

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience

Industry Stakeholders
Report, December 2020



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council



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December 2020**

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"The historic locations are a fantastic opportunity to engage with hidden histories and untold histories."

Commissioned artist

01 Foreword



This report reflects upon the outcomes and findings of *Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience* (MCAHE). The project was the first of its type, bringing serious critical examination to the role and practice of commissioning new temporary artworks in heritage properties. We explored the effects of this on audiences, properties and artists.

The project was carried out between 2017 and 2020, by a team of researchers from Newcastle and Leeds Universities, working in partnership with the National Trust, the Churches Conservation Trust, English Heritage, Arts Council England, the Contemporary Visual Art Network and Arts&Heritage. Funding for the research was provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), with additional support from our partner organisations and Newcastle and Leeds Universities. This report summarises the research and makes recommendations for stakeholders involved in commissioning and siting works of art in heritage environments.

We are grateful for the contribution of our heritage partners, the commissioned artists and our focus group participants, all of whom have been generous in their involvement in the project and in reflecting upon it afterwards. These reflections have been key to informing our recommendations. Our focus group participants, drawn from regular heritage visitors and those who rarely attend such venues, journeyed with us throughout the research process, providing invaluable insight into how public audiences understand and appreciate contemporary artworks.

The strong and positive relationships formed through the research have been a key to the project's success. We particularly appreciate the contribution of staff and volunteers who work at the sites for our commissions: Gibside and Cherryburn, both managed by the National Trust; Holy Trinity Church in Sunderland, managed by the Churches Conservation Trust; and Belsay Hall, managed by English Heritage. Thanks also to Andrew Fletcher at Mercury Writing, who helped with writing this report.

02 Key Findings



Creation

- Spending time at heritage sites and researching them can have a transformative effect on artists' career options, generating new outlets and opportunities.
- Making work within heritage contexts can directly influence artistic practice and lead to new ways of working – with different materials, scales and subject matter.
- Working processes between heritage sites and artists are complex and benefit from well-defined structures that are understood by all parties from the outset.
- Artists bring their own reflections and ideas to historical contexts. They should not be steered towards telling a specific narrative. Commissioners should design interesting, open artist briefs to make a space for creative development.
 - Heritage organisations desiring to 'know' what the finished artwork will be can potentially conflict with or constrain some artistic processes. Similarly, artists may have different ideas around autonomy and creative control. Proper consideration must be given to these questions early on.
- Strong communication between artists and heritage organisations is critical. A nominated liaison within the heritage organisation can ensure effective two-way communication throughout the project.
 - The scale and complexity of the property or commission will be reflected in the size of its steering group. Whether this is an individual or a large team, there remains a need for a clearly identified project manager or point of contact.
- Artists can be powerful agents, work within and across communities. The creative activity therefore has impact beyond simply the artist and the property.

Consumption

- Presenting histories differently or more vividly increases knowledge and encourages enquiry. Artists can play a significant and important role in revealing and exploring new creative modes of presentation.
 - Artworks can deepen and enrich emotional responses to an historic site, making its stories more vivid and its history more relevant to current events.
 - Art can create new audience experiences for both arts and heritage audiences.
 - This is beneficial for audiences and staff, as well as heritage organisations' self-perception and ideas around the wider roles of heritage in society.
- While art and heritage audiences often overlap, this is not always true. Commissioning new artworks in heritage sites provides a route into contemporary art for audiences who may not ordinarily visit art galleries.
- Accessible understandings depend on effective interpretation. While this should not be overpowering, a lack of interpretation risks creating a sense of exclusion.
 - Interpretive materials must be well judged, imaginative and offer creative solutions for engagement.
 - The role of volunteers in the presentation and understanding of the work is critical. There is a need for training for volunteers to enable them to gain confidence in presenting contemporary works.

**"We got members of staff talking to the visitors in a more engaging way."
Heritage organisation, staff member**

Exchange

- In exchange terms, the value of this practice is oriented around three imperatives: audience engagement, interpretative work and arts/artist development.
- UK contemporary art in heritage activity has expanded massively since 1990, creating a status of a new 'commissioning industry'. Definitions of heritage sites have also broadened, from the 'country house museum' to include historic landscapes, archaeological and industrial heritage sites, and others.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many industries to an abrupt halt and the looming financial consequences of this mean that the future is uncertain for both the arts and heritage sectors.
- Despite this, arts commissioning in heritage is considered to be worth strategic investment. Organisations including Arts Council England, National Trust, English Heritage, The Canal and River Trust, The Forestry Commission and others, have given significant support to arts in heritage activity. So while strategic priorities will always change in response to a fluid landscape, there exists a precedent for supporting this activity, and mounting evidence of its benefits across both sectors.
- The MCAHE research revealed areas where practical change and reviewing commissioning processes can give voice to hidden histories and to hitherto silenced narratives through: a) telling different stories associated with heritage sites and b) generating opportunities for more diverse artists from marginalised groups.



