

Manchester Museum Podcast  
Season 2: Episode 2

## How can museums tell LGBTQ+ stories?

Dan Vo in conversation with Mattie Davies

00:00:01 Dan Vo

It is becoming a really important aspect of any museum's work, recognising that there are stories that need to be given extra research in order to be able to bring them up to the surface and share them with people, and I think there's a really nice intersectional overlay as well in what we do. So, you've got Queer Histories on one side, but for me that does connect up with decolonising collections as well. And that has an implication on so many World collections that are presented in lots of museums.

00:00:50 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

Our guest on the podcast today is Dan Vo. Dan is an advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion in museums and is the Project Manager for the Queer Heritage and Collections Network, working with museums and heritage sites across the country.

Dan is joined in conversation today by Mattie Davies, a member of the Manchester Museum's Learning and Engagement team and Trans Youth Work Coordinator for the Proud Trust.

Today Mattie and Dan reflect on their own experiences, exploring the power of storytelling and the importance of representation and belonging for LGBTQ+ people in museums.

00:01:58 Mattie Davies, Manchester Museum

So, I'm Mattie Davies, I go by they/them pronouns, and I work at Manchester Museum. I work in the Learning and Engagement team, but my actual job title is Inflatable Museum Support Assistant, so it's my job look after our Inflatable Museum Project that we take out to the primary schools and do the workshops in.

00:02:18 Dan Vo

Well, I don't have as cool a title, I don't think. I'm Dan Vo and actually I'm a Museum Queerator, so there you go. I do lots of work as a freelancer across the sector that relate to LGBTQ+ History and Heritage, that's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus, so a plethora of different identities and personalities and things associated with that as well.

And so, at the moment I'm the project manager for the Queer Heritage and Collections Network, which is a lovely partnership that is trying to look at how we look at Queer History across the sector that founded by the National Trust, English Heritage, Historic England Historic Royal Palaces, The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, and also about 50 organisations that are interested in being part of that network. So yeah, a lot of stuff is happening.

I know that there's really interesting things happening at Manchester Museum that relate to what you do, and what you do outside of the Museum as well, Mattie.

00:03:18 Mattie Davies

Yeah, that's right. So, we've got all sorts of different things going on at the moment, but one of the things that I'm involved in is working on LGBTQ+, LGBTQ+ representation and visibility within the Museum, Queering Manchester Museum, and thinking about the stories we tell and the people and identities that are represented.

00:03:42 Dan Vo

Can we talk a little bit about that experience and some of the people that you bring into the Museum?

00:03:47 Mattie Davies

Absolutely. So, my title now at the Proud Trust is Trans Youth Work Coordinator, so that is my other job where I am a youth worker. I run a number of youth groups and so collaborating myself between my roles at the Proud Trust and Manchester Museum, we wanted to do something for LGBT History Month.

So, that takeover took place back in February for LGBT History Month. So, it went down really well and the audience got a lot out of it, but what the young people got out of it was really, really meaningful for me. So, I got a lot of feedback from young people saying how exciting it was to be out and visible in such a public place, to feel comfortable and safe, and to have the general public respecting their identities. So, that's really what I took out of that experience, is the opportunity to make Manchester Museum and other spaces somewhere that young people, especially LGBTQ+ young people can feel safe and comfortable.

00:04:52 Dan Vo

I think there's two themes that we kind of wanted to pick up on today as well, which was to do with on one hand, belonging, and the other hand representation.

00:05:00 Mattie Davies

Yeah, I think something that is really special about this type of visibility and representation is they're being their own representation. They are putting themselves out there in a way that is really quite scary to do. But they've put themselves in the public space, in Manchester Museum in this case, for the general public, and to have their identity reflected in one another and maybe audience will see them, and feel seen and represented.

00:05:32 Dan Vo

I think that's the thing that when we approach all of this, we kind of think in terms of the community or the communities, so we think quite big in terms of the way that we engage with people and the way we interact with people. But when it comes down to it, I think the most, the change that you make, it's on a one-to-one basis, isn't it? It's sort of an individual and reaching out to various to, to an individual and being able to change the way they view their relationship with the museum, their relationship with society as well. That change happens very much in a very intimate way, and it's very much about creating a space where they can explore a lot of those things; where they belong, and that leads to that better representation. I love the idea that also the LGBT+ History Month is just such a great way for museums to be able to make that space.

