

A different perspective: Developing collections at the International Slavery Museum

Angela Robinson of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool presents her reflections on how the curatorial team have been developing the museum collections, the development of a Collections Plan and the process the museum has been through to build its collection since 2007.

Background information

The International Slavery Museum (ISM) opened on the 23rd August 2007. The 23rd August is the UNESCO Slavery Remembrance Day, dedicated to the memory of the successful uprising of enslaved Africans on the island of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti) in 1791. 2007 was the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. The museum is located on the third floor of the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

ISM is the successor to the original Transatlantic Slavery Gallery – Against Human Dignity, which opened in the basement of the Merseyside Maritime Museum in 1994. The gallery was very successful and laid the foundation for the museum.

ISM is made up of four galleries: Life in West Africa, Enslavement and the Middle Passage, Legacies and the Campaign Zone. The life in West Africa gallery aims to highlight the diversity and sophistication of West African society prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The gallery uses traditional forms of museum interpretation, such as objects and text as well as more modern forms of technology in the use of audio visual and touch screen computers. The middle gallery – Enslavement and the Middle Passage, focuses on transatlantic slavery and the processes of enslavement. The use of primary sources is integral to the telling of this history and has been heavily used in this gallery. The legacy gallery explores the legacies of transatlantic slavery. Community consultation highlighted the need for the museum to balance the negative legacies of transatlantic slavery such as racism, against a backdrop of resistance and African and Black achievement. This gallery aims to fulfil this need. The final gallery, the Campaign Zone, opened in September 2010. The gallery is an exhibition space, dedicated to campaigning against contemporary forms of slavery. At present we have an Environmental Justice Foundation exhibition on display in the campaign zone. The exhibition highlights the use of child labour in the cotton industry, in particular, in the harvesting of cotton in Uzbekistan. Children are forced to leave the classroom and spend over three months of the year harvesting the cotton.¹ Considerable profit is made by the Uzbekistan government through the sale of cotton; however, the money is not invested back into the Uzbekistan cotton industry or to those working within this industry.

Why a Collections Plan

The museum opened with the appearance of a fully formed museum but without a collection. The question of which collection the objects acquired during the museum development, should become part of was raised prior to the museum opening. The established transatlantic slavery collection had been developed over a number of years by the Maritime History department at the Merseyside Maritime Museum. However, key objects which were collected during 2007 could not be incorporated into this collection as they were predominately objects which reflected the legacies of transatlantic slavery. An example of the type of object the museum acquired is an original 1920s Klu Klux Klan outfit which is on display in the racism and discrimination section of the legacy gallery. It therefore became necessary to explore the idea of

developing a new collection for the International Slavery Museum. To develop this new collection a collections plan was devised.

The Collections Plan

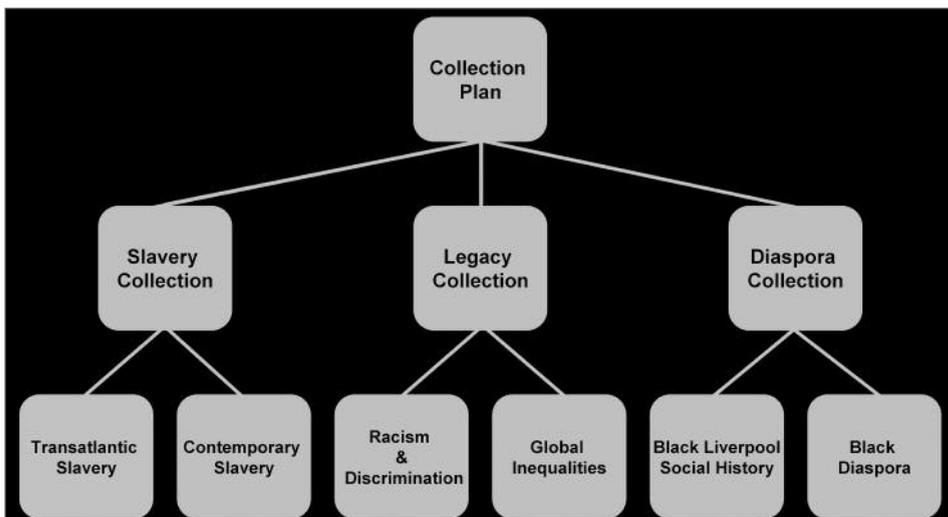
The plan began as rather a large document which encompassed all the ideas for collections. The main influences on the plan were:

- The community consultation, carried out during museum development.
- The themes of the Legacy Gallery.
- And the type of offers we initially received.