Summary of recommendations

A key theme among these recommendations is collaboration. Successful joint working relies on understanding and buy-in from all parties. It is also important to recognise the diversity in the relationships between venues and their heritage organisations, and the level of involvement each might have in commissioning an art project. With those points in mind, these recommendations can have relevance across several stakeholder groups and we advise readers to consider all of them accordingly.

Heritage organisations

- Consider the long term. The criteria for business cases for commissioning contemporary art should be aligned with audience development strategies rather than income-driven targets.
- Heritage organisations considering contemporary programming must have buy-in at all levels to ensure understanding of all strategic and operational objectives. This should be reflected from the initial discussions onwards.
- It is important to seek opportunities for joint-funding and for budget optimisation.
- In developing artist briefs, heritage organisations should consider whether to give a clear 'steer' or to leave things open.
- Contracts can vary widely and expert advice might need to be sought. Make use of sector support organisations (some are detailed at the end of this report).

Heritage organisations and venues

- Heritage organisations and venues must be realistic about the full scope of a project and its associated costs. A clear understanding of artists' requirements is vital.
- When developing a project timeline, plan backwards from a commission's installation. Flexibility should be built into the overall plan.
- Ensure enough administrative capacity if commissioning artists through an Open Call.
- Take care with invited calls to respect equality, diversity and inclusion principles.
- Inform marketing and communications teams of the artist's intentions from the outset, to make the most of media coverage.



Venues

- Actively involve staff/organisations in designing the artist's brief and the selection of artists.
 - Use accessible language when presenting and promoting artists' work within a heritage context; terms used in a gallery context may not be appropriate for a heritage venue.
 - Staff and volunteers who will be responsible for the artwork and its interpretation onsite should be involved in developing the project outline, the artist's brief and selection of the artist. Consider in-house training to assist them in the eventual presentation at property level.
 - Representation from all relevant departments is important for project steering, with handover plans in place to accommodate staff turnover. If a team is not possible, the artist must have a dedicated contact within the organisation.
- Discuss various methods of printed interpretation early in the project. Involve artists and, where possible, interpretation managers. Set aside a budget for display panels, films and screens.
 - Team-wide buy-in and enthusiasm enables greater coordination across the whole project.

Venues and artists

- Site visits are an important part of the commissioning process. Curators and other relevant staff should be available during visits, and archive material made available to artists. Curators and staff should be aware that they will be contacted by artists.
- Good communication between the steering group, staff and volunteer team, and the artist will help to mitigate issues that may arise as the project develops.

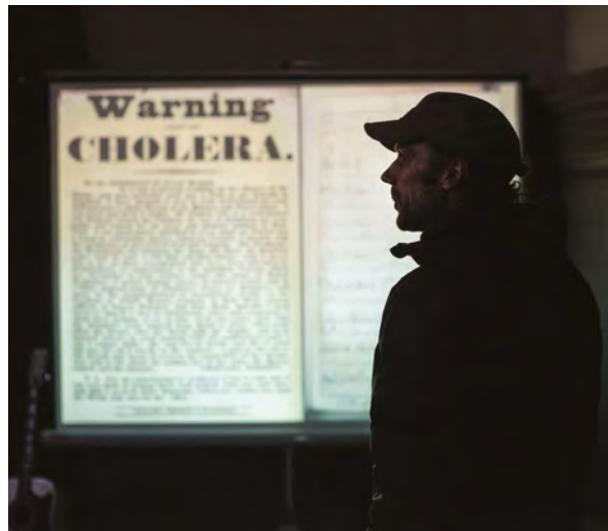
- All parties should have the same understanding of any specialist terminology or issues in both the arts and the heritage sectors. Define terms prior to any negotiations.
- Alternative ways of interpreting the artworks should be discussed, and the need for understanding and explaining the work should be clearly stated in the brief.

Artists

- Artists should see heritage commissioning as an opportunity that can bring real benefits to their practice but may also involve different ways of working, especially the need to observe heritage organisations' priorities and constraints.
- Such commissions offer artists opportunities to engage with new materials, new audiences and understand their practices in different terms.
- We also recommend that artists are aware of venue and organisation responsibilities and encourage involvement, transparent communication and joint working wherever possible.
- Artwork outside of a gallery context may need additional interpretation to allow a 'way in' for some audiences normally more aligned to heritage venues.
- More broadly, artists must understand that despite some crossover, the audience for their work is a different one.

Heritage organisations and wider stakeholders, including academics, funders and cultural partners

- Understanding contemporary art commissioning in heritage sites needs to be expanded to consider national policy, funding and international contexts.
- Serious consideration should be given to the development of other kinds of spaces and forums for new professional and critical exchange on this subject, including the encouragement of new critical writing on artistic and curatorial practice in this field.
- More institutional attention should be given to the legacy of commissioned artworks beyond their initial timescale and site-specificity, including their potential as an accessible collection or archive.





Belsay Hall, English Heritage, the location for Susan Philipsz's sound-based installation *The Yellow Wallpaper*

03 Introduction

Recent decades have seen a great increase in the number and variety of works of contemporary art commissioned for heritage sites. Artworks reflect the full range of contemporary art: performances, participatory events and immersive video installations, sculpture and painting, socially engaged practice, among others. Artists have drawn upon cutting edge digital technology as well as their expertise in more traditional methods. Some artworks have been political and topical, while others have brought new perspectives on established histories.

