

## **TOWARDS A NATIONAL COLLECTION** **PRESS RELEASE**



### **£310,000 funding boost for new digital research into the impact of COVID-19 on the heritage sector**

Three new COVID-19 digital research projects have been funded by the [Towards a National Collection](#) programme, as part of a five-year £18.9 million investment by the (UKRI) Strategic Priorities Fund and delivered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

*Towards a National Collection* (TaNC) will take the first steps towards creating a virtual 'national collection' through funding pioneering research. Aiming to extend researcher and public access to collections beyond the physical boundaries of their location, TaNC represents a vital leap forwards in digital innovation, while celebrating cultural heritage as a keystone in the UK's Recovery story.

The three digital projects were selected as part of TaNC's 'Urgency Call' to provide a critical and time-sensitive evaluation of the digital practice undertaken by museums during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide scalable lessons to inform future museum practice as well as the overall TaNC programme.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, digital access was left as the only option for heritage organisations to engage with their audiences and presented many challenges to the sector. This has opened a vital research agenda on how the public are interacting with collections and what lessons can be learnt for future digital provision.

These TaNC Urgency projects will help provide much-needed guidance on how cultural institutions can engage with virtual users as well as being better prepared for digital access in general. Building on data collected during the first lockdown, the projects will analyse the effectiveness and reach of digital collections and advise on solutions to the digital divide between large and small collection institutions.

[Professor Gobinda Chowdhury](#) of the University of Strathclyde in conjunction with the University of Edinburgh will be working with National Museums Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland to analyse the digital pathways of visitors to their websites during the lockdowns. The aim is to establish what attracts visitors, which pathways lead to engagement (Google Arts and Culture, Art UK etc), and how different stages of the pandemic affected interaction.

Online collections are now a major route through which users can experience artworks and cultural artefacts from galleries, libraries, archives and museums. While many large

institutions have the resources and skills to make their collections accessible online, [Professor Julian Richards and Dr Darren Reed](#) from the University of York (working with the Collections Trust, Culture24, The Audience Agency, Museum of London Archaeology and others) will support a cohort of smaller museums to navigate the digital challenge. Following the FAIR data principles (data should be Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) the project will identify best practices and tools for those with lesser budgets and lower levels of digital literacy. Professor Richards said: 'Small heritage institutions face major challenges in creating reusable and sustainable digital resources. We want to use our experience in digital curation to help them maximise the value of their investments in digital resources.'

[Kevin Gosling, head of the Collections Trust](#) said: 'In lockdown, digital engagement is the only way UK museums can connect with their audiences. As some museums prepare to re-open, others have written off the entire year, and physical visitor numbers are unlikely to rebuild soon. [Collections Trust found](#) that during lockdown, staff and volunteers in over a third of museums could not access their collections data themselves, never mind share it. Our collaboration with the University of York aims to investigate how this situation can be mitigated and to provide direct support to help small collections build their digital capacity.'

Finally, [Dr Leonardo Impett](#) from Durham University and [Professor Joasia Krysa](#) from Liverpool John Moores University will look at public interaction with the 2020-21 virtual Liverpool Biennial and how that differs to previous, physical events. The project will ask questions around who views an online collection (local, regional or national) and what happens when you introduce machine curation to the exhibition process.

[Edward Harcourt, Director of Research, Strategy and Innovation](#) at AHRC notes that, 'We have funded these projects to identify the role of digital collections in addressing the impact of the pandemic on the collections sector as a whole. The projects will increase understanding of the full extent of public interaction with online collections and identify digital patterns and practices in order to shape a coherent and comprehensive response that secures the well-being of our heritage sector as the pandemic recedes.'

## Projects

### **Digital footprints and search pathways: working with National Collections in Scotland during Covid-19 lockdown to design future online provision**

**Principal Investigator:** Professor Gobinda Chowdhury, The University of Strathclyde

**Partners:** The University of Edinburgh, National Museums Scotland, & National Galleries of Scotland

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting every aspect of daily life, including the human need to connect to collections held at [museums and galleries](#). The timing of the pandemic has been particularly damaging for [Scotland's 409 museums and galleries](#). A clear understanding of how people access national collections online can make cultural institutions better prepared for digital service provisions in general, and especially for a crisis situation should there be another lockdown for COVID-19 or a similar catastrophe. This project will undertake a longitudinal study of the digital footprints of users in two national collections – National Museums of Scotland and National Galleries of Scotland – over a 12-month period to investigate:

- how people engaged with heritage collections during the lockdown/post-lockdown period;
- whether the lockdown changed digital access patterns;
- which collections/objects drew more users; and
- where users are accessing these: through the institutions websites, or through external platforms like Google Arts and Culture, Youtube, etc.

The project will lead to a short term impact by informing: (a) future policy decisions on the most effective digital platforms for national collections, and (b) how the knowledge of online access patterns can be used to design search pathways that can lead to an ontology-based approach to linking collections combining the user search terms and semantics-based representations of the collections/items accessed. This can make a long term contribution to heritage collection data standards, particularly what data is recorded at object level, something similar to what [CETAF](#) is achieving for natural history specimens.

### **Making it FAIR: understanding the lockdown 'digital divide' and the implications for the development of UK digital infrastructures**

**Principal Investigator:** Professor Julian Richards, The University of York

**Partners:** Museum of London Archaeology, The Collections Trust, Culture24, The Audience Agency, Intelligent Heritage & Knowledge Integration

Our project will respond to challenges faced by smaller museums struggling to engage online with audiences during varying levels of lockdown, and beyond. These problems include low levels of basic digital literacy, poor understanding of audiences, uncertainty over how to transfer real-world interpretive practice to the digital realm, lack of guidance about technical solutions, barriers to future-proofing digital assets in line with the FAIR data principles (data should be Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) all while working with shoestring budgets.

*Making it FAIR* will create a community of practice that will extend beyond the immediate participants to museums across the UK. The core cohort will receive training, mentoring and technical support to develop digital collections-focused content to stay connected with existing audiences, and reach new audiences. This community will explore prototype solutions for user-group testing, responding directly to emerging challenges and informing the TaNC Discovery process. As participants encounter difficulties along the way, the project team will also respond where possible to that demonstrate how a fully developed infrastructure might support smaller museums. Through critical evaluation of current practice in microcosm through online workshops, and a technical gap analysis, *Making it FAIR* will draw scalable lessons to inform Towards a National Collection's (TaNC) Discovery phase, and AHRC's infrastructure planning.

### **Visitor Interaction and Machine Curation in the Virtual Liverpool Biennial**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr Leonardo Impett, The University of Durham

**Partners:** Liverpool John Moores University & The Liverpool Biennial

Our project seeks to understand how the public interact differently with virtual art events than they would with physical ones. In particular, we are interested in how interaction might change when visitors no longer passively watch an event, but actively participate in its curation. They do this by co-curating the event with a machine learning algorithm - in our experiments, an online edition of the 2020-21 Liverpool Biennial. In doing so, we propose taking these algorithms beyond the “search engine” context in which they have mostly been used to date, and instead consider them to be curatorial.

We are also interested in what kind of public might visit such an online machine curated exhibition. Online exhibitions have shown great potential in bringing art to an international public (at a far lower cost to the environment than flying) but might they also disappoint their audiences - including local residents - that the Biennial was intended to serve? How might these different kinds of public (with different technical skills and different degrees of expertise in contemporary art) interact and co-curate the exhibition differently? Our relationship with computers is changing rapidly; and by comparing our own experiments to a previous online project of the Liverpool Biennial from 2016, we will also be able to track how these patterns might have shifted through time and in relation to developments in automation. These are crucial questions as museums try to imagine new forms of exhibiting, curating, public interaction, and income generation that continue to speak to diverse audiences.

### **About Towards a National Collection**

**Programme Director:** Rebecca Bailey

Towards a National Collection is a major five-year research and development programme that aims to underpin the creation of a unified virtual ‘national collection’, dissolving barriers between the different collections of the UK’s museums, archives, libraries and galleries. Its ambition is to extend and diversify researcher and public access to our world-renowned collections beyond the physical boundaries of their location. The innovation driven by the programme will help to maintain the UK’s world leadership in digital humanities and set global standards in the field.

The programme is funded through a £18.9 million investment by UK Research and Innovation’s (UKRI) Strategic Priorities Fund and delivered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The programme Directorate is based at the Independent Research Organisation, Historic Environment Scotland.

### **About the Arts and Humanities Research Council**

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation, funds internationally outstanding independent researchers across the whole range of the arts and humanities: history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages and literature, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and much more. The quality and range of research supported by AHRC works for the good of UK society and culture and contributes both to UK economic success and to the culture and welfare of societies across the globe.

### **For further information contact:**

Colin McDowall | Communications & Events Co-Ordinator (Towards a National Collection)  
[colin.mcdowall@hes.scot](mailto:colin.mcdowall@hes.scot)