00:06:29 Mattie Davies

Yeah, it's very much about the individual impression and reaction for me. And it's all about individual people, and a community is made up of individuals, and that's where you start. So that's my sense of the young people that I work with, how they feel about approaching the Manchester Museum space now is that they find that it is somewhere that they can feel safe and belong in. And I spoke to number who said they probably wouldn't come before, but are now likely to come back and visit again because they know it's a space where they are welcome.

What do you see elsewhere in the UK? I know you're based in London; do you see events and things like this happening elsewhere?

00:07:21 Dan Vo

So, I see that there is a lot of interest, and there's growing interest across the sector, and I've been having conversations with almost 50 museums, galleries, libraries, archives, museums, the GLAMs of our sector. So, I've had about 50 conversations across the board and it's really interesting to see what people are doing, the sort of challenges that they have to overcome to do amazing events like this or to open up the spaces to our communities. And then what happens when they sort of hit those goals? What happens when they actually are able to successfully hold events or exhibitions or work with communities? And I think the most interesting thing for me right now is that I feel that there's a really strong sense of involving co-curation, in the way that we look at our galleries, the way that we interpret our collections, as well and involving our communities in, on one hand, queering collections or asking questions about collections, you know, what can we find in our collections that have a queer overlay, queer history story connected to it that wasn't previously told in the past? I think that's really becoming an important area of research for a lot of organisations and it's great to see that, you know. We launched the Queer Heritage Collections Network just at the start of lockdown, so, I think that, yeah, it is becoming a really important aspect of any museum's work, recognising that there are stories that need to be given extra research in order to better bring them up to the surface and share them with people. And I think there's a really nice intersectional overlay as well in what we do. So, you've got queer histories on one side, but for me, that does connect up with decolonising collections as well. And so, you can instantly talk about, for example, the anti-homosexual laws that went around the world during the colonial, British Colonial era with that British colonial contact. And that has an implication on so many World collections that are presented in lots of museums.

00:09:33 Mattie Davies

Absolutely, yeah. Some that's really important to me is that when we talk about queering museums and queering this and that, inquiring, queering is an inherently political act, it is very much tied up in the politics of LGBT+ civil rights history and, you know, there's the, there's different sayings like "no equality for any of us until there's equality for all of us." I think we need to think about those intersections and make sure that all of this is working together. Decolonisation needs an element of queering and queering can't exist without working on decolonisation.

00:10:17 Dan Vo

I think the thing is also that we find that if you go beyond the Colonial era, if you look back into the past with so many different countries around the world, there is such a stronger sense of gender and sexual diversity in the past, and that is where all of these stories do come together quite neatly, I think, and there's a really important aspect in that, in being able to tell the idea that there was so much different ways of looking at the world in the past, and that helps us understand ourselves in the present day, a lot better as well. And understanding the past, remembering the past also can have an implication on the way that we look at law reform right now as well. So, for the countries where they still retain those Colonial laws, there's potential to actually go, well actually, that's not part of our past, and so we can actually look at law reform based on what it means to us, from our past. And I think that you're absolutely right in terms of gay rights or LGBTQ+ rights in this country have reached a certain level. And I think that we need to kind of look at how we can support other countries around the world as well in their own reform as well, because I feel that there is a bit of a duty there because of the way that Britain influenced the rest of the world. And it's not to say that we go around saying, "no, you should change your laws, this is how you need to do it." It's to work with the activists in those countries as well, to be able to help them with law reform and a lot of that is about being able to better understand history.

And I think it brings us back to the idea of the museum with the idea of representation and recognising, you've obviously got those communities, but it is made up of individuals, as you rightly pointed out, and being able to recognise the uniqueness of each individual or even the difference of each individual, and how they then kind of fit into that bigger jigsaw puzzle is quite crucial, isn't it? And being able to celebrate the individual, and in doing that, you can then

celebrate the whole of the communities that you are working with or you're seeking to serve.