Works of art are powerful – they can prompt enquiry, elicit emotional responses, provoke thought or disrupt. Commissioned artworks are often immediately well-received and valued by visitors and heritage workers, but they may also be challenging. Sometimes the reason for commissioning a particular work in a particular site is clear, and the art immediately opens up new and exciting ways of thinking about heritage. At other times, the rationale is more ambiguous, or the work itself raises unforeseen issues. Prior to any work being created, the commissioning process itself can be an interesting journey, where different ways of thinking by artists, curators and heritage professionals can release a creative energy.

As well as exploring the many positives of art commissioning within heritage, Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience examined how and why the process of commissioning an artist for a heritage site might come unstuck or provoke tensions. This can undermine a significant investment of time, money and creative energy but can also provide valuable lessons. Our findings signal how partners can collectively learn from the experience to make continuous improvements and get the best from contemporary arts commissioning. The research captured a broad range of stakeholder perspectives through interviews and focus groups with heritage visitors, volunteers, staff, artists and commissioning organisations at many different stages of the commissioning process.

We aimed to map the current landscape and explore the impact and processes of heritage arts commissioning on producers, artists and audiences. By involving academics, artists, experts in audiences and art curating, and heritage professionals, the research was interdisciplinary by design.

Public outputs included seven new commissioned artworks sited in heritage settings in North East England in 2018-19. A public exhibition at Newcastle's Hatton Gallery brought the exhibited works together, enabling audiences unable to visit the original venues to experience them, and allowing us to explore the impact of the artworks and their presentation in an off-site context. A major international conference at Newcastle University in 2019 attracted some 200 delegates, enabling a vibrant and robust discussion of the current landscape.

The project had several linked aims, designed to benefit stakeholders across arts, heritage, commissioning and academic sectors:

Map the trajectory of contemporary art in heritage sites in the UK

Many heritage organisations are investing in contemporary art as a way of developing new opportunities for public engagement. Organisations such as Arts Council England strategically support this work as a significant means of fulfilling their mission to promote engagement and creative potential in individuals and community, invest in artistic practice and demonstrate creative excellence and public benefit. MCAHE has generated important new knowledge for the sector, including for its funders and policy makers. A new online resource, now publicly available as a Google Map, develops, expands and digitises an existing audit of such projects: <https://www.mappingcontemporary.art>.

Understand how artists engage with the heritage context in the creation of contemporary art for heritage properties

For many artists, heritage-linked commissions are an increasingly important strand within their practice, providing a rich foundation upon which to make new work and an income stream. Through case study research, centring on the MCAHE art commissions and their development, the project explored how contemporary artists engage with heritage narratives. The findings have been developed into this report to help artists and commissioners work better together.

"Caring for the artwork has created a sharp sense of stakeholder among individuals and buy-in from the wider volunteer team for future projects."

Heritage organisation, staff member

Analyse how heritage property visitors and staff receive and consume contemporary artworks in these settings

The impact of such projects on their producers and audiences is poorly understood. Through case study research, focus groups and interviews, MCAHE aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of organisational experiences of art commissioning, audience responses, and the experiences of staff and volunteers working directly with the art.

Our report makes recommendations that can help guide all those involved in the process to ensure that art commissioning provides as much value as possible for heritage venues. The MCAHE website offers an in-depth account of the project.

<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/mcahe/>



Research themes

The project addressed a series of research questions gathered under three key themes: Creation. Consumption. Exchange.

Creation

- How do artists engage with heritage contexts and narratives within the creation of commissioned artworks?
- What are the conceptual and practical challenges of creating site-specific works for a heritage property context?
- Do such commissions generate new creative approaches and artistic strategies that might impact on artists' future practice?

Consumption

- How and to what extent does contemporary art add to the audience experience of heritage, and what potential benefit does it bring for the host organisation, the property staff and volunteers?
- Can encounters with art in heritage places inspire a broader interest and enthusiasm for contemporary art?

Exchange

- What is the current landscape of contemporary art in heritage practice in the UK? How might we map and share knowledge of this practice across interested communities in the arts and heritage sectors?
- What are the criteria for evaluating the contemporary art and heritage experience from a producer and audience perspective?
- What are the key issues or barriers for commissioners, artists and audiences engaged in or wishing to develop this area of practice?



Case studies

Our case study commissions were sited at four heritage properties in North East England.

Gibside

(Managed by the National Trust)

A vast landscaped estate with a Palladian chapel and other historic buildings, some semi-ruinous.

Belsay Hall

(English Heritage)

A fine neo-classical country house with an atmospheric empty interior.

Cherryburn

(National Trust)

Birthplace of the celebrated 18th Century engraver Thomas Bewick; offers an intimate visitor experience.

Holy Trinity Church

(Churches Conservation Trust)

An inner city Georgian Church in the early stages of restoration during this project.

