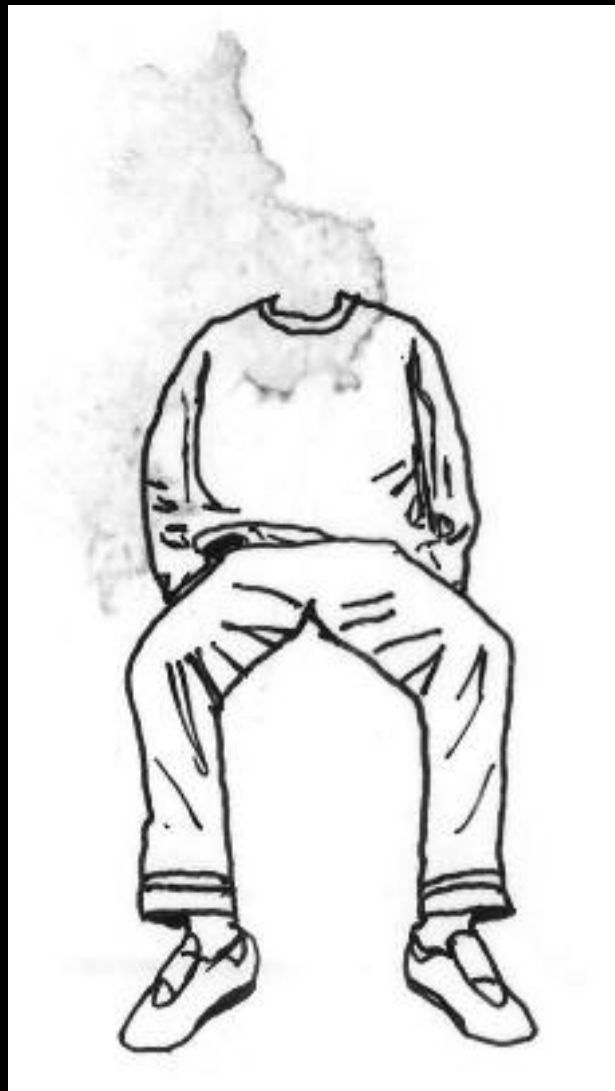


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*Special Edition*  
**The Prison and the Public**

# Challenging Perceptions:

## Considering the Value of Public Opinion

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**What's it Worth? Value Inside was a collaborative project between the University of Leeds and Leeds Museums and Galleries, funded through the Art and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It was developed to research whether providing prisoners with access to museum objects and participating in work inspired by them could contribute to levels of subjective wellbeing. The theme of the project was 'What makes something valuable?' as it was believed this would encourage the participants to challenge their existing perceptions of value and look beyond the obvious monetary value of things. However, what became clear throughout the process of planning and delivering the project was that there was the potential to make an impact on a far wider audience than just the prisoner participants. By using the project to challenge the stereotypical views held about the purpose of both prisons and museums the idea of using the institution of the museum to provide a lens for the public to view the work delivered in prisons arose. As creative work delivered in prisons is often hidden for fear of how it will be portrayed by the media and perceived by the public, could presenting it in the museum environment encourage people to challenge their existing preconceptions and allow a more open debate around the potential of rehabilitation in prisons to take place?**

The first section of this article will review existing literature from both the criminal justice sector and the museum sector as a means of highlighting areas of crossover between the two fields and the potential value that could be gained from collaborative relationships between prisons and museums. Using examples from the *What's It Worth? Value Inside* project the second section of this article will aim to

demonstrate how the perception of what the public will think made a powerful impact on the decisions and behaviours of those that were involved in the research.

Previous research suggests that the public generally know very little about life inside prison and that the main source of information from which they base their opinions is the media.<sup>1</sup> If the majority of information provided by the media is negative the concern is that this will reduce the level of confidence the public has in the criminal justice system and ultimately threaten the legitimacy of the system in the eyes of the public.<sup>2</sup> If as Andrew Coyle suggests research indicates that levels of imprisonment owe more to public opinion and political decisions than to rates of crime, the value of exploring new ways of providing the public with a realistic idea of the nature of prisons could be of great significance.<sup>3</sup> Although Anne Reuss acknowledges there is evidence that many good and positive things do currently take place in prisons, these are very rarely reported on or talked about on a broad enough social platform to spark any wider changes to policy or political opinion.<sup>4</sup> If the media cannot provide such a platform for discussion other potential forums need to be explored, one of which could be museums.

