

## Friends of York Art Gallery

Q and A: A new series where curators answer questions about policies and practices, in dialogue with Judith Glover.

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Helena Cox, Curator at Beverley Art Gallery



Picture Tony Johnson  
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*Can you describe your present role?*

My curatorial role at Beverley Art Gallery is an incredibly varied one, which is one of the things I love about my job.

It starts with overseeing our collection of fine art and its permanent display in our gorgeous, recently restored, Edwardian 'red' gallery.

We pride ourselves on being the UK's largest collection of the works of the painters Fred and Mary Elwell (see below for links). So making sure that we preserve, research, and share the collection are my main tasks.

But it does not end there. I am also responsible for a lively programme of temporary exhibitions – we usually run up to five a year. These are again very varied shows, from working with contemporary artists, regional, national and international, to bringing in exciting loans, touring exhibitions, celebrating art from across our region and catering for all types of visitors from academics to under-fives.

I take delight in collaborations with universities and I love overseeing our research student placements at the gallery, working with the Universities of York and Hull, and internationally such as Ochanomizu University in Tokyo. One of my passions is bringing international artists to Beverley, and over the last few years we have worked with artists from Ghana, Canada, Czechia and the Netherlands. We also had a successful exhibition exchange with a contemporary art gallery in Berlin.



*What led you to become a curator?*

I originally got into curating during my undergraduate studies in art history in Prague, Czechia. I studied at the Charles University (one of the oldest universities in Europe) and right from the start I was engaged in various curatorial student projects. I soon realised that exhibitions work as a fantastic ‘bridge’ between academic art history and wider audiences, and I fell in love with that special in-between place between research and reaching out to visitors.

During my studies I worked part-time running workshops for the National Museum in Prague and after my graduation I started working as a curator of Japanese art at the National Museum’s Asian department – the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American cultures. My masters research was a collaborative project between the museum and the University of Central Lancashire. I researched a rare collection of Japanese toys at the National Museum and my thesis was turned into an exhibition and later published as a monograph.<sup>1</sup>

Once I started to work as a curator, I was hooked for life! The combination of in-depth collection research with the chance to create engaging narratives for the public through exhibitions became my life-long passion. I am also someone who is constantly curious, and I love making intercultural connections and leading interdisciplinary dialogues. So my research and exhibitions cover a wide ground from Japanese art to British Victorian and Edwardian art, modern art, Continental art and work with contemporary artists – how could you not love such a profession?

*How do you build your collection? Can you say which factors you keep in mind when adding an object to your collection, whether purchasing it or accepting a donation?*

At Beverley Art Gallery, it is paramount for us that we grow and develop the strengths of our existing collection, reflecting both the history, character, and contemporary art developments in the region. From the practical point of view, we are limited by the storage available, and this strongly impacts our decisions. We have a superb purpose-built

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<sup>1</sup> Helena Gaudeková, Alice Kraemerová: *Playing All Day Long – Japanese Traditional Toys from the Náprstek Museum collection in Prague* (National Museum: Prague) 2013

environmentally controlled repository, but it is filling up very fast. We have a Collections Team consisting of the site curators from across the East Riding Museums Service; we meet quarterly and take decisions on acquisitions, donations, and purchases. While our acquisition budgets are limited, we receive fantastic support from the Friends of Beverley Art Gallery, and we are also lucky to receive regular offers of donations and long-term loans from the public.

In recent years, we received a bequest of a whole collection of works by James Neal, a painter whose work is closely linked to East Yorkshire and Hull. We regularly get offers of artworks by the artists [Fred Elwell](#) (1870-1958) and [Mary Elwell](#) (1874-1952) which we more than welcome.

But of course, we can't always take everything in. Regarding the Elwells, for example, we can only accommodate artworks that contribute to widening our understanding of their works in order to create an engaging narrative, and thus interpreting the Elwells' work in a national and global context.

We also focus on collecting contemporary art linked to our region. In recent years, we have welcomed new work into our collections by the multimedia artist Paul Clifford, and a series of Beverley-inspired mystery-evoking pastels by Julian Swift, among others.



Julian Swift:  
*The Candidate*,  
pastel on  
paper, from  
the Series  
*Straw People*,  
1990-2010

*Do you have a scheme for supporters of the gallery?*

We are very lucky to have the amazing Friends of Beverley Art Gallery. They are such an asset for us, offering support during events, exhibition launches and outreach, but also massively contributing to the growth of our collection. In 2017, with the Friends' support, we purchased a key painting – Fred Elwell's portrait of the artist Mary Holmes (later Elwell) in 1913, a year before the couple married.