Each site presented a different context, scale and situation, and differed greatly in their staffing and management. Gibside had over 400 volunteers, while Holy Trinity Church relied on a core group of four volunteers.

Two further artworks were commissioned: Marcus Coates' *Conference for the Birds*, a National Trust / Newcastle University co-commissioned artwork for Thomas Bewick's birthplace at Cherryburn; and Martin Hylton's *Prospects*, a choreographed dance, performed at the MCAHE conference, Newcastle University in 2019.



"It's thrown up questions about the site. I would be interested to know more about Mary Eleanor Bowes and her relationship to the site and the work that she did in the botanical sphere... as a way of drawing that to my attention, the art's been very successful."
Contemporary arts attendees focus group member

Fiona Curran's *Your Sweetest Empire is to Please*
at National Trust, Gibside

Gibside, Rowlands Gill, Tyne and Wear

National Trust Gibside lies to the west of Gateshead and is famous for its 18th century designed landscapes. Gibside was inherited in 1760 by Mary Eleanor Bowes, whose harrowing story of abuse, rained on her by her violent husband, Andrew Robinson 'Stoney' Bowes, led to her becoming known as 'the unhappy countess'. This became the focus for the artist's brief. Four shortlisted artists were asked to develop proposals relating to Mary Eleanor and to the National Trust's programme theme of Women and Power. Two commissioned artists liaised closely with National Trust gardeners, curators, conservationists, operational staff and volunteers.

Your Sweetest Empire Is To Please

Fiona Curran

Fiona Curran's work for Gibside takes its title from a poem by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), which is quoted by Mary Wollstonecraft as an example of women being depicted as delicate or exotic flowers, 'born for pleasure and delight alone'. The work focuses on Mary Eleanor's passion for botany and collecting plants – an occupation that was all the rage in Georgian England. Specimens were transported from across the world to the Orangery at Gibside in Wardian Cases, containers that sheltered them from salt water and exposed them to light. Curran scaled up the Wardian Case to become a striking contemporary architectural feature celebrating Mary Eleanor's life – and the lives of all women whose aspirations have been stifled by society or abusive relationships. Exuberant tropical flowers burst from within the Wardian Case, which is positioned by the Gibside Orangery. Now a ruin, the Orangery became a poignant symbol of the state of the Stoney-Bowes marriage. For Mary Eleanor it was a place to nurture her beloved plants and seedlings; for Stoney, it was the focus of violent diatribes against 'damned weeds'.

"All of that research that I did for the project around women in botany, it's just so fantastic. It has now really taken on a life of its own in terms of my thinking and the studio practice and how it then kind of pushes outwards and connects up with other research. I think it was brilliant to have that very specific story from that site, emerging from that site."

Fiona Curran

The Orangery Urns

Andrew Burton

The Orangery Urns began with the idea of 'returning' a set of ornamental urns that were removed from the Orangery balustrade in the last century. Burton created a group of gigantic vessels made from red and black clay. The artworks, located in and around the walled garden, and next to the spectacular avenue, are metaphors for Mary Eleanor's fragmented relationship with her husband. Some of the vessels are inscribed with Mary Eleanor's own harrowing accounts of episodes that occurred during her disastrous marriage. These were published as the *Confessions of the Countess of Strathmore* (1793), which caused a public scandal. The inscriptions juxtapose extracts from these 'confessions' with lines from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/74), which Mary Eleanor learned to recite as a child at Gibside. Other vessels recount passages from the wonder-filled journals of Mary Eleanor's protégé plant collector, William Paterson, written during his botanical expeditions.

"I wasn't expecting pots but as we went further on along the walk, some of them became quite sinister, the ones that were stapled together had a dangerous look to them. I thought that was very interesting... A good thing to see but it had this nasty idea to it."
Contemporary arts attenders focus group member



"It's relevant to gardening, it's relevant to botany. It's made me want to know more, it's made me curious about Mary Eleanor Bowes."

Contemporary arts attendees focus group member



Andrew Burton's *The Orangery Urns* (foreground) and Fiona Curran's *Your Sweetest Empire is to Please* (background) installed at National Trust, Gibside 21



Susan Philipsz's sound-based installation *The Yellow Wallpaper*
22 at English Heritage, Belsay Hall. Photo: Paul Thompson

Belsay Hall, near Morpeth, Northumberland

Belsay Hall, built and inhabited by Sir Charles Monck, is now cared for and managed by English Heritage. Described as 'a building of austere perfection', it is currently maintained in a condition of 'benign decay'. Its starkly unfurnished interior has proved an inspiration for many artists and designers, who have responded by filling its empty spaces with extraordinary visual responses. Susan Philipsz was invited to make a work for Belsay as part of the MCAHE project.

The Yellow Wallpaper Susan Philipsz

With no objects or furniture to link place to people, fading patches of wallpaper in the bedrooms reminded Philipsz of the melancholic and haunting short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), written by nineteenth century humanist author, Charlotte Gilman Perkins. In her work for Belsay, Philipsz's solitary and lilting voice curled through the empty upper rooms, coaxing the visitor to follow it – much like the hallucinogenic visions that seductively appear in the short story. The vocal works themselves were inspired by *The Border Ballads*, tales of love and death, usually told by a revenant (a person who has returned from the dead), which speak to Northumberland's wild, violent and beautiful Borderland past.