An increasing amount of research is currently being proposed and carried out to explore the different ways museums can be seen to benefit society and work successfully as agents of social change.<sup>5</sup> Recent studies around the social responsibility of museums proposes that in the twenty-first century ethical museums should be places that encourage active citizenship by developing a relationship of trust between themselves and the public they serve.<sup>6</sup> By recognising the ever shifting identities of their staff and visitors ethical museums should strive to create a more just society by engaging with themes of work that challenge

1. Roberts, J. V. and M. Hough (2005). 'The State of the Prisons: Exploring Public Knowledge and Opinion.' *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 44(3): 286-306. Feilzer, M. (2009). 'The Importance of Telling a Good Story: An Experiment in Public Criminology.' *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 48(5): 472-484.
2. Feilzer, M. (2009). 'The Importance of Telling a Good Story: An Experiment in Public Criminology.' *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 48(5): 472-484.
3. Coyle, A. (2005). *Understanding Prisons: Key Issues in Policy and Practice*. Berkshire, Open University Press.
4. Reuss, A. (2003). 'Taking a Long Hard Look at Imprisonment.' *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 42(5): 426-436.
5. Sandell, R. (2003). 'Social inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change.' *Museum and Society* 1(1): 45-62. Silverman, L. H. (2010). *The Social Work of Museums*. London, Routledge.
6. Besterman, T. (2011). *Museum Ethics. A Companion to Museum Studies*. S. Macdonald. Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell. Lynch, B. T. (2011). *Collaboration, Contestation, and Creative Conflict: on the Efficacy of Museum/Community Partnerships. The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*. J. Marstine. London, Routledge. Marstine, J., Ed. (2011). *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics — Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum*. Oxon, Routledge.

traditional values and orthodoxies, in order to provide a forum for visitors and staff to think through the difficult issues facing society.<sup>7</sup> As Janet Marstine suggests one way for museums to achieve this aspiration is to forge collaborative relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders and be willing to assume the risks associated with taking novel standpoints which would suggest a level of openness about such collaborations to the public.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a museum and a prison as collaborative partners is not as strange or new a concept as it may first appear. According to Bennett if we look to the original intention behind why museums and prisons were established clear similarities can be found. This can be seen from the idea that they both target behaviours or beliefs seen by the government as in need of transformation, and encourage people to alter these to be more in line with those behaviours deemed as being acceptable.<sup>9</sup> In this sense museums and prisons are at opposing ends of the same spectrum. If museums aim to subtly coerce people into changes in behaviour then a prison can be viewed as the next step when that fails. Recent research by Charlotte Bilby *et al* can be seen to support this idea and suggests that the positive feeling achieved through participation in arts based interventions can contribute to a sense of community cohesion and a feeling of achievement, both of which can be linked to secondary desistance from crime.<sup>10</sup>

### What's it Worth? Value Inside

The Discovery Centre Museum is unlike other museums and consequently perfectly placed to provide an alternative lens through which the public can view the *What's it Worth? Value Inside* project. The Museum is one of nine sites that make up the Leeds Museum Service and is the main site responsible for conserving and storing the objects not on display at the other sites. In addition it is also responsible for developing community engagement and research into the collections. Unlike the other museums in the service the

majority of the exhibits at the Discovery Centre display objects from the collections alongside work created by different community groups as part of the outreach work delivered. Visits to the Discovery Centre are by appointment only and often include a tour of the building which consists of the storage facility for the main collections, as well as the displays of the community project work. One of these is now the Cabinet of Curiosity which was built in HMP Wakefield as part of the project and contains the artefacts created by the prisoner participants during the project. As the cabinet was donated to the Discovery Centre at the end of the project it too is now part of the museum's collection of objects creating a lasting legacy for the prisoner participants to feel proud of.

For the museum service this project was an opportunity to engage with a new community that is traditionally closed to museums, as well the rest of society. It was hoped it would provide an opportunity to explore the potential impact museums can make on prisoner wellbeing and how such engagement could inform future museum community engagement practice.

The first encounter with the concept of public perception arose while attempting to put together a collection of museum objects that could be used to represent the theme of value during the project. At this point it became clear that some of the curatorial staff at the museum were initially reluctant to suggest objects from their collection to be included. Some cited their perception was that taking the objects into a high security prison posed too great a risk to the objects and that their reluctance for the inclusion of certain objects was to protect them from harm. For other staff it was more about their personal opinion as a member of the public, based on what they had heard in the press, rather than their professional opinion as a museum curator. Their perception was that such people did not necessarily deserve access to these objects, and that engaging with prisoners might reflect badly on the museum service in the eyes of the existing and established museum audience.

