has been developed through the work of a group of local curators working with the support of BMAG staff. We have been working together to reinterpret the collections relating to the history of Empire and to reflect modern multi-cultural Birmingham. We would like to continue this work by ensuring that the museum puts on exhibitions that are relevant and attractive to the people of Birmingham. Please help us realise this by giving us your valuable feedback on the exhibition.

1. How did you find out about the StoryLab exhibition?

- I came across it by chance on a visit to BMAG
- I came specifically to see it
- Word of mouth
- I heard about it in the press
- I heard about it through social media

Other (please state)

2. I learnt something new about the history of the British Empire

1 2 3 4 5

On a scale of 1 to 5 (when 1 is low and 5 is high)

3. I learnt something new about Birmingham’s history of empire

1 2 3 4 5

On a scale of 1 to 5 (when 1 is low and 5 is high)

4. Would you recommend the StoryLab exhibition to your friends and family?

5. BMAG can tell Birmingham’s story of empire in new interesting ways.

1 2 3 4 5

disagree to strongly agree

6. The British Empire is all about the past and we don’t need to keep returning to it

1 2 3 4 5

disagree to strongly agree

7. Which aspects of the exhibition did you find most interesting? Please say why.

8. What is the most important message you will take away from the StoryLab exhibition?

ABOUT YOU

To anonymously monitor equal opportunities, would you be happy to share some information with us on your background? Please don't feel obligated but if you'd like to we'd really appreciate it.

Thanks for your time and joining us today, with best wishes,
Birmingham Museums Trust Learning and Access Team

