

Arts Methods Funding Report

Community Curators: Inside the Pharmacy Collection, Winter 2019

Community Curators was a series of four citizen science events that took place in the Manchester Museum between 26th November and 5th December 2019. Made possible through Arts Methods funding, these events aimed to engage university staff and students – as well as members of the public – with interdisciplinary academic research and museum collections.



Purpose

Housed in the Manchester Museum, the Materia Medica Collection is one of particular importance to University of Manchester heritage and the wider history of pharmacy. It is one of the few surviving teaching materia medica collections, which were used to teach pharmacy in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is also one of the largest, containing over 840 glass jar specimens (plus additional boxed specimens) of plant, animal and mineral origin. These were used to teach pharmacy students at the precursor institutions of the University (namely Owens College and the Victoria University) how to compound drugs and identify elements of medicines. However, very little archival evidence relating to the collection has survived. As a result, archaeologist Linnea Kuglitsch (SALC) and historian of pharmacy Jemma Houghton (CHSTM, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health) set up the Community Curators events to bring people behind the scenes of the museum and to learn more about the collection through analysis of the glass jar containers.

The purpose of the event was therefore twofold: firstly, to expand the understanding of the role and history of the materia medica collection through examination of the glassware; secondly, to illustrate the benefits of interdisciplinary research between humanities and STEM, with the event incorporating aspects from history, heritage studies, archaeology and museology but also with the field of pharmacy.



(Left) Materia Medica jars used in the Community Curators events; (Middle and Right) Two jars from the collection highlighting the variety of jars in the collection.

Structure

The structure of the day-long events was formulated to both provide enough training on how to analyse the historical glassware and handle museum objects, and to maximise the amount of time to engage with the practical activity. The event was therefore roughly split into two halves. The first involved introducing those attending with the collection and providing a brief history to the collection, pharmacy education in the nineteenth century more generally and to the history of glass manufacture. Following the introduction, training was then provided as to how to handle the objects as well as how to conduct the interdisciplinary research. The second half involved the practical activity of conducting the research.



(Left) Linnea explaining the different types of glass found (mouth-blown, mold-blown and automatic); (Right) Jemma showing a specimen and explaining the features found on the jar.

Outcomes

The event has already produced some positive outcomes. In statistical terms, over the four days the Community Curators events had 32 attendees register and nearly 120 jars analysed. Postgraduates, undergraduates, University staff, museum staff and members of the public all attended. A blog post and podcast episode for “In Pursuit of Plants” was recorded (<https://www.inpursuitofplants.co.uk/post/ep4-an-unnatural-obsession-with-bottles>). Forthcoming blog posts will also be written by an attendee for the Manchester Museum blog as well as a second by the Engagement and Widening Participation Intern for the Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health social responsibility blog (<https://blogs.bmh.manchester.ac.uk/blog/category/faculty/social-responsibility/>). Jemma and Linnea are also in the process of writing a co-authored paper on the events research and Jemma will be presenting on the event to the British Society for the History of Pharmacy at their annual conference in March 2020.



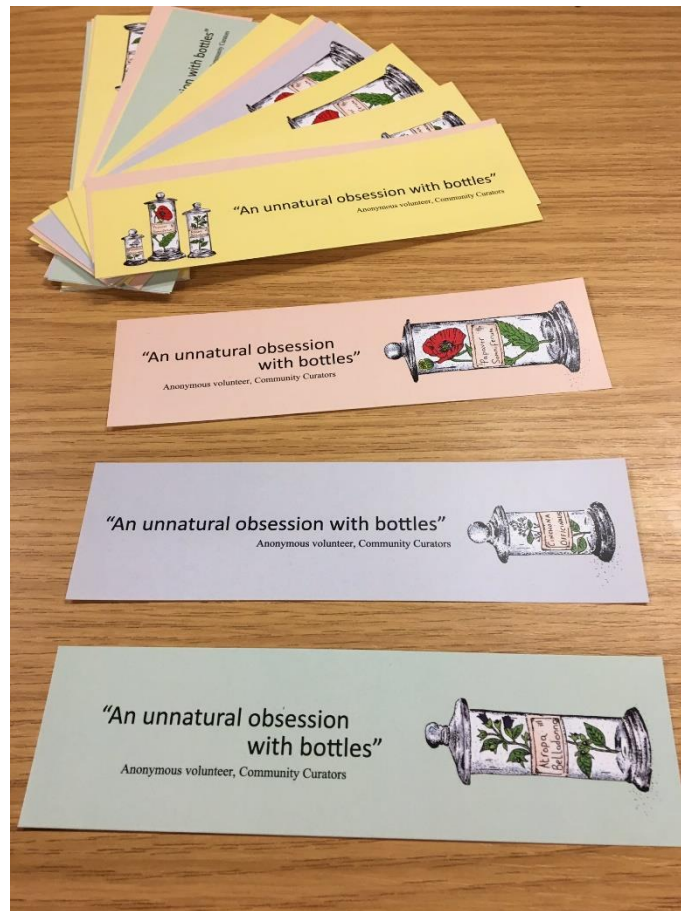
Feedback

Feedback was gathered from attendees via a questionnaire, which gave them the opportunity to express their favourite and least favourite parts of the event, as well as say if they would like to be involved in the future. Of those who attended the event, 30% had been to our previous pilot events for this project. 30% were students (either postgraduate or undergraduate), 45% were members of the public and 25% were staff (either at the university or museum). The feedback on the event was overwhelmingly positive. All respondents reported that they enjoyed the event and 95% said they would do a similar event in the future. Respondents reasons for attending the event ranged from “science participation” to “simply curious” and to “learn more about historical medical collections, curatorial skills etc”. 35% of respondents stated that what they liked the most was getting to handle the objects – other popular responses included: “looking at the range of collection”, “identifying the

specimen jars/bottles”, “contributing to active research” and “the enthusiasm of Jemma and Linnea”. One attendee stated that the event had given them “a new appreciation of bottles!”.

Next Steps

The response to the Community Curators citizen science events were overwhelmingly positive, with the majority of attendees saying they would attend a similar event in the future. Given that there are still many jars left to analyse and the extremely positive feedback, additional events are planned to take place in 2020 to explore the collection further and encourage more engagement with interdisciplinary research.



Bookmarks produced as part of the Community Curators events.