And I think LGBT+ History Month, we've got a saying which is from our founder, Sue Sanders, which I rather like, which is to 'usualise' the experience, 'usualise' things, and so it sort of takes away that word 'normal' and takes away the idea of there are certain norms, that it just makes everything, you know, it's about being able to celebrate those differences. And then at the same time being able to celebrate unity, in which way you bring all the people together as well.

I think it's really important to remember, for you and me, as well as people who work with the communities to remember that as well, that people do come from all sorts of different backgrounds, and different places on their journey. And I personally feel as well, you know, there's so much we have to work to overcome, internalised homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and racism as well. There's elements that we, ourselves are raised with, and we need to challenge ourselves before we can assist others as well, and being able to recognise that and doing that work personally, as well is quite, is quite strong and powerful.

00:13:36 Mattie Davies

Absolutely, I think internalised phobias represents a very large part of the community work that I focus on, and that acknowledgement is difficult, but more than acknowledgement is really, really work on it. You know, we grow up in a society where we can't help but internalise homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, racism, and classism, and it requires constant work to acknowledge and challenge those thought patterns. But I think also, yeah, working on those internalised behaviours is nothing to be ashamed of, it's something we should be vocally working towards, and that can help challenge those thoughts. If you're going through a museum and you've come across an event or an exhibit, or a staff member, who kind of challenges your ideas, I think that's an opportunity to go "well, hang on, why does that make me comfortable? Why does that make me uncertain?" It's where representation and visibility can be useful for absolutely everybody.

00:14:52 Dan Vo

I mean, part of this is also to acknowledge that doing this on a daily basis, it can get tiring sometimes. How do you reset? How do you recharge?

00:15:07 Mattie Davies

Oh, I mean, friends, I mentioned community work, and that involves a lot of sort of social groups that I am involved in. And just being part of those groups, being in a space which is, like, purely trans people, or just LGBT+ people, is a great way to recharge your batteries, and maybe have a little bit of a vent, lot of events, and, or just to distract ourselves with the game, or with a film or something. And so really focusing on those support systems and find those in your lives is something that I really advocate for. Yeah, and in particular, I think we both share a love for Dungeon Dragons, which I play with my queer friend groups a lot.

00:15:57 Dan Vo

I, you know, that's a new thing to me, Dungeons and Dragons, but it is such a wonderful way of keeping friends connected, getting each other onto a, literally, a team. You're working together, problem solving together. I think it's a nice metaphor for kind of just working through professional life as well.

00:16:15 Mattie Davies

It is, you know, I've used Dungeons and Dragons and other roleplaying games as a metaphor, and actually think in a number of job applications for guiding people on narratives, which is what museum's is about. It's about telling a story, guiding the public or visitors through that story. And I think there's a lot of storytelling skills I've picked up from my background, and it's a really popular hobby among queer folks as well, because it's roleplay. It's an opportunity to be someone else, to try on different identities. And I think that there's a cross-section, funnily enough.

00:16:57 Dan Vo

It's a really interesting way to connect up to the museum as well, because for me the going to a new museum is like an adventure. I try not to know anything about the museum before I go in, because that first time that you make that contact and you start to explore the galleries, you don't know what's going to be in there and what's around the next corner and the way that the story will unfold to you. And I really like that as a way of kind of exploring the narrative through Dungeons and Dragons, as the museum, as the as the site for, a site for the play. I mean, I

think a good trip to the museum, it should be play as well. There should be the ability to just go in and completely shut down everything else and just enjoy the space, enjoy the art, enjoy the walking around and just being in the most immersive type of game possible.

00:17:50 Mattie Davies

Totally, I think what my favourite museum experiences of the past couple years, it was at the nearby Bolton Museum, and they had the Love, Desire, Identity travelling exhibition that come up from the British Museum. But they also put a very specifically Boltonian twists on it. A lot of focus on local history, and that was absolutely wonderful to go to, but what really, one the one thing that really stuck with me about the exhibit was they had a performance element. There was what they called the Museum Monologues, and it was stories from four different historical LGBT+ figures talking about their experiences, their identities, in the context of Bolton and local area. And it was so engaging, the actors would really look at you and ask you questions, and get you to really, really think. And they would bring you along this story, and it was so, so immersive. So, I think using stories is a really strong way to communicate with people in a museum context.