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7. Besterman, T. (2011). *Museum Ethics. A Companion to Museum Studies*. S. Macdonald. Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell. Lynch, B. T. (2011). Collaboration, Contestation, and Creative Conflict: on the Efficacy of Museum/Community Partnerships. *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*. J. Marstine. London, Routledge.
8. Marstine, J., Ed. (2011). *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics — Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum*. Oxon, Routledge.
9. Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London, Routledge.
10. Bilby, C., Parkes, R. & Ridley, L. 2013. *Re-imagining Futures: Exploring Arts Interventions and the Process of Desistance*. London: Arts Alliance.

Even when curators were keen to be involved in the project and suggest objects for inclusion there was still evidence of some areas of public perception that required challenging. One of the curators was under the impression that the prisoners would only be interested in objects that related to prison, as though they would never have had any concept of life outside, almost as if all they had ever been in life was a prisoner. In general, the museum staff were initially confused by some of my choices of museum objects, particularly the World War one postcard. I selected this object as I thought the prisoners would value the skill of the needlework, as I was aware of the Fine Cell Work undertaken by some prisoners. I also thought they would make a connection between the soldier trying to keep in touch with his family and their own efforts to maintain family relationships from within prison.<sup>11</sup> For the museum staff this object was not one instantly thought of when working with groups of men, particularly not those perceived as being hardened criminals. The museum Education Officer who participated in a number of sessions during the project, was particularly shocked at the strong affiliation felt by some of the participants to the postcard, most notably when it was voted as one of their favourite objects during the object handling sessions delivered by the group to others in the education department. Several other objects that were popular amongst the prisoners during these sessions, and the reasons behind their popularity seemed to surprise the museum staff when they were fed back after the project.

The most interesting example of this can be seen in the popularity of the honey bees which received 5 votes during the group object handling sessions. By spending time researching current issues regarding the decline of bees and the contributions bees can be seen to make to us as a society, the prisoner that chose to champion them was able to find information that served as a 'hook' to spark interest and discussion from the people he was presenting to. The feedback received from the prisoners explaining their reasons for choosing the bees as their favourite object surprised many of the museum staff however, one quote in particular challenged any stereotypical views they might have held.

*All the objects symbolised important aspects of life, but the bees suggest something of our*

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*responsibilities towards future generations.*  
(Prisoner Participant)

The focus on the future, and the level of awareness of the needs of other people were both areas that the museum staff had not considered prisoners in a high security prison would be concerned about.

The most popular object with the prisoners was the broken verge escapement watch which received eight votes. I selected this object as I hoped the prisoners would explore the idea of whether an object still has value if it can no longer fulfil its original purpose. Interestingly, many of the prisoners saw it as an advantage that the watch was broken as it allowed them to see the detail and aesthetic quality of the mechanism inside, which would otherwise have been hidden from them. An area of focus with the watch was the name engraved on it. There was much discussion about whether this would be the name of the maker or the owner however, what this level of personalisation created was an appreciation of the skills required of the maker to produce such an item.

*I liked the intricate design on the back of the timepiece, plus the way the mechanism on the back is also on display. (Prisoner quote)*

The museum staff were generally surprised at the focus on the aesthetic qualities of the watch as an object and impressed that the comments received made little mention of the object being broken.

The concept of what the public may think also made an impact on the prisoner participants themselves at several points during the project. As a result of existing damage from years of use within education sessions at the museum, the ancient Egyptian Shabti unfortunately broke while being unwrapped by one of the prisoners. The collective sense of horror that ran through the group made it clear just how much the opportunity to participate in the project meant to the individuals and fear at the potential for this incident to ruin future engagement with the museum. Interestingly they had two main concerns as a result of this incident. The first was whether I would 'get in trouble' with the museum and as a consequence cancel the rest of the project. The second concern was how the museum, and consequently the public, would perceive the object

11. FineCellWork. (2013). 'Stitching a Future.' Retrieved 15/10/2013, from [http://www.finecellwork.co.uk/about\\_us/mission\\_and\\_vision](http://www.finecellwork.co.uk/about_us/mission_and_vision).

getting broken, as they did not want the museum staff to think they had not valued the objects or appreciated the opportunity to have access to them.

During the process of writing the information panel to accompany the final cabinet, a discussion ensued about how much emphasis should be placed on the fact that the work was created by serving prisoners. Some of the participants wanted to play on the fact and go along with several stereotypes such as including bars across the text and changing the name of the project to something 'more prison sounding', in order to play to people's fascination with the hidden world of prison as portrayed by the press. Other participants strongly objected to this idea and felt it undermined the whole concept behind the project. They wanted to avoid mentioning prison at all, and have the work viewed and valued by the public in the same way as any other community project would be.

