

Scrutiny Bulletin: 15 January 2024

Title of Update: RAMM Quarterly Highlights Report

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1. What is the update about?

This is the quarterly highlights report for the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, showing museum activity for the period October to December 2023.

2. Background

The quarterly highlights report, along with other reports showing activity against targets, is taken to RAMM's Oversight Panel and reported to Arts Council England as part of its National Portfolio Organisation funding agreement. The oversight panel consists of six councillors and two external representatives.

3. Current position

Activity plan

Visitor Experience (Activity 1)

- Collaboration with citywide social prescribing network, Wellbeing Exeter, developed into a monthly Friendly Friday offer, accompanied by trusted community connectors. The well-attended sessions used RAMM's learning from longstanding dementia-friendly programme to create relaxed, welcoming activities targeted at over 50s (predominantly experiencing anxiety and depression). One gentleman said it was the first time he had left the house in three years, and he was delighted to be surrounded by the noise of hubbub again. Feedback comments included: "Enjoyed wonderful company, lovely space to be in"; "Inspiring, unusual, forging connections" and "Magnificent event, profoundly stimulating, and a big thank you."
- An outreach session at Exeter City Football Club for the same age group reached a largely male audience, who requested a follow-up visit to RAMM. Some in the group

had already found – or returned to - the museum later in life, as a goal for a walk. “It didn’t occur to me for ages, and then one of the girls here [gesturing to the women in their fifties or sixties sitting opposite] mentioned it. I gave it a go. Now I pop in most weeks.” He tells me it’s lonely at home since his mother died, and he lost his father and brothers years ago. He mentions all the RAMM cafe staff by name. “I go to the cafe and the shop. I like talking to people.” Another participant, a former nurse unable to continue working after a series of major health issues culminating in a terminal diagnosis, said: “I’ve had to find myself again. [Coming to the museum] has changed my life.... I’ve discovered [a new] interest in history. Local history is grounding. It makes me think about people in times before, and how they lived, and what we take for granted now. It helps me stay positive.”

- RAMM’s informal museum cafe voucher scheme provided incentive for approximately 75 people to visit. Many of these were used by wellbeing staff and their clients in social prescribing.
- The mindfulness sessions in the museum continued, with 15 participants attending the sessions in September involving breathing exercises, a visit to a different gallery each week and handling objects. Excellent feedback: “I enjoyed the session. It left me feeling peaceful and happy to be there. The handling session was very interesting and reminded me how much I love my own curiosity!”

Exhibitions and Events (Activity 2)

- ‘Hollow Earth: Art, Caves and the Subterranean Imaginary’ from Hayward Gallery Touring continues to attract visitors in galleries 20 and 21.
- Inspired by our Hollow Earth Exhibition we welcomed two speakers to RAMM. Classicist Jasmine Elmer talked about Dreams of the Underworld: Ancient Greeks and Romans exploring what the ancient Greeks and Romans thought about the underground spaces with which they engaged. Dr Rosy Gray, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery, discussed René Magritte’s *La Condition Humaine* (1935), which features in the exhibition.
- November saw our latest RAMM Lates where 300 adults enjoyed a night of entertainment exploring the world underground where species and time intermingle. Visitors enjoyed live music, talks, performance and workshops around the theme of Hollow Earth.
- A new display of portrait photographs has been installed in the Viewpoint Windows. Alongside a Victorian studio camera are a selection of portrait photographs from the museum’s collection, exploring the various poses and props used by photographers to catch their subject’s likenesses through the ages.
- December saw our Winter’s Edge festive musical extravaganza event, a musical journey through the museum exploring winter with music from Schubert’s *Winterreise*, seasonal songs and quartet music by Debussy, Mendelssohn and Caroline Shaw. The Haldon String Quartet and performer Freddie Crowley, previously a chorister at Exeter Cathedral and choral scholar graduate of Merton College, Oxford, performed within the surroundings of the museum.
- A series of short video projections inspired by the Hollow Earth exhibition were made by Exeter College A level students from the Art, Craft & Design (Film & Video) course. Students visited the exhibition in November, and their creations were showcased in the museum Courtyard for two weeks in the lead up to Christmas.

