

triumphs Show

What makes art history?

Year 7 exploit the resources of the Victoria and Albert Museum's Medieval Gallery to create and curate their own answer

What do 14 Year 7 students, an art teacher, a history teacher and the Victoria and Albert Museum have in common? They are all part of the 'Stronger Together' Museum Champion project run by The Langley Academy and the River & Rowing Museum and supported by Arts Council England, designed to engage students, teachers and museum staff further in bringing museums into schools and vice versa. Sarah Copey reflects on her experience of this particular project to highlight the value of museum learning and the way in which it enriches students' experience within, across and beyond the school curriculum.

When the opportunity arose to become a Museum Champion for my school, I jumped at the chance to apply. Working together with Lindsey Parsons, a colleague and friend who teaches art, we developed a proposal to address the question 'What makes art history?' Not only were we lucky enough to have the proposal accepted as part of the project, but we found that we had been partnered with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. We were ecstatic and determined to make it work.

Our aims were to use the Medieval Gallery at the V&A to explore our key question as a truly integrated cross-curricular project. Part of the brief included effective use of new technologies – equipping and encouraging students to use digital applications and tools such as Pic College and Prezi. As my history department was also designing a new scheme of work, establishing the foundations for history in Year 7, it was a perfect opportunity to focus on that particular year group, enriching my own understanding of the medieval period and ways of bringing it alive to all students. The project itself was run as a series of after-school sessions and although we could only include a limited number of students, we sought to include as wide a variety as we could in terms of the backgrounds and current levels of attainment of the 14 selected. It was launched with a special evening event to showcase the importance of museum studies to the students and their parents.

The programme (outlined in Figure 1) was developed in collaboration with Holly Burton, our link within the Learning Department at the V&A. The meticulous nature of her planning for our first visit to the museum was inspirational and it contributed enormously to the success of the project. The outcome for which we planned was that the students should be required to create, curate and provide a digital presentation of an exhibition answering

the central question 'What makes art history?' The students have relished the challenge and are currently working on fine-tuning their final exhibitions in preparation for our second visit to the V&A, where they will present their work to the members of the Learning and Curatorial Departments, as well as to their families.

We found the experience as fascinating and engaging as the students did, and learned much from Holly about framing questions to extend students' thinking in analysing and interpreting medieval artefacts, moving from detailed investigation of what they can see to the history that it reveals. Year 7 learned far more from an illustrated hymnal about a monk's life than a simple focus on their daily timetable could ever have revealed. Holly too found the experience invaluable, developing her understanding of teachers' specific curriculum needs and of the constraints they face in terms of time and resources.

A completely unexpected outcome was the impact which involvement in the project had on the students' performance in both art and history within the school curriculum. About six weeks into the project, our standard history assessment task revealed that the students involved in the project had achieved more highly than expected and/or demonstrated much clearer and fuller explanation of their ideas than those who had not participated. They are constantly surprising me in lessons with their deep questioning of the medieval world. Their responses to a questionnaire we used to evaluate the first museum visit suggested that even they were shocked at how much they enjoyed it!

But it is not just institutions in London that make these projects possible. The whole point of the project is to integrate museum learning into everyday school life anywhere in the country. Most local museums have learning departments or

Figure 1: Outline of the extra-curricular Museum Champion Project 'What makes art history?'

Week	Theme	Activity
1	Saints and sinners	Introduction: give out sketchbooks and introduce the task. Students examine the Gloucester Candlestick, with probing questions to elicit analytical thinking about its use, the artistry involved in its creation and the historical insights it provides.
2 & 3	Saints and sinner (cont'd)	Students work in groups to design and construct their own version of the candlestick, using their knowledge of medieval religious ideas to depict a 'Doom' theme of heaven and hell. (See Figure 3)
4	Communication	Students examine and analyse a number of illuminated manuscripts, considering their purpose and construction before producing their own illuminated letters.
5	Knights and heraldry	Students examine a coat of arms on a stained glass window, considering content, meaning and design before constructing their own (modern day) coat of arms, using the app Pic Collage.
6	Castles and kingship	Students examine and analyse The Tristan Wall Hanging, developing their knowledge of the story of Tristan and the dragon, with tasks focused on annotating the story and drawing a section from observation.
7	Trip to the V&A	Students spend the day in the medieval gallery, completing the six degrees of separation sheet, focusing on their own exhibitions, choosing their own theme and the objects that they will include.
8	Feedback from the trip	Students create a mini-Prezi presentation, first to summarise what they learned from the visit, and second to explain which theme they had chosen and why.
9 & 10	Create and curate the exhibition	Visit from Holly Burton in week 9 to help students begin to construct their own digital exhibition – by first modelling her own idea and then working with the students on their ideas. Continued work in week 10, encouraging an explicit focus on answering the question 'What makes art history?'
11	Practice and presentation	Second trip to the V&A for students to present their exhibitions and their sketchbooks to members of the Learning and Curatorial Departments (and the students' families)

Figure 2: The students' first visit to the Medieval Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum



education officers available to support teachers not just with prepared resources related to common curriculum topics but also by tailoring a visit to your particular purposes. Many will even lead sessions in school, bringing some of the museum's resources with them. The emphasis on digital technologies has certainly alerted me to the wealth of materials available online from national and local museums, to which I will now direct students of all ages, spanning topics from medieval life to the Cold War.

Lindsey and I plan to take the project forward, inviting the Year 7 who participated to act as Museum Ambassadors for the school, sharing the knowledge they have gained from

Figure 3: One of the medieval 'Doom' candlesticks created by the students



being involved and giving other students the confidence to access this wealth of resources, enhancing lessons across the curriculum as well as their personal cultural development.

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