



Economou, M. (2014) Reinventing the Academic Museum: Studying the Digital Transformations at Glasgow's University Museums. In: EPC 2014 Horizon2020 and Creative Europe vs Digital Heritage: A European Projects Crossover, Florence, Italy, 18 Feb 2014, pp. 7-11.

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Version: Published

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/104171/>

Deposited on: 17 Mar 2015

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Reinventing the Academic Museum: Studying the Digital Transformations at Glasgow's University Museums

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Abstract The Hunterian is Scotland's oldest public museum holding large and diverse collections of national significance. These were built on the founding bequest of Dr William Hunter (1718 - 1783), a pioneering obstetrician, teacher and passionate collector, and reflect his Enlightenment interests. The Hunterian has just embarked on an ambitious project that will allow it to reunite the collections and employ new technologies to increase their accessibility. In partnership with Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Life and the National Library of Scotland, it will co-locate its collections at the Kelvin Hall, one of Glasgow's historic buildings. A new portal will bring the collections of the three partners together. The paper focuses on a project, which will study the use of these online collections and large data sets for teaching, research and public engagement with diverse communities. The project will investigate how these developments affect the way different user groups (students, researchers, wider educational audiences and communities) engage with the online collections and the potential for new types of interactions. It will also draw guidelines and discuss the wider issues arising from this case study about how online access and digital technologies are reshaping our understanding of rich and diverse cultural material.

1 Introduction

The Hunterian is Scotland's oldest public museum and holds large and diverse collections, which have been recognized as being of National Significance. They were built on the founding bequest of Dr William Hunter's (1718 - 1783), a pioneering obstetrician and teacher with a passion for collecting, and reflect his Enlightenment interests [Kep07]. They include scientific instruments, Roman artefacts from the Antonine Wall, natural and life science holdings, Hunter's own anatomical teaching collection, numismatics, ethnographic objects from Captain Cook's Pacific voyages and an extensive art collection with the largest holdings of James Whistler artworks and important works of Charles Rennie Mackintosh.



Figure 1. Portrait of William Hunter by Allan Ramsay, 1764-65

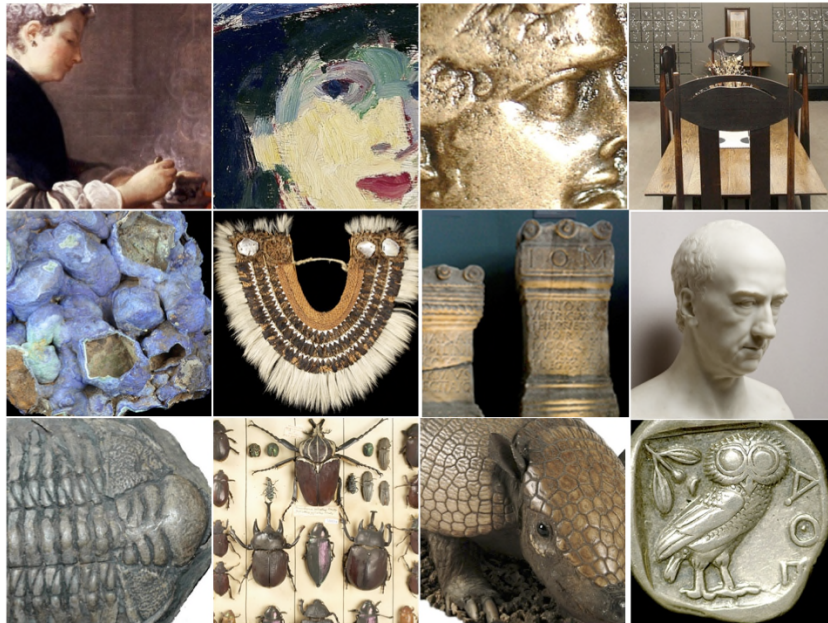


Figure 2. Part of the Hunterian's rich and diverse collections

The Hunterian is currently undergoing an interesting period of change, which is affecting not only the University but also the whole cultural sector in Scotland and beyond. It has recently created a new Student Engagement Officer post (2012) and a Museum Studies Lectureship jointly funded with the School of Humanities in the College of Arts (2013). These developments have increased the opportunities for engagement with the collections [GF12] and have helped to re-position the Hunterian as a an 'academic museum' service in line with the University of Glasgow's and wider UK higher education drivers. They are also in line with the organisation's strategy to place the Hunterian at the heart of the University, to expand the use of the collections for teaching and research, strengthen links with all University Colleges and foster collaborations and

partnerships outside the University. The Hunterian learning offer for public engagement and knowledge exchange includes opportunities for getting involved in various programmes:

- MUSE (Museum University Student Educators) guides (all students) (currently 55);
- Hunterian Associates programme (Postgraduate research students) (15 per annum);
- MSc in Museum Studies – Hunterian Exhibition Development course part of the MSc programme;
- Other work placements, internships (e.g. Museums Galleries Scotland interns), fieldwork.