Digital (Activity 3)

- ECC Executive agreed to a new Open Access policy for RAMM in November. This allows RAMM to release out of copyright digital images of its collection in medium

resolution. Funded by an AHRC project with the University of Exeter Law School, the GLAM-E Lab, RAMM will begin to release selected images throughout 2024.

Contemporary Art (Activity 4)

- 'Points in a Constellation' by Janet Sainsbury has been installed in RAMM's Courtyard gallery in November 2023. RAMM commissioned Exeter-based artist Sainsbury in Spring 2023. She is known for her contemporary approach to portrait painting. Sainsbury chose to study four women artists whose work is in RAMM's art collection: two Exeter-based contemporary artists, Michelle Sank and Amy Shelton, and two artists with links to the southwest, Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and Gillian Ayres (1930-2018). Sainsbury met, photographed and sketched both Sank and Shelton from life while she referred to historic photographs of Ayres and Hepworth to inform her sketches and create her insightful new portraits.
- M. H. Sarkis's RAMM commission 'Votive for the Next Earth' (disabled artist commission) continues to be displayed in the Finders Keepers? gallery and Michelle Williams Gamaker 'The Silver Wave' continues its very successful showing in the Americas Gallery.
- RAMM's 2022 commission 'Labour: Birth of a New Museum' by Grace Ndiritu was featured in a show at Kate MacGarry gallery (London) which received a 4-star review from the *Guardian* (4/11/23).

Children and Young people (Activity 5)

- RAMM launched Devon-specific online educational resources about the transatlantic slave trade. The material was promoted through local teachers' networks for teaching around inspirational figures and Black History Month. We highlight their relevance to Key Stage 3 History, home-learners of all ages and Key Stage 2 topics such as Chocolate, Victorians, Explorers. The resources, a lasting legacy of 2022's exhibition In Plain Sight – about Devon's connections to the transatlantic economy – include an online Kahoot! quiz (popular with secondary students), a language guide to discuss race and history, and an information sheet for teachers. It links to an online exhibition page, complete with videos, interactive timeline and contemporary artwork by Joy Gregory. Feedback so far is very positive, including from colleagues at Museums of Nottingham who had produced a relevant ground-breaking glossary.
- During October half-term families got to unleash their inner cavepersons, inspired by our Hollow Earth exhibition, and cover the grotto walls with prehistoric-esque chalk drawings, as well as decorating a slate tile to take away with them. Over 60 children took part.
- Continuing the Underworld theme, author, presenter and blogger Jasmine Elmer regaled a group of 50 children and adults with the timeless tale of the fearsome minotaur in his enchanted labyrinth. We cracked open chunks of clay and crafted our own menagerie of hideous beasts and terrible monsters drawn from mythology and/or sucked out of the scarily imaginative minds of youngsters.
- The courtyard was overrun with underground beasties as we welcomed Chris from South West Animal Encounters with his collection of animals that live in or under the earth. Herby the armadillo was a particular hit with visitors and staff and the children had the opportunity to hold grubs, beetles and snakes. One parent said it was the best event he had ever been to at RAMM.
- The half-term fun climaxed on Friday night with the Cave Critters Underground Party, our annual Museums at Night offer. We enlarged the grotto in the courtyard, scattered bats and spiders around . . . then plunged the museum into darkness. The

evening flew by with beams of torchlight cutting through the gloom as 250 children and adults hunted in groups to unjumble anagrams of creepy-crawlies hidden around the museum. UV creatures skittered and slid into life in face paint. And a swarm of glowing cave critters took flight from our craft activity.

- The Christmas holidays include lantern-making workshops and wooden decorations inspired by animals in our collection. There was an opportunity to travel back to the earliest days of Yuletide merriment to see what our resident Roman soldier might have thought about the new celebration. A WWII warden described how he kept up the Christmas spirit even during the darkest of times. And a Victorian Lady Collector explored the origin of trees, lights and other traditions we take for granted at this time of year.
- This term RAMM launched a series of formal learning sessions for home educated families, based on the existing schools offer on Romans in Devon, Ancient Egypt and World War 2. 60 children aged 8 to 11 attended the popular sessions with excellent feedback. Due to high demand, we are planning to increase our offer to this audience going forward with more craft-based sessions planned for next term.