It was concluded that the museum should have a slavery collection with the intention, long term, of transferring objects from the collection held in the Maritime History department, of the museum service. The existing collection had focused on the maritime links to transatlantic slavery; the new collection would have a broader remit and propose to explore forms of slavery in a contemporary context.

The development of a collection which reflected some of the key themes of the legacy gallery was proposed. To collect objects which reflected the racism and discrimination section of the museum would be a completely new approach for the museum. Objects of this nature had not been collected in significant numbers in the UK before. The proposal was also influenced by the acquisition of the previously mentioned Klu Klux Klan outfit. Within the existing collections a small number of ephemera, which showed racists imagery, had been collected, the majority of these had been placed on display in the racism and discrimination section of the museum. The displaying of these objects saw the museum receive numerous offers from the public to donate items which fitted this definition.

A further legacy of transatlantic slavery and a key theme of the legacy gallery is the Black Diaspora. A collection which explores the positive contribution of people of the Black Diaspora was proposed. It was felt that a collection was essential to demonstrate the breadth of the legacies of transatlantic slavery. A separate Diaspora collection was proposed which focuses on the individual story. The collection would be a social history collection which would seek to collect oral histories as well as objects wherever possible.



From these initial proposals it was concluded that we were in need of a document to guide our collecting and help us make considered long term decisions that fitted with the aims of the museum. We established three main collections – Slavery, Legacy and Diaspora. Within the main collections are smaller collection strands, these are more flexible and are regularly reviewed. The plan is first and foremost a working document that enables the museum to collect in a strategic manner. It is an essential tool and a guide.

The Collections:

The initial proposals for the collection plan lead to the development of the following collections:

Slavery Collection

The Slavery collection is divided into transatlantic and contemporary forms of slavery. At the core of the museum is transatlantic slavery, a key aim of the museum, long term, is to explore all forms of slavery. The development of a contemporary slavery collection is the next logical step as these are forms of slavery which exist today.

The transatlantic slavery collection will be developed, over a number of years, by means of different collecting strategies. A recent strategy the museum has adopted has been to contact institutions which have objects on long term loan, to ISM, and ask them if they would consider donating the object. This has a 50 per cent success rate so far.

Examples of the type of objects we have collected are two small black and white photographic cards called *Carte de Visite* photographs, a form of calling card. The cards are from 1863 and show an image of a girl called Rebecca Huger. Rebecca was part of a group of eight emancipated slaves from New Orleans sent to the Northern States of the US, as part of a publicity tour.² The purpose of the tour was to raise money to educate former slaves in Louisiana. The tour also highlighted and challenged the social and legal existence of the 'one drop rule'. This classified persons with any degree of African ancestry as Black. Rebecca Huger was eleven years old; to all appearance she was white.

Developing a contemporary slavery collection is a priority for the museum as this will contribute to the eradication of contemporary forms of slavery through campaigning and education. To develop the collection we are establishing partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisation's (NGO's) active in the anti-slavery movement, such as Anti-slavery International and Stop the Traffik. We aim to build a collection which challenges slavery through the individual narratives of people who have been enslaved. Working in partnership with Anti-Slavery International this approach has over the last two years enabled the museum to collect a small number of personal items and oral histories from individuals how have been enslaved. The items collected represent domestic and descent forms of slavery.

An example of a contemporary slavery object we have collected for this collection is an ankle bracelet previously worn by a lady called Mariama. The bracelet is horseshoe shaped, possibly made from brass and weighs over 2 kilos. Mariama was subject to a form of descent based slavery.³ Descent based slavery occurs in some countries where people are either born or are from a group that society views as suited for being used as slave labour. People from this group are not allowed to own land or inherit property and denied education,



a status which is carried from one generation to the next. Mariama is from Niger, West Africa; she was helped to gain her freedom with support from Anti-Slavery International. Slavery is illegal in Niger. Mariama's bracelet and another bracelet donated by Anti-Slavery International are on display in the museum.

Legacy Collection

The legacy collection explores racism and discrimination and global inequalities.

The racism and discrimination strand has developed considerably since the museum opened. We regularly receive offers from all over the country, from people who have in their possession items depicting a racial stereotype. Racism and discrimination are issues which arguably define transatlantic slavery, therefore it was felt we should have a collection which reflects this history as a means to educate and tackle the use of negative imagery.