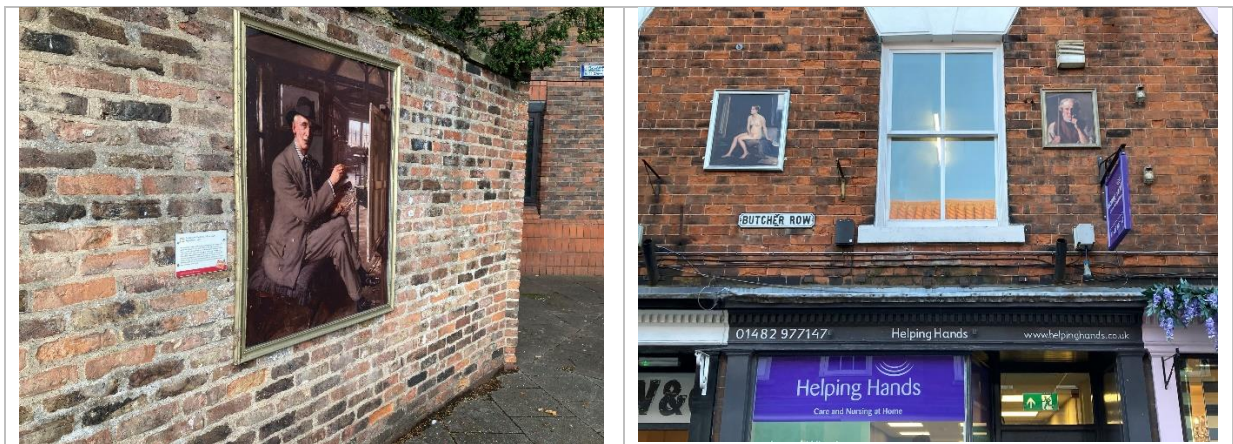


Fred Elwell: *In the Studio (portrait of Mary Elwell as an artist)*, oil on canvas, 1913

This work enabled us to bring in more focus on Mary as an artist in her own right, and to shift from showing 'Fred and his talented wife' to celebrating '*The Elwells – a Partnership in Paint*', which is the new title of our permanent display. Upon entry into the gallery, you will now be

greeted by two mutual portraits that the Elwells made of one another – a beautiful gesture of a true partnership between two outstanding artists.

We are also honoured to have the interpretation panels for these paintings written for us by Professor Tim Barringer, Paul Mellon professor of Art History at Yale University. This purchase was only possible thanks to the Friends' support, which helped us to receive further funding from the V&A Purchase Fund. The Friends are very important to us and we were keen to stay in touch digitally during the pandemic. We also work closely with the Beverley Civic Society, which is renowned for the outdoor Elwell trail. This is a series of paintings adorning the facades of buildings across central Beverley.



Images from the outdoor *Elwell Trail*

*What are the main challenges that you face both currently and in the long term?*

First, I must say we were incredibly lucky to receive brilliant support from the East Riding of Yorkshire Council during and after the pandemic. Despite the lockdowns, our entire museums team kept working remotely, and we were able to jump straight in once the restrictions were eased.

During the pandemic, I realised how important it is for the gallery to act as a hub, creating networks and connections. This also reflects in our upcoming exhibition *'Reflections of Japan in East Yorkshire'* which includes international collaborations, co-creating the exhibition with members of the public, as well as consulting academics and involving students.



Sir Alfred East: *A street scene in Kyoto*, oil on canvas, 1889

The Alfred East painting was bequeathed to the gallery by its founder John Champney, whose brother Marcus Huish was one of the foremost promoters of Japanese art in Britain at the turn of the century. This was one of the inspirations for the upcoming exhibition.

Overall, there are many challenges ahead for the gallery: how do we stay relevant to both our local audiences and the wider world? How do we bring together world-class research of our collections while making sure that everything we produce is widely accessible and engaging? How do we play our part in current important issues, such as Black Lives Matter and de-colonising of museum collections, and keep up with the very rapidly evolving digital technologies, just to name a few.

*And lastly is there any issue that you would like to raise that has importance for your role?*

There are two things that strike me as particularly important regarding curating at a regional gallery.

Firstly, at last year's York Festival of Ideas, University of York's Professor Michael White said: 'We should think of ALL museums as national



museums'. Just because a gallery is not located in a major city and has limited collections does not mean that the public, students, and researchers can't massively benefit from it. I often feel that regional and local galleries are not viewed as a place where cutting-edge exhibitions and research can take place. All my work revolves around changing this perception. I passionately believe that students and researchers should explore smaller galleries and bring the latest research methods into regional collections' interpretation. This will in return generate exciting new narratives for the wider audience and create a renewed sense of meaning, and pride in the region and its heritage.

Secondly, I see regional galleries as a place that should connect the full circle – from celebrating local heritage through to connecting to national networks, and collaborating in an international context. We live in a world where seeing the bigger picture is an essential skill, and museums should reflect that. To be able to do this, regional galleries need support from enlightened funders who can see what a substantial role galleries and museums play in society, and in its crucial ecology of social and mental wellbeing. I therefore like to represent the gallery at conferences in the UK and abroad, showing that regional galleries can become a valuable resource and that 'no gallery is too small to make a difference', as I like to say.



Beverley Art Gallery @BeverleyArtGallery/@BevArtGallery  
Image by R&R Studio Ltd, Hull

Helena Cox, September 2021

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