Individual Creativity (Activity 6)

- RAMM's age-friendly programme visited a care home and city council social housing for older people, with multisensory object-handling activities. These sessions are now financially sustainable, with an ongoing reputation for high quality among this isolated demographic. The programme continues to gather knowledge and experience, with new learning around FE College student placements in care homes, adapting methodology to provide a low-pressure environment for people battling with anxiety, and confirmation that the season-themed sessions are relevant for older people from any ethnic background.
- RAMM visited the Beacon Community Centre on 21 December to offer free Christmas craft activities and handling objects as part of their free Family Fun days for low-income families in the Wonford area.

Skills Development (Activity 7)

- One new person joined RAMM's Youth Panel.
- One young person started a placement with Contemporary Art and Collections – two days a week.
- One Exeter College student started a Marketing Placement, creating videos for social media.
- Three students from Exeter College completed work experience.
- One student from the University of Exeter started a placement updating the shop's website.
- 20 students from the University of Exeter completed a 'Thinktank Challenge' on 'How can RAMM encourage families and individuals who feel that museums are not for them, to make their first visit?'. The students conducted their own secondary and primary research and presented their findings to RAMM staff members. RAMM staff facilitated a number of workshops, staff interviews and a tour of the museum to assist the students with their research.
- We created a regular supported placement where we will have a new student every term.
- We have developed hiring processes to make them more accessible, for example sending questions and a visual story of the room in advance of interviews.

Dynamic Collections (Activity 8)

- The successful National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) bid has allowed for an expanded remit for this project.
- A new NLHF-funded Engagement Officer (part-time), Eleanor Coleman, started in November. She has begun to contact local community groups and develop the project partnerships.
- The project lead, RAMM's Digital Media Officer, has begun to investigate the Digital Assets Management System (DAMS) and explore the use of SharePoint.
- The project's external evaluators were appointed in December.

University collaboration (Creative Arc) (Activity 9)

- Developmental work with the University of Exeter data sciences department is ongoing. The output will be a community engagement project on the topic of transport with workshops happening in March. We are partnering with Exeter Science Centre who will be facilitating the sessions.
- RAMM Audience Development staff developed a project proposal with University of Exeter Psychology academics to investigate the value of family conversation in museums to reduce bias around race and ethnicity. If successful, this would complement RAMM's 2025 exhibition theme of Food, as a legacy of In Plain Sight research around Devon's ties to sugar produced by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean.

Investment principles plan

Ambition & Quality

- Significant work has now taken place to centralise all RAMM's evaluation documentation into a single location on the shared drive. This includes evaluation data since 2019 on exhibitions, events, engagement projects, art commissions and a folder of all known data compiled previous to 2019. This foundational work will allow for the new A&Q strategy document to be completed in Q4.

Inclusivity & Relevance

- RAMM's Audience Development team responded to challenges and overtures from newly formed group representing families of mixed heritage.
- Engagement officers initiated and responded to overtures with diverse ethnic community groups towards collaboration around Dynamic Collections, Transport and Food. These include Afghan taxi drivers, a Bulgarian society, Diverse Devon Together, Hikmat (who support newly arrived migrants navigating local services), Exeter Hindu Cultural Centre, recent asylum-seekers housed in Exeter, Ubuntu mentors of young people of colour, and South West Black Network.
- RAMM continues to share learning and training with Bristol Museums as a legacy of In Plain Sight.

Environmental Responsibility

- Terms of reference and the first agenda have been drafted for first meeting of RAMM's 'Forum for Action' (which will take place in Q4)
- The design brief for the PSDS funded heat pump scheme has been completed and submitted for committee approval.
- Staff members attended carbon literacy training.
- Staff sounding board held and a number of ideas and suggestions raised which will be considered and built into future plans.

Dynamism

- Fundraising campaign launched to support RAMM' ambitious plans to host a Dartmoor inspired programme of activities from autumn 2024.
- Funds secured to acquire Garry Fabian Miller artwork 'The Darkroom's Fading Presence'
- Repair work to roof continues to have an impact on income from venue hire and events in the museum, due to lack of spaces for events.

4. Future position

n/a

5. Are there any other options?

n/a

6. Conclusion

RAMM continues to deliver a varied, inclusive and ambitious programme of activities to its audiences in the city and further afield.