"Sound is materially invisible but very visceral and emotive. It can define a space at the same time as it triggers a memory."

Susan Philipsz

Cherryburn, Mickley Square, Northumberland

The wood engraver, Thomas Bewick, was born in 1753 and lived in Cherryburn, on the southern banks of the River Tyne. The site, now owned by the National Trust, includes the modest cottage in which Bewick was born. Famed for his exquisitely observed drawings and wood engravings, Bewick drew inspiration from his long walks and passion for natural history. The artist's brief for Cherryburn was to relate Bewick's political stance and acute observations of the natural world to twenty-first century observations.

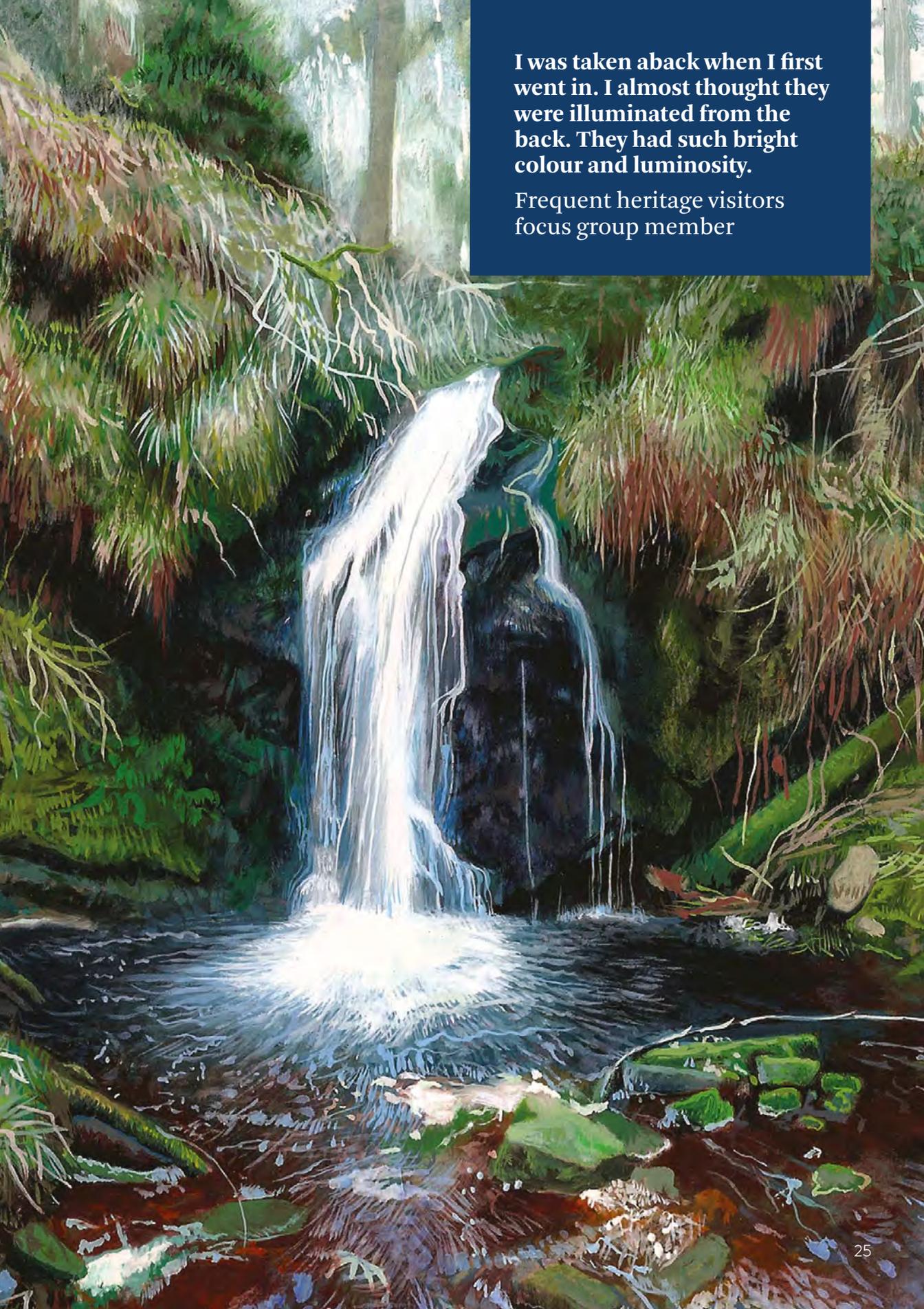
Walking, Looking and Telling Tales

Mark Fairnington

Contemporary painter, Mark Fairnington, took on the 'mantle' of Thomas Bewick, by 'following in his footsteps', recreating walks he made in the landscape surrounding Cherryburn over 200 years ago. Based on sketches of small but vivid details, such as a hanging swing he encountered along the way, Fairnington produced a series of small paintings, taking a contemporary viewpoint. These exquisite works were hung in Bewick's birthplace, a tiny cottage adjacent to the Cherryburn museum.

