

Arts and Humanities Impact Fund Case Studies

These brief studies are intended as useful examples of projects in the Arts and Humanities disciplines that have drawn upon the Arts and Humanities Impact Fund and expertise.

Feast & Fast: Material Culture and Food Memories in Contemporary Cambridge Communities

Between January and October 2019, Dr Melissa Calaresu and Dr Victoria Avery worked with Dr Miranda Stearn and three local groups who regularly take part in activities at the Fitzwilliam Museum to create a film that would play a significant role in a major exhibition. 'Feast & Fast: The Art of Food in Europe 1500-1800' was held between November 2019 – August 2020 and had an audience of >60,000 prior to the national lock down. The exhibition told the stories of people in early modern Europe coming together to produce, prepare, and consume food. The videos, created with Egg & Spoon Films, capture the groups' interaction with these stories and with treasured objects from the University's collections, as they share their own memories of food. The film featured within the exhibition and encouraged visitors to reflect and respond critically and creatively to its themes.

The challenge: Historically, the expert curatorial voice has dominated how and why collections are presented to the public. Certain groups – inadvertently or advertently - have been neglected from consideration or from opportunities to have input. Many museums today are committed to diversifying both the engagement with their collections and the contributions to how their stories are told, recognising that when we diversify the voices being brought to bear on collections, we generate and exchange richer knowledge around them.



With the guidance of Dr Miranda Stearn and the Fitzwilliam Museum's Learning and Exhibitions team, Avery (Fitzwilliam Museum) and Calaresu (Faculty of History) worked with North Cambridge Academy Museum Ambassadors, adult students with learning disabilities from Rowan Art Centre, and older people living in sheltered housing who participate in the museum's regular Dancing with the Museum programme. The groups created a contemporary contribution to the exhibition, showing how objects became meaningful to a variety of audiences through making links between people's experiences of food in the present and historic discourses.

The research: Calaresu's work explores the material culture of food in early modern cities, focusing on provisioning, seasonality and consumption across the social spectrum. Teaching a third-year object-focussed course with Dr Victoria Avery, Keeper of Applied Arts, allowed Calaresu to see the benefit of object handling sessions when teaching material culture history. An awareness of the importance of food in contemporary debates resulted in *Feast & Fast: The Art of Food in Europe*

1500-1800. Their research, combined with the expertise of Dr Miranda Steam, Head of Learning at the Fitzwilliam, and the wider learning and engagement team at the museum, created new opportunities for under-represented audiences to learn and engage with early modern European food-related objects, and actively collaborate in both object selection for and the didactic content of the exhibition.

The impact: The process of making the films brought diverse local and contemporary voices to the exhibition narrative, making clear the ongoing relevance of the exhibition themes. For some visitors, the 'reflect-engage' section was their favourite part of the exhibition. As importantly, all the participants in the project have since returned to the Museum to participate in further activities, many bringing family and friends to engage with the exhibition and other parts of the Fitzwilliam's collections. Several participants returned with another community group and shared their knowledge.



School pupils have been able to talk about their involvement in the film as part of a public celebration event held at the museum and urged their peers to take part in similar future initiatives. The school group is using this project as part of coursework for their Silver Arts Award, an accredited qualification, and plan to become an 'Artsmark' school, embedding more Museum-inspired Arts Award projects within its curriculum. The City Council Independent Living Service continues to work with the Fitzwilliam on an initiative to combat loneliness and social isolation.

You can watch the films [here](#). The project was recently awarded with a runner up prize in the [Vice-Chancellor's 2020 Public Engagement and Impact Awards](#) in the Collaboration category.

Learnings from the Research Team

1. Engage with expertise in public engagement available in the University of Cambridge Museums or in the Public Engagement Team and look to pre-existing channels/networks within or without the University by which you might connect with audiences
2. A researcher's contribution may be to add to existing partnerships with new enriching content. Consider where you might add value.
3. Be aware of the protocols for approaching groups in a way that avoids being instrumental, and think about what the legacy of the engagement will be.

The Fitzwilliam Museum's public engagement and exhibitions work is made possible by a range of funders including: University of Cambridge Museums and Botanic Garden, Cambridge City Council, UK Research and Innovation, Arts Council England, The Fitzwilliam Museum Business Partners: The Technology Partnership, Brewin Dolphin.