2 The Kelvin Hall development 2014-17

It has just embarked on an ambitious project that will allow it to reunite the collections, employ new technologies to increase access to them and re-create the contemporary equivalent of the Museum of the Enlightenment. In partnership with Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Life and the National Library of Scotland, the Hunterian will co-locate its collections, currently dispersed in various locations in the main campus and beyond, at the Kelvin Hall, one of Glasgow's historic buildings. It has managed to secure external funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund, together with the University's and the partners' support for Phase 1. This will bring together civic, university and national heritage collections. As part of the project, a new Hunterian Collections Study and Research Centre will be built which will offer new opportunities for object-based teaching, research and engagement with diverse communities.

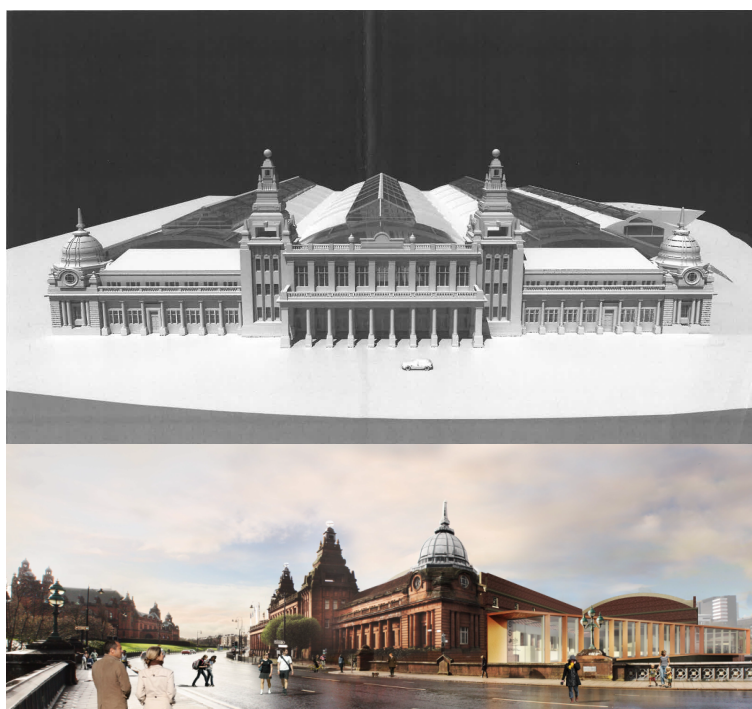


Figure 3. The Kelvin Hall – model after Phase 1 of the project will be completed.

A new portal will also be created bringing the collections of the three partners together (The Hunterian, Glasgow Life Social History collections, and Scottish Screen Archive holdings) and is currently being designed. Furthermore, the Hunterian has just transferred its collections' data from the old in-house system to the new KE-Emu one, which allows, among others, more sophisticated recording of collections information, grouping and linking of objects, recording multimedia and other interpretative information and creating digital narratives.

3 The research project

All these developments make the Hunterian a unique case study for museological study and the understanding of the use of new technologies for capturing, sharing, and re-shaping collections information not only for Scotland but the rest of the world and are worth investigating in greater depth. The research project will investigate how all these changes will transform the ways of engaging with the collections and the effect they will have on different user groups:

- a) University of Glasgow students and wider learning body.
- b) University of Glasgow and global research community.
- c) Wider learning communities & groups (life-long learners, schoolchildren, families).
- d) Cultural tourism audiences.

The study will examine the different user requirements of each group and how they currently interact with the collections both online and onsite. It will also study the effect of particular design and interface choices in the portal and how these affect access to the information and ways of exploring the objects. It will investigate the information pathways different groups take through the large collections data set and what they make of the information they encounter.

The project also offers a unique opportunity for involving the students in aspects of the research and also the other way round, feeding directly the results of the research in updated teaching components, particularly to the very successful MSc in Museum Studies course.



Figure 4. Student engagement opportunities at the Hunterian

The methodology will include interviews and focus groups with the different user groups as well as cultural heritage staff (from the Hunterian, Library, Special Collections and Archive Services, the other Kelvin Hall partners). It will also include observation and visitor tracking and use of the ‘think aloud’ method when using online resources. Finally, it will also examine the use of computer logging for automatically recording users choices when using the online portal and other Hunterian resources.

4 Potential for collaboration and wider impact of project

Although the project focuses initially on the specific case study of the Hunterian, it has potential for opening up to other organisations interested in investigate access to large diverse collections of data by different groups. The digital revolution is constantly changing and re-shaping citizens and communities interact with memory institution and cultural data in general, opening up new opportunities and challenges for research. It also raises complex issues about authorship, responsibility, curation, privacy, identity and security, to mention only a few. The project will investigate how the creation of these online tools and the merging of large collections from different cultural organisations is transforming the way of organising, interpreting and using knowledge.

The results of the project will be of significant benefit not only to individuals and cultural organisations, but also to policy makers, businesses and creative industries.

References

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