"It's had a very specific impact in my practice. It opened up an area for my paintings which I'd contemplated before but hadn't gone into, and that's looking at landscape – in relation to the history of landscape images, how they impact on the way landscape's experienced and perceived now.

Mark Fairnington



I was taken aback when I first went in. I almost thought they were illuminated from the back. They had such bright colour and luminosity.

Frequent heritage visitors
focus group member



Conference for the Birds

Marcus Coates

Conference for the Birds was Coates' direct response to Thomas Bewick's lifelong work as a natural history artist, relating ornithology to today's species and environment. Gathering together experts in this field, Coates orchestrated a one day 'conference', where ornithologists 'inhabited' the species they so admired and spoke, imagining a first-hand perspective, as their chosen bird. The conference was recorded and edited by Coates, and presented through speakers positioned underneath huge sculptural birds' heads, positioned in the intimate space of Thomas Bewick's birthplace.



"We didn't expect to see giant birds' heads and hear birds 'talking' in Thomas Bewick's birthplace but we are glad that they are here. The work made us appreciate the birds in our garden more."

Visitor comments card

Holy Trinity Church, East Sunderland

Now under the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, Holy Trinity was an Anglican church in Sunderland. It opened in 1719 and served the local community until 1988. The church was once a vibrant place for religious and civic duties, even housing at times a public library and the fire brigade. As the focus of city life shifted west, Holy Trinity Church became isolated. With the building now in a new stage of renewal and refurbishment, the Churches Conservation Trust is aiming to re-engage local communities and to position the church once again as an important community amenity. The artist's brief was designed to be inclusive and to acknowledge the church's important roles in the past.

Gogmagog: Voices of the Bells

Matt Stokes

As a starting point for his audio installation, Stokes explored the history of the church and gathered narratives from local residents and groups. *Gogmagog* is based on an eight-bell 'Bob Triples' peal composed by Benjamin Annable in the mid-1700s, which was rung at Holy Trinity during the late nineteenth century. The 46-minute composition, developed in collaboration with local musicians, was played through a circle of eight speakers in the centre of the church nave. Five distinct sections, sung by community choirs and singular voices, drew on stories describing the founding of the church, Britain's first cholera outbreak, slum clearances, the dismantling of the nearby Garths housing estate and the opinions of residents today. The work was installed during Holy Trinity's restoration programme, so the necessity for visitors to wear hard hats added an extra dimension to the experience.

"I've been talking to people in Sunderland about some of the changes that they've experienced in living memory, as well as going to archives and finding sources to do with old Sunderland Town and Holy Trinity, and meeting community groups who might be interested in music. The bells of Holy Trinity have been silenced, so it becomes more poetic to think about what the alternative would be."

Matt Stokes





30 Prospects dancers were: Andrea Masala, Patrick Ziza, Igor Tavares and Marcio Inacio

MCAHE Conference

The MCAHE conference, held at Newcastle University in July 2019, attracted speakers from around the world for two days of debate about partnership working across the arts, heritage and wider cultural sectors. As the conference schedule developed, the importance of addressing a diversity of voices became increasingly prominent. An examination of whose heritage is being presented in historic sites inspired the team to approach choreographer, Martin Hylton, Artistic Director of Gateway Studio, to close the conference with a specially commissioned work: the dance composition, *Prospects*.

Prospects Martin Hylton

Prospects was directly inspired by the speech given by Dr Martin Luther King Jr on receiving his honorary doctorate in Kings Hall at Newcastle University in 1967. It brought a vividly dynamic and site-specific understanding of black voices in contemporary art. The piece included recorded excerpts from the speech, while young dancers from Gateway Studios played out their physical responses, choreographed by Hylton. The piece also referenced questions asked of Dr King in his last interview, 11 months before his assassination. It concluded with three young men contemplating their place in the world as the struggle continues. Although the work was performed before the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, its poignancy was not lost on the audience; the struggle for black voices and those of people of colour to be heard and acknowledged is ongoing.

"English heritage often inspires the choreographed work I create, from a Black British perspective, especially by drawing attention to those who are not included in the contemporary presentation of English history. Urgent attention must be given now to addressing these omissions. Dr Martin Luther King Junior's speech in King's Hall in 1967 is more poignant now than it has ever been. It is evident that his words still ring true today to these young performers and his words inspired them to perform eloquently with passion and conviction, portraying strength and struggle for brighter prospects."

Martin Hylton

04 Case Study Findings

Immediate benefits

All four properties – and the three heritage organisations – benefited from including contemporary art in their programming. Working directly with artists influenced working practices and created new ways of thinking about interpretation and the visitor offer. More generally, the project changed some venues' perceptions of commissioning contemporary art, broadening the potential for similar types of project in the future. For artists, working in historic environments presented a rich foundation for their work and introduced their work to a different audience. These types of commission can be both an important professional/income-generating strand, and an opportunity to change and expand artists' creative boundaries.