A Robertson's golliwog apron forms part of our racism and discrimination collection. The apron is believed to be from the late 1970s. On the back of the apron the straps have been repaired, suggesting the object had been regularly used by its original owner. In the early 1980s images of the golliwog began to be seen as racist. Following protests from ant-racism campaigners in 1988 Robertson's removed the image from television adverts.⁴ The image was the mascot for Robertson's Jam for 91 years, it was discontinued in 2001. Robertson's said its decision to abandon the mascot was due to children no longer recognising the character and not due to societal pressure. It was created by Florence Kate Upton in her 1895 children's book, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog*.

The global inequalities collection is a small strand, the curatorial team felt that this was a subject which the museum should seek to represent within its collection. The museum seeks to collect objects from those countries which have links to transatlantic slavery. Countries which have been underdeveloped and continue to be unable to gain equal status due to the world policies put into effect by General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, The World Bank, and the International Monetary Foundation.

One of our key objects for this collection is a piece of metal art depicting The Beatles – Yellow Submarine. The piece was produced by a group which promotes employment in Haiti. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere though it was the world's first black-led republic and the first independent Caribbean state. It has endured decades of poverty, environmental degradation, violence, instability, dictatorship and western intervention.⁵

Diaspora Collection

The final collection focuses on the Black Diaspora on a local, national and international level. The two strands for this collection are Black Liverpool Social History and the Black Diaspora.

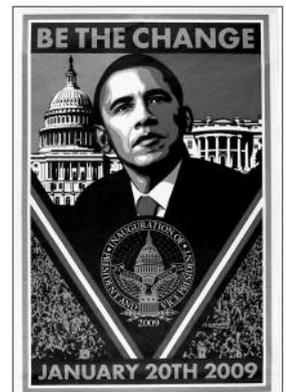
A key part of the museums legacy gallery is a section which explores the family histories of three local people from the Black community. The section, through text and photographs tells the family history from slavery through to the present day. It was felt that the museum should have a Black Liverpool Social History collection which focuses

on collecting these histories. We aim to base this collection around oral histories, recording people's experience of living in Liverpool and their family history.

One of our latest acquisitions is an anti apartheid banner made by the L8 Against Apartheid Group. The banner is made of yellow and green pieces of material sewn together with 'Liverpool Eight Against Apartheid' painted on the front. The L8 against Apartheid group were a local group active from the mid eighties until the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. The group felt that the Black residents of Liverpool 8, also known as Toxteth, should show solidarity with the Black population of South Africa. The group's activities included boycotting products made in South Africa and picketing establishments supporting the regime such as Barclays Bank and Shell. The banner was regularly used in local marches through the city

A principal aim of the museum is to demonstrate the contribution people of the Black Diaspora have made to the development of society today, particularly in the West. The Black Diaspora collection is preliminarily based on Black presence in the UK though we do have objects which represent the Diaspora. To date this collection has been established mainly through the purchase of items.

An example of an object in our collection, which represents the Black Diaspora, is a Barack Obama campaign poster designed by Shepard Fairey. The poster was used during Obama's presidential campaign. The version in our collection states the date of Obama's presidential inauguration in 2009 with the slogan 'Be The Change' printed along the top. The style is described as Andy Warhol meets Socialist Realism and is printed in red, blue and black.⁶



Conclusion

Since the museum opened in 2007 the curatorial team has been striving to develop collections which represent the breadth of the legacies of transatlantic slavery and enable the museum to educate and campaign against the contemporary forms of slavery. The development of the collections plan has provided the team with clear definitions and solid foundations with which to build the collections. It has enabled the team to make considered decisions, taking into account the sensitive issues some of the collections explore, and develop strategies for the collections.

The development of the collections has required a variety of approaches; the curatorial team has learnt to be flexible and proactive in the process of developing the collections. In particular the contemporary slavery collection has led the museum to develop close links to NGO's, which has enabled the museum to develop a small collection which reflects contemporary forms of slavery. This has led the development of exhibitions which support various NGO campaigns.

Over the last four years with the guidance from the collections plan the museum has begun to develop its collections. The collection has now reached a size where it requires its own storage. As the curatorial team has become more adept at using the strategies devised and grown more confident with our approach, the growth of our diverse collection has accelerated.

With our collections becoming established the museum has begun to develop plans for the next phase of the museum. We aim to teach the history of transatlantic slavery, its legacies and contemporary forms of slavery through our collections. With this in mind it is proposed that within the next building phase of the museum a collections centre should be developed which would enable the collection, where possible, to be on accessible display. The collection centre will be housed in the refurbished Dock Traffic Office, a building adjacent to the current display galleries. The building would become an education and research centre for the study of slavery. The collection centre, together with the DTO, will engage with large parts of the local and international community to educate and campaign against all forms of slavery.

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