

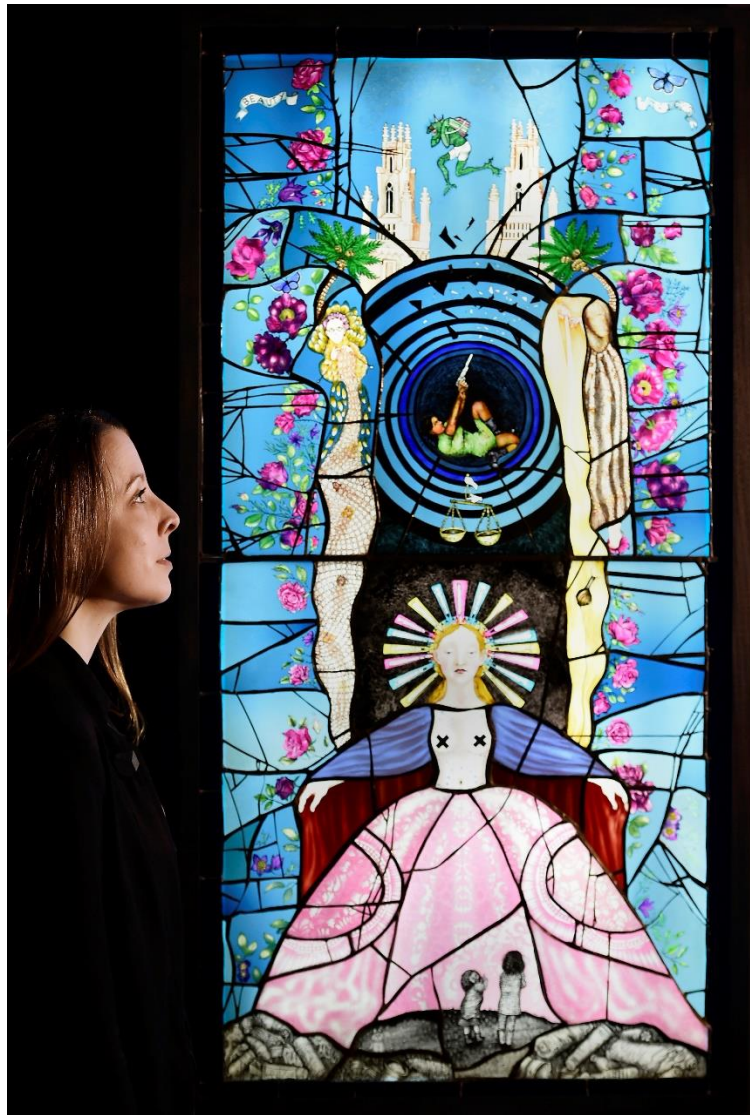
Friends of York Art Gallery

A second Q&A series where curators answer questions about policies and practices in dialogue with Judith Glover

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Sarah Rothwell

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Sarah Rothwell views *Beauty Tricks* by Pinkie Maclure, which featured within the exhibition *Art of Glass*, 2018. Photo courtesy of National Museums Scotland ©Neil Hanna

What led you to become involved in the museums and galleries sector?

From an early age, I had always wanted to work within a gallery or museum, and had, during my school years, even participated in a work placement at my local art gallery and museum. Museums were something special to me growing up; as well, there weren't that many in the South Lakes in the late '80s and '90s, and none that were free to make it accessible on a regular basis for my working-class parents to take us to. So, the ones I was able to visit became awe-inspiring places that fuelled my fascination and interest in history and art, planting a seed inside me that someday I would like to work in one. Not that I knew at that stage in what capacity or how to achieve it, I just wanted to be there, immersed within these inspirational spaces.

So ironically my museum career started out when I joined the [Lakeland Art Trust](#) (LAT), the same trust that runs the local art gallery and museum I had my placement with some ten years earlier as a curatorial volunteer in 2004 following the completion of my undergraduate degree, alongside shifts working in their tea rooms and on reception. It was a wonderful foundation, as I gained experience working with, and on, fine art, decorative arts, contemporary craft, and social history collections and exhibitions. This was alongside an insight into the management and care of the Trust's then three sites of Abbot Hall Art Gallery, the Museum of Lakeland Life, and Blackwell Arts and Crafts House - since I left, the Trust now also cares for the Windermere Steam Boat Museum.

I had the opportunity to work with leading curators within the field, learning directly from them how to handle and care for works of art from artists such as the 18th-century portrait painter [George Romney](#) to ceramics by the *grande-dame* of British Studio Pottery, [Magdalene Odundo](#); assisting in the research for and contributing to exhibitions such as [Talwin Morris & the Glasgow Style](#). Meeting with artists, makers, and collectors was a dream come true. And it was through the support of these colleagues and their encouragement I was able to see that I could be a part of the sector as a curator.

Can you describe your curatorial career?