Although this project was interested in visitor, staff and organisational experiences, it also observed more direct impacts. For example, Gibside, Cherryburn and Holy Trinity Church all reported increased visitor numbers, while the gift shop at Gibside also recorded a spike in book sales during the installations. MCAHE did not gather this type of commercial data but it was noted by some of the participants.

"We had more visitors come than we've had for the last three years. It shows that it generated footfall as well..."

Heritage organisation, staff member

Our initial interviews found that some venue staff had apprehensions around what artists might make and how visitors might react. However, the final interviews revealed a significant change in attitude. Being involved in the selection process and finding an artist who had researched and developed a work that resonated with their site's narrative altered the expectation that visitors might find the work challenging.

Recommendation: Actively involving staff/organisations in designing the artist's brief and the selection of artists can significantly change attitudes regarding the risk and challenge of 'contemporary art' for visitors.



"One of the things I really love about these kinds of projects is the way they take you completely out of your normal, everyday environment and bring you into contact with people you wouldn't normally have met. I really like that insight into how other people's lives are – what their priorities and concerns are."

Commissioned artist

"I thought the sculpture was sympathetic to the surroundings, which I wasn't expecting. The artworks have made me interested in coming back just to see the rest of the site now, and I'm interested in seeing the artworks again."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

"Before I entered this [contemporary art commissioning] world, I would have thought it wasn't for me. But in the past year I have changed and I'm thinking: this is really great and I'd like to see more of this, not just in our space but in many historic spaces and churches. More people would be interested in this."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

"I think it's changed. I don't think about it with horror now, like: 'There's no way I'm going to that exhibition'. I'm open to seeing new things... Before, for me, it was just for a certain group of people, now I get it could be for everybody."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

04 Case Study Findings

Being involved in the selection of artists and the development of their research and ideas created a positive working environment. Effective support and communication enabled artists to gain a deeper understanding of how an audience, whose initial intention may not have been to encounter contemporary art, received their work in a non-gallery environment.

"I very much enjoyed the commissioning stages. The first time we looked at all the artists' proposals and those glimpses of the different ways that those artists had viewed our property, I understood what they could bring and how they might interpret differently our story. We had never worked like that before... it was a really special moment."

Heritage organisation, staff member

"The work wasn't like a contemporary art show in a gallery; it bridges a gap between contemporary art-making and a museum collection that's known and loved by lots of people."

Commissioned artist

Site specificity was important. The artist's brief was essential in articulating the host property's requirements. Whether to highlight alternative narratives, reflect upon community stakeholders, or to connect past and present, the brief gave the artists a steer without being too prescriptive.

"I'm grateful to the artist for opening up the history of the building and its social history, which I knew nothing about before."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

"For me, contemporary art fails when it doesn't relate to the context within which it is placed – also sometimes because the historic place is so overwhelming and the art looks insignificant."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

"If you took the works out of their place... I can't help but think the whole experience would be completely different because the two things [heritage/arts] work in tandem."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member



Understanding the longer-term benefits contemporary arts commissioning can bring to heritage organisations

The most common motivation for heritage organisations considering contemporary programming within their historic site is to increase, diversify and engage their audiences in different ways. By consuming history in different and unusual ways, audiences gained a better appreciation of heritage assets.

The expectation can be for an immediate heightened profile and uplift in visitor numbers through the presentation of something new. For the MCAHE commissions, the emphasis was less on seeing whether they achieved commercially driven benefits and more concerned with increasing emotional engagement with the site, enhancing visitor experience, providing a reason to visit again. Prompting different kinds of enquiry about the sites and their history aligns with a longer-term investment. The positive and engaging effect of the artworks on individuals was reflected in visitor comments:

"It was brilliant! It should be heard everywhere– it would be a shame if it just disappears once finished here."

"A fascinating and thought-provoking installation. Exciting concept extremely well executed. Very relevant to the place. A total treat."

Comments written in visitors' books

"We had a public meeting about something different and it was actually mentioned then. Somebody said: "I hope you're not putting any more of that stuff in, I didn't even like it," and somebody else went: "Well, that's your opinion. Lots of other people liked it." I was like: "Yes!" So it is still in the memory and somebody asked me when it was coming back, which I think is really nice. People loved having it there."

Heritage organisation, staff member



"It was the sound that drew a lot of people and a lot of the passers by. Some people actively made a special trip but some came in because of the sound and the doors were open."

Heritage organisation, staff member

Focus group participants recognised the wider relevance and importance of thinking 'beyond the business case' for heritage sites:

"It's a business but at the same time it's an education centre for children... It needs use for young and old to get them out of cities and maybe into the countryside and get some history, living history."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

"I like the way that the National Trust and English Heritage are evolving... They are both trying to reach other audiences and younger people. I'm sure that they are not totally convinced about why they are doing it but it's an experiment and it's different and it's good to see."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

Recommendation: A longer-term approach and longitudinal view of how art integrates within existing programming and targets, especially enhancing visitor experience and engagement, is more realistic than expecting an immediate, quantifiable uplift in visitor numbers.