The one area all the participants were in agreement on was the sense of pride felt at having their work displayed in the museum. This was reflected in comments made in the diaries they kept, as well as in the focus group evaluation at the end of the project, where the feedback from one participant was;

*I have to say that the cabinet has to be the high point of the project. To see your work displayed and knowing that it's going to be somewhere near, in our local museum that is just amazing. To know that somebody may actually, like, appreciate your work. (Participant quote)*

This also raised the idea of the degree of trust the participants were placing in the museum in terms of putting their work up for public scrutiny and believing that it would be presented in a positive light. This was also reflected in the diary entries of several participants.

*Hopefully the exhibiting of the cabinet of curiosity and the catalogue will go well, generate interest and change a few ideas about the kind of thing prisoners get up to and are capable of learning/ achieving. (Participant quote)*

This idea seemed to stem from the acknowledgement of the amount of trust the museum were placing in them, as prisoners, by allowing them to have access to the museum objects, particularly the more delicate and fragile ones. In many ways this

should hopefully alleviate the concerns any museum staff may have about future projects.

When the cabinet was finally exhibited in the museum, the project was presented as a case study rather than as an exhibition, as this ensured more information could be given about why the project had taken place and the potential value that could be gained from it. The museum was proud of the collaboration with the prison so wanted to celebrate the success of the project and share it openly with the public rather than hide it for fear of a negative reception. In many ways it is this confidence in presenting the work that has inspired so much positive interest from those who have seen it. From the initial feedback the museum has received regarding the cabinet the overall reaction seems to be a sense of shock followed by a great deal of intrigue. Shock first of all that the museum would actively seek to deliver

outreach in a high security prison, followed by disbelief that the cabinet itself could have been built by prisoners at HMP Wakefield. Overall where people have had something to say about the cabinet or the project it has been to ask questions rather than pass any sort of negative comment. As a result of this positive reception, the decision has been made to create a page on the museum's website to share additional information about the project as a more in

depth case study, to hopefully answer some of the questions raised already and signpost the project to others using the website. This will also provide a platform to share with the public how the findings from the research are being disseminated and received in both the criminal justice sector and the museum studies world.

In addition to the display of the cabinet the prisoner-made artefacts that directly link to the museum objects have been integrated into the museum collection, by being added as 'derived items'. This means that the prison project adds to the existing interpretation available for the objects and becomes part of the individual museum object's story. Consequently, whenever that particular museum object is searched for in the future by a member of the public, the What's it Worth project will be highlighted. This will hopefully help to create a lasting legacy for the project outside the timescale for the research itself.

From the outset it has always been the museum's intention that this project would pave the way for a longer term relationship to be developed between themselves and the prison, so that future research into

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potential social benefits can be continued. Therefore, it has always been the plan to feedback the public's opinions of the project to the prisoners that participated and the wider population in HMP Wakefield. As more feedback is gathered and collated, a display will be developed in the forthcoming months and taken into the prison to highlight the positive way the work has been received. This brings the project full circle back to the original aim of the research which was to explore the effect on levels of subjective wellbeing of prisoners who had access to museum objects and activities inspired by them. It also highlights a cycle that can be developed through using the museum as a lens to critically analyse and acknowledge positive work being achieved in prisons, and to propose changes and improvements that can be made in the future. If receiving feedback from the public can motivate prisoners to engage further with activities delivered by the museum, can feeding this back to the public through the museum provide the public with a feeling that they can make an impact on how their local museum engages with the prison community, and more

directly on the prisoners who participate in the work? Additionally, can the empowering effect strengthen the collaborative relationship between the prison and museum and promote an environment where all parties actively work towards positive prison reforms.

### Conclusion

Overall the project can be seen as an example of working towards an area of secondary desistance from crime, by establishing a clear link to the community for the prisoners who participated.<sup>12</sup> However, if through discussion alone the various stereotypes about prison held by the museum staff were broken down and dispelled, there would appear to be strong evidence to suggest the potential for the same to be true for the wider museum public. By using the display of the artefacts in the museum to inspire a forum where questions can be asked and answered about prison, a more open and honest debate may be possible in the wider public arena.



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12. Bilby, C., R. Parkes, et al. (2013). *Re-imagining Futures: Exploring Arts Interventions and the Process of Desistance*. London, Arts Alliance.