Over the last fourteen years I have been extremely lucky to have worked alongside contemporary artists, designers, and makers, supporting them in their practice through research, curating, commissioning, mentoring, as

well as acquiring works for the National Collection. Prior to my appointment at National Museums Scotland, I worked for the [National Glass Centre](#) (NGC) in Sunderland which I had joined following a post-graduate course in Art Museum Studies at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne. I come from a long line of makers and craft workers - my paternal grandfather was one of the last cobblers who could hand sew in the South Lakes. I decided during my postgrad to focus my own research and curatorial activities in the area of contemporary craft, and so looked to work within an organisation that celebrated craft and art within this sphere. Luckily during my time in the North East, there were several galleries and museums that specialised in the area, but the NGC had an exciting element that they had a glass studio, so you could engage directly with artists and makers based there and their visceral material of choice.

I started out as a curatorial assistant, similarly to my role with LAT, assisting with the exhibition programme by researching artists and makers, as technical support and gallery attendant, whilst also assisting and running education workshops, before gaining the position of Exhibitions Officer, where I became primarily responsible for the coordination and organisation of the exhibition programme on behalf of the Head of Arts and guest curators. It was then that I had the opportunity to curate a series of complementary exhibitions to the blockbuster shows, that ranged from emerging artists within the field of glass, private and public collections, to commissioning new work. I was always keen to support those artists and makers who were challenging perceptions of their chosen material, pushing the boundaries of process and technique, or who used their craft to tell a story, whilst also making beautifully crafted works of art.

One of my notable achievements during my time at NGC was assisting on the project management of the international exhibition *Interloqui* for the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. This was devised by NGC's then Creative Director Grainne Sweeney, alongside a consortium of galleries from the North of England which included the Laing Art Gallery, Locus+, MIMA, and [Caterina Tognon Arte Contemporanea](#) in Venice. The exhibition featured commissions created at NGC by the artists [Rose English](#) and [Cerith Wyn Evans](#), alongside an installation by [Paul Noble](#) that had been specially created for the Laing Art Gallery, and works from the Craft and Print collections of MIMA. During the run-up to the exhibition, we also worked with the Berengo furnaces in Murano to achieve a series of glassworks with them that [Rose English](#) designed.

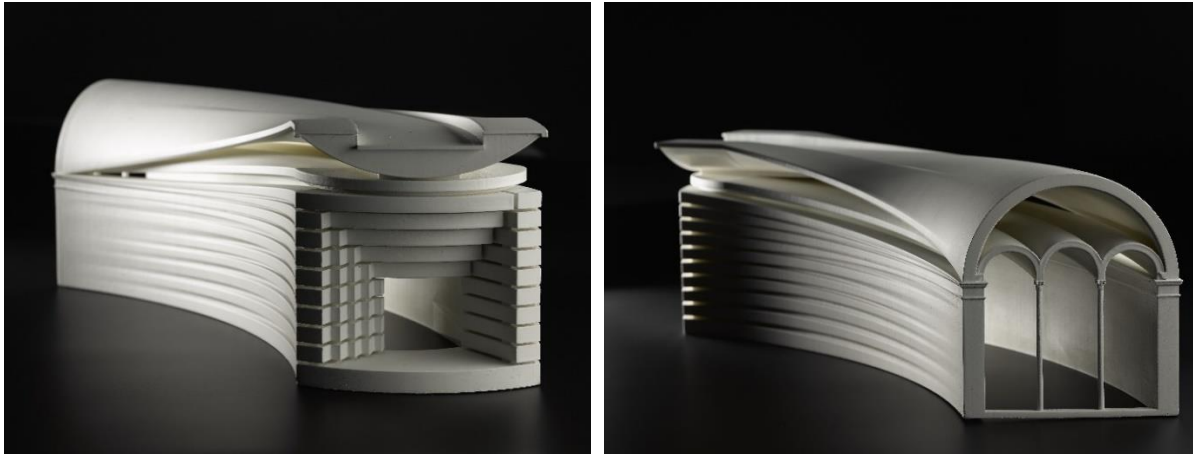


Cloud Glass 1, sculpture, incorporating 17th & 18th century archaeological glass & ceramics, with mixed media core by Bouke de Vries, London, England, 2014 (K.2016.60).
© Bouke de Vries; Image © National Museums Scotland.

The aim of the exhibition was to discuss cross-disciplinary practice, and how craft processes were a powerful element in conceptual thought. It was a magical time as all the artists and curators involved stayed within a house on the Lido, so the chats around the dinner table at night were always engaging and inspiring. This cemented within me a desire to explore craft in all its variance, from traditional exponents to conceptual endeavours.

However, as I had always wanted to work with and care for a collection, I knew I needed to move on from NGC to gain this experience as they did not hold a collection. The opportunity presented itself in 2014 when I joined National Museums Scotland as an Assistant Curator for the Art & Design department. It was always a childhood dream to work for National Museums Scotland. On our biennial trips to Edinburgh to visit my father's childhood friend, we would often find ourselves at the National Museum of Scotland, with me, the museum geek that I have always been, spending most of my time spellbound by the objects and artefacts held within.