And the thing that really stops me in my tracks was passing by a display case, and there was in there pronoun badges, really simple pronoun badges. One said "they/them", there's another said, I think, "asked me about my pronouns" and it really stopped me in my tracks, because that was something that, I mean, that I put on most days, usually on my work lanyard, I think I had got one on my jacket. I think I had one on at the time. And to see an everyday part of my identity, my experience, in a museum exhibit, it was kind of surreal. I didn't really know what it was like to be seen in a museum in that way before, and to feel like, wow, this is something that's really important and that people should know about as a piece of history, and ongoing history, that was something that I really want other people to be able to experience in museum settings.

00:20:07 Dan Vo

I mean, it's one way to make someone feel incredibly old though, to say you are definitely a museum accessionable object. But yeah, it's so crucial, and often when you work in oral histories, people kind of go, "I don't have anything to tell," but you go "actually you do have so much to tell us," because a historian isn't just interested in the grand narratives at Kings and Queens and celebrities, and you know, famous people, we actually want to know about everyday life experiences

as well, and how big events are thought about by different people. So, the different perspectives that are brought to bear on all history, and so I think that that's a really important bit of work.

00:20:52 Mattie Davies

You mentioned a while back about co-curation, that is something that's really critical for me about queer museum spaces and that collection. And another one of the most impactful museum exhibits I've ever seen was the Museum of Transology, which the collection which I believe currently at Bishopsgate, but I saw it when it was at Brighton Museum last year. And it's all objects that have been being donated by trans people across the UK mostly, a few from abroad as well, I believe. But the thing that's really good about it to me is that every single label, every single, like, description and story about each and every object was written by the person who donated it. So, it is just rammed with personal stories that really paint a picture of the wider community and that is just so impactful, so emotive to see.

00:22:08 Dan Vo

I had a chance to interview E-J Scott, the founder, on the radio too, for Alphabet Radio. And even within a collection like the Museum of Transology collection, E-J is now putting in a little of effort and work to seek out stories of trans people, from Black and people of colour. So, trying to diversify the stories as well. So, I think even when you've got a collection like that, it is so crucial for us to be thinking about intersectionality and how we better represent. Coming back to the idea of representation as well, you know, how do we better do that as well in any collection? So, it is such a wonderful collection though, and I've seen snippets of it since its move to the Bishopsgate. But it was remarkable to be able to walk into, that space at Brighton Museum, and you're right, seeing those handwritten labels, seeing though that really, really personal touch to the object I think was eye opening and really connects you so instantly with the person who gave the object to the museum as well.

So, I think everything kind of anchors in with the idea of how do you give people a sense of belonging in museums? And also, how do you look at representation? What do you think is the key takeaway for you, Mattie?

00:23:39 Mattie Davies

I think, coming back to what we just talked about with co-curation and the approach at the Museum of Transology took was to reach out to communities, so E-J Scott went out and did workshops with trans groups and social groups and really skilled up people and gave them storytelling and curation knowledge, and I think that demonstrates how to do community co-curation, community outreach is, you don't just put on an event inside the museum and expect people to come, you need to go out into those communities and bring them in.

00:24:33 Dan Vo

It's definitely the idea that, and I think you placed it in my mind as well just then, which is the idea that, you know, nothing is without us, but it's always for and by us. And ultimately, it's a constant process, and so we always need to be continuing to question, and continuing to challenge, and by doing that we continue to learn. And I think it's just accepting that we're never going to have, "this is the gold standard of exactly how we're going to do everything," because we're just gonna have to keep on working to get better and better.

00:25:10 Mattie Davies

But I think that's actually crucial, there's no one 'golden way' of doing it, because there is no 'one' of anything, there's no one way being a person, and if we're really going to be celebrating the different, the diversity in in our wider global community, we really need to be telling different stories, we need to be taking different approaches and using different techniques trying different people.

00:25:39 Dan Vo

You know, Mattie, I'd love to have more chats with you, but we will have to draw to a close. It's been an absolute honour.

00:25:46 Mattie Davies

Alright, really, really good pleasure speaking to you, Dan. Ta-ra!