

Charleston's Orlando: A Biography, Queering the Museum Guide

Charleston's upcoming *Orlando at the present time* exhibition offers an opportunity to explore the contemporary relevance of both the house and collection, and the lives of the creators who produced, imagined, played and loved there. In particular, there are themes and plot twists in Woolf's seminal work that today's viewer might use modern language to describe as trans, intersex, gender non-conforming or queer.

Woolf's seminal work provides an opportunity to engage with contemporary debates surrounding LGBTIQ+ history and culture. The identifiable genderqueer narratives offer an opportunity to reach diverse new audiences interested in understanding how Charleston's own history is steeped in challenging conventions of sexuality and gender identity.

The exhibition also gives staff and audiences who don't identify as LGBTIQ+ an opportunity to explore a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the lives, identities and relationships of the artists who occupied the property and the way these experiences informed the work they created. Not only do LGBTIQ+ audiences want to see themselves on the walls of museums, so do their families, friends and workmates.

This is a timely opportunity, as it continues the momentum of the celebration of LGBTIQ+ lives seen in heritage sites, museums, archives and galleries throughout the UK in 2017 that marked the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain and Wales.

What is LGBTIQ+?

This acronym is an umbrella term that includes people who identify lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, or other sexual orientations such as asexual, and is also inclusive of other gender identities such as non-binary.

Some of the language used by the LGBTIQ+ community can seem complicated to those not embedded within it. Using it can make people worry about making an unintentional mistake that may cause offence. There are many useful websites that explain complex community terms and issues simply, including Stonewall, Gendered Intelligence, UK Black Pride and the UK Intersex Association.

As any avid Virginia Woolf reader will know, choosing your words carefully is important. When you understand and use terminology and pronouns correctly, your efforts are seen by LGBTIQ+ visitors as a sign of allyship, part of a process of building a long-term relationship between marginalised groups and your institution that's founded on trust, consistency, competency and accountability. Assuming or misusing somebody's pronoun, or using language that assumes someone is heterosexual, may be considered disrespectful. Presuming someone is *not* trans just by looking at them, is referred to as assuming 'cisnormativity'. Similarly, presuming someone is heterosexual, perpetuates 'heteronormativity'.

Put simply, you can't judge a book by its cover. It's just not always possible to tell a person's gender identity by their dress or physical appearance. Similarly, with marriage equality and

adoption being open to lesbian and gay couples, families increasingly come in all shapes and sizes.

Making LGBTIQ+ visitors welcome is easy – just say “Welcome” and leave off the ‘ladies’ or ‘gentlemen’. It’s important too, that this welcome means that all visitors are welcome to be ‘out’ – for example, to be affectionate with their partners, or to decide which toilet they use.

Why do we need to include LGBTIQ+ lives in museums and historic houses?

Everyone’s story deserves to be told. Leaving LGBTIQ+ people off the walls of museums leaves them historically homeless. It sends the message that queer lives are not worth remembering and are destined to be forgotten. It also ignores the richness of diversity embedded in the UK’s history of art and design.

Heritage spaces are places where visitors increase their understanding of the society they live in and the world around them. In this way, museums contribute to shaping social norms surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity. Over the past decade, historians and curators have been making a conscious effort to increase the breadth of representation of the lives that have shaped the nation’s heritage. This has meant including people who aren’t usually mentioned in the historical narratives previously dominated by white, male, elite, straight, cisgender and non-disabled people. Opening up multiple perspectives of the past enriches our understanding of its complexity. A more inclusive and more diverse telling of the past is not part of a political campaign for civil rights, it’s simply telling a fuller version of our shared social history.

The exploration of LGBTIQ+ past lives in museums not only reflects legislative equality, it reflects the UK’s shift in attitudes towards the social acceptance of trans and queer people – they are our family, our friends and our workmates. LGBTIQ+ people have made a tremendous contribution to the UK’s cultural life, not least in art, literature, architecture and garden design. We should all want to understand the way in which queer lives have shaped the nation we live in.

Queering the Museum.

The term “queer” not only indicates a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity is not hetero- or cisnormative, it also asserts a political identity – namely, that the queer individual seeks to work outside institutional models that have previously excluded LGBTI+ people (such as marriage and the church). Queer and genderqueer people often dress to express their queer politics.

The politicisation of the term ‘queer’ relates to the history of the word itself. Once used as a derogatory term, reclaiming it is an act of public pride that celebrates difference and places faith in the possibility of new ways of doing things more effectively, responsibly, accountably, creatively and collectively. It has now been adapted by academic institutions that categorise the study of LGBTI+ culture as queer theory and Goldsmiths University, for example, now offers an MA in Queer History. Ceramicist Matt Smith’s innovative exhibition *Queering the*

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Museum at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in 2010/11 marked a significant development in curatorial methodology that built on the more selective narrative of *Gay Icons* at the National Portrait Gallery in 2009. In 2017, Tate Britain marked the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain and Wales with the exhibition *Queer British Art 1861 – 1967* and this year's *Queer & Now 2018* one-day festival attracted 10,000 visitors in a continuation of the institution's commitment to stimulating progressive and far-reaching queer programming. Brighton Museum & Art Gallery are currently in the middle of its two year "Be Bold" programme of queer exhibitions and engagement, including *Gluck: Art & Identity*, *Queer Looks*, *The Museum of Transology* and *Gilbert & George*.

To queer the museum refers to disrupting not only hetero and cisnormativity, but also ableism, sexism and colonialism that exists within the UK's heritage institutions. This inclusion of decolonisation within queer theory, museology and practice reflects an awareness of the way in which the legacy of colonialism both shaped the UK's art collections and continues to inform legislation that oppresses queer people internationally. According to Joseph O'Mahoney, Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading, of the 72 countries that continue to criminalise homosexuality in 2018, at least 38 of them were once subject to some sort of British colonial rule. Similarly, prior to British occupation, many cultures were gender diverse and did not impose heteronormativity. By extension, the term intersectionality refers to an understanding that many queer people face multiple oppressions – for example, fatal violence disproportionately affects trans women of colour.

Queering the museum opens up collections to be re-read from multiple perspectives. It advocates that demonstrating good practice means ensuring community engagement and consultation is central to the process of developing more inclusive representation. The impact of queering the museum over the last decade can be felt by audiences beyond the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, as it is a process of readdressing how museums operate to appeal to new audiences through creative, dynamic, creative and innovative new approaches. Queering the museum is increasingly considered to be a marker of good practice.

Trans Identities.

Every fan of literature understands the power of finding a story that 'speaks to you'. Whilst Woolf's character Orlando is fantastical, positive expressions of non-conforming gender identities in literature remain particularly important to trans and intersex people, not least because they are frequently invisible in the heritage sector and are often misportrayed by the mainstream media.

It is becoming increasingly understood that gender is not a binary system, but rather, a spectrum of different possibilities. The term 'trans' is now used as an umbrella term. It is derived from the Latin prefix 'trans' meaning 'across'. 'Cisgendered', meaning not trans, is derived from the Latin 'cis' meaning 'same'. Being trans is based on self-identification. A trans person's gender is not the same as their sex or the one they were medically assigned at birth. Not all trans

people undergo medical transition and not everyone's gender identity can be assumed just by looking at them.

Trans people include trans women (assigned men at birth) and trans men (assigned women at birth). QTIPOC refers to someone who's a queer trans or intersex person of colour. Some people who identify as non-binary also identify under the umbrella term 'trans'. A non-binary person's gender identity does not fit into a male or female binary system. There are a growing number of countries that legally recognise more than two genders, including Germany, India and Australia (but not the UK).

An intersex person is born with sexual characteristics that do not fit typical medical definitions of male or female. The United Nations estimates between .05 and 1.7% of people are born intersex. Intersex people aren't rare, they're invisible, including frequently being excluded by the acronym LGBTQ, despite being an active part of the community with shared experiences. The UK Intersex Association is advocating to stop the continued practice of unnecessary, non-consensual surgical intervention used in the UK to physically re-categorise intersex people's bodies into a binary gender.

According to Gendered Intelligence, good practice as service providers includes:

- Not assuming you can identify that someone is trans or intersex
- Trying not to assume someone's gender simply by their appearance (such as saying "Welcome ladies" when people arrive at front desk)
- Considering whether or not you actually need to ask someone's gender (such as when you are collecting audience feedback – why is it necessary or important?), and if you do, allowing people to tell you their gender rather than limiting options to 'male' and 'female'
- Assuming that everyone selects the facilities appropriate to their gender (including toilets)
- Accepting a range of I.D. other than a birth certificate, such as a license or passport, as few people have a Gender Recognition Certificate
- Publicising your good practice and inclusivity to diverse groups

Useful Links.

Gendered Intelligence is the UK's leading gender diversity training providers. The website offers excellent downloadable resources, and there are clear explanations of terms and legislation, including the widely debated Gender Recognition Act.

<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/professionals/resources>

Stonewall provide a simple glossary of terms relating to and used by the LGBTIQ+ community. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms#q>

UK Black Pride celebrates Black LGBT culture. <https://www.ukblackpride.org.uk/mission/>

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Brighton & Hove City Council's **Trans Needs Assessment Report** offers insight into living as a trans person in the area. It was produced by the University of Brighton.

<https://www.bhconnected.org.uk/sites/bhconnected/files/Brighton%20%26%20Hove%20Trans%20Needs%20Assessment%202015.pdf>

The **Interdisciplinary Conference on Intersex People** brings together leading experts, thinkers and activists. <http://eleanorglanvillecentre.lincoln.ac.uk/events/IPI2019?IPI2019>

Brighton Museum & Art Gallery's *Be Bold* programme continues to 2019.

<https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/brighton/> with the importance of the Museum of Transology outlined on BBC World Service World Update

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0596k3g>

Queer & Now 2018 at **Tate Britain** [https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-](https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/festival/queer-and-now)

[britain/festival/queer-and-now](https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/festival/queer-and-now) launched *A Queer Walk Through British Art*.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/queer-walk-through-british-art>

This 6 part podcast series explores queer heritage sites and houses within the **National Trust**, and was downloaded by 20, 000 listeners.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/our-lgbtq-podcast-series-presented-by-clare-balding>

The National Trust's publication ***Prejudice & Pride: LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications*** is downloadable as a PDF.

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/publications/prejudice-and-pride>

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery's *Queering the Museum* exhibition guide features excellent articles surrounding the concept. <http://mattjsmith.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/QTM.pdf>