So, it was a great honour for me to join the organisation, and to be part of such an amazing and dedicated team that cares for our National Collection. In addition, it was an exciting time, as the Museum was embarking on a redevelopment of its Art & Design galleries, allowing me to prove my expertise within contemporary craft and design, by leading on the acquisition of key works for the new gallery and assisting in creating the commissioning opportunity which was awarded to [Michael Eden](#). The work he created, entitled *Portals* (below), reflected how museums are transformative spaces full of inspiration and knowledge exchange, something I truly believe.



Portals, sculpture incorporating the unique architecture of the National Museums of Scotland, made of a high-quality nylon material with a cream soft mineral coating by Michael Eden, Cumbria, England, 2016 (K.2016.53). © Michael Eden; Image © National Museums Scotland

Since then I have gone on to curate the Scottish content for the Australian Centre for Moving Image (ACMI) touring exhibition *Game Masters*; was one of five successful recipients of Art Fund's 'New Collecting Award', with the project 'Northern Modernist Jewellery', securing funding to facilitate the research and acquisition of jewellery designed and manufactured in Britain and Northern Europe between 1946 and 1979; collaborated with the National Centre for Craft and Design on the two-venue exhibition *Art of Glass* that looked to highlight some leading British-based artists in glass; worked alongside colleagues within Scottish History and Archaeology on the Glenmorangie Commission; and was one of six international guest curators for the 2021 European Glass Context with my nominee for the UK, [Jeff Zimmer](#), winning the second prize for his exploration of LGBTQI+ stories in the North of Scotland.

In my role as Senior Curator, I have responsibility for the collections of British, European, and other 'Western' glass, ceramics, metalwork, jewellery, and industrial design circa 1945-present.



The Glenmorangie Commission: 'coordinate', composite sculpture in corten steel, silver, and gold by Simone ten Hoppel, London, England and Munich, Germany, 2020 (X.2020.32).

© Simone ten Hoppel; Image © National Museums Scotland.

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

Every organisation has a collection vision that will align with its core aims and objectives, current strategic projects such as when National Museums Scotland was developing its new galleries, but also ambitions for the future. As curators we feed into these discussions, looking at the collections we care for, assessing gaps that may be in place historically, whilst also looking at developments within our areas of expertise that could be represented if already not within a collection, as with my Art Fund New Collecting Award which addressed a gap in collecting Modernist Jewellery, not only within my own institution but also across the UK. And more important, key cross-disciplinary discussions that are taking place, such as climate change and representation for example.

Collections over time have been formed and shaped by our predecessors and will be developed further by our successors. So, for myself as a contemporary specialist, it's important to be a part of the shaping, not to impose one vision, but to show how craft and design reflect what is happening today, and also in the past where there may be gaps. Making key acquisitions in multiple areas, allowing for the creation of a dialogue that will tell generations to come of how key events shaped artistic and design thought across multiple disciplines. Or how technological developments enabled others to push the boundaries of their chosen medium or practice.

Created in 2020, a year that witnessed global protests against racism and structural inequality, Christopher Day's *Back to Black* (below) draws attention to the fact that forty years on from the establishment of the [Blk Art Group](#), which was formed to empower and give a voice to black artists at a time of growing racial tension, the same voices are still fighting to be heard.



Back to Black, handblown and sculpted glass, microbore copper pipe, and copper wire, by Christopher Day, Wolverhampton, England, 2020 (K.2021.27).

© Christopher Day; Image © National Museums Scotland.

In relation to accepting the generous donations we are offered, it is a similar rationale, in that we must consider how the object or collection of objects offered would enrich the National Collection. Would the gift aid further research to be conducted into a movement, artist, or designer? Would it allow us to represent an individual, studio, etc that is not currently held within our collection? Or is the narrative of the object, or what lies behind its creation, demonstrating an important discussion that should be captured for posterity? Then there is the condition of the work to be considered. If the work needs some or a large amount of TLC, we would consult with our colleagues in conservation to ensure whatever was accepted could be preserved for future generations. In my area this doesn't happen often, though there are challenges when it comes to how we can preserve and make accessible those works created in digital formats, or experimental materials and processes. Even plastics, for instance, degrade and off-gas, so have to be considered carefully.

And lastly, is there any issue that you would like to raise that has particular importance for your role or anything that is particularly impacting on the museum/gallery world currently?

As with so many in the sector since the outbreak of Covid-19, working remotely from the Museum and the collections we care for has been the hardest part of this period. And it was with a heavy heart that I took a step back from the job I love and joined hundreds of others within the UK who were furloughed in 2020. Two years on from the first days of the pandemic, and as we continue to face what is being termed the worst global recession in 300 years, we still witness its effects upon the sector, with just recently the Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent coming under threat of job cuts and closure.

So, I ask of you all, please revisit the buildings and venues that celebrate art, heritage, and culture where you live or are visiting. They are there for us all, and more importantly the generations that will come after us, so we owe it to them to support these centres of joy and inspiration. I truly believe museums are for all, and that our lives would be poorer without access to the collections held within them.

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