Perceptions of ‘contemporary art’

"I don't know what I was expecting contemporary art to be. It could have been anything from a painting on a wall to somebody dancing in the garden. I really had no perception and I was amazed by what the artists came back with. When everybody had the same brief, I couldn't believe the diversity in what came back. That opened my eyes to contemporary art."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

Language and accessibility

Most focus group participants were open-minded about contemporary art, but for some, the term itself triggered thoughts of inaccessible works and galleries, while one person even felt disempowered.

"I don't want to feel that art has been foisted on us."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

When asked to reflect upon their expectations of encountering contemporary art in heritage sites, some participants felt that it might be out of tune with the site. Some heritage organisation staff members were apprehensive of using the term 'contemporary art', anticipating that it might be challenging for their audience.

"I don't know if I 'get' contemporary art really, and the language you get on art invitations makes it sound really boring and pretentious."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

"People are suspicious of contemporary art and so they probably don't go to see it because they think they are not going to understand it."

Heritage organisation, staff member

"What I thought was interesting was the way (the artists') ideas reflect the original use of the site, it's relevant."

Contemporary arts attendees focus group member

04 Case Study Findings

However, when participants visited the commissions and discussed the works within their groups, their perceptions were mainly positive.

"I was apprehensive about what the artwork would be like... But you have to be congratulated for choosing this artist; I suppose it has been a revelation to me that work can be so suitable for this place."

Infrequent attender of heritage or arts venues

"It's stimulated my interest in a type of art which I don't know so much about."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

Recommendation: Language must be carefully considered when presenting and promoting artists' work within a heritage context. Some organisations use the term 'creative or cultural programming'. Often it is better to specifically describe the work that the artist makes rather than calling it 'contemporary art'.



Specific terminology in arts and heritage sectors

Where certain terms and specific language are normal in one sector, these might have a different meaning in another sector, leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Terms such as 'performance', 'installation', 'site-specific', 'collaborative', 'film', 'participatory' or 'practice' all have particular meanings when used within the fine art community but could mean something else in heritage contexts. For example, 'commissioning' is sometimes misinterpreted to mean 'buying in' a new piece of art, which overlooks the detailed process and, in some cases, co-creation that is involved. Similarly, for those working in the arts sector, understanding the language around collections and conservation issues is essential when working with heritage organisations.

"The difficulty is the language used in contemporary art. It's difficult when we try to promote it... we've always talked about it being co-created with the community, a beautiful soundscape, telling the stories..."

Heritage organisation, staff member

Recommendation: It is important to recognise industry-specific language that might be considered intimidating and to find ways of making this more inclusive. A short 'user's guide' or glossary might be useful.



Resources needed to develop a contemporary art programme

Organisational

Organisational buy-in at all levels – from senior heritage organisation management to property managers, to operational staff and volunteers – is vital. Staff understanding of why the property was commissioning and presenting contemporary work was critical to success for all stakeholders. Where staffing teams were fully informed and involved, the visitor experience was deepened, as staff were able to explain why the work was there and talk about the artist's intention.

MCAHE observed a distinction between management, who usually deal with higher-level and budgetary issues, and staffing teams, who have more 'on the ground' involvement and visitor contact. When only management was involved in commissioning, information about the artworks had to be cascaded to staffing teams, giving them only partial buy-in. Having little stake in the project meant that frontline staff and/or volunteers were less knowledgeable when discussing the works with visitors. When operational staff were involved with the commissioning, they had a better understanding of the artwork, were able to provide more accurate information to visitors, manage audience responses more confidently, and promote the work more enthusiastically.

"Being involved right from the beginning, developing the brief and selecting the artist has made me advocate for artists' work being presented in our place of work."

Heritage organisation, staff member

Embedding the contemporary art programme within the site's visitor operations / frontline team structure, rather than as separate event programming, helped to achieve staff buy-in. In addition, site staff who visited artists' studios and were directly involved in the commissioning stages became enthusiastic ambassadors for the work. Visitor-facing staff's interest in and understanding of the work contributed to the overall positive effect on audiences.

Recommendation: Heritage organisations considering contemporary programming must try to achieve buy-in at all levels. Initial discussion between heritage curators, site managers and staff/volunteers should be held early on. Where possible, staff and volunteers who will be responsible for the artwork and its interpretation onsite should be involved in developing the project outline, the artist's brief and selection of the artist.

Staffing and capacity

All MCAHE partners identified a specific contact within their organisation from the outset and set aside dedicated time within their work plans. Working closely with an artist was regarded as an essential part of job descriptions for that year.

For artists, having a dedicated point of contact was essential to understanding the site, its restrictions and opportunities. At Gibside, where the works were located outdoors, the Landscape and Gardens Team were an important source of advice. They gave guidance on issues that may not be immediately apparent to artists, such as how works might be fixed into the ground to avoid damaging tree roots. The Property Curator provided important advice on where artworks could be located and why certain sites needed to be avoided. Bringing curators, landscaping, operational, and health and safety/technical teams together early on ensures good communication and planning. There may also be a need for an archaeologist's advice, which should be costed into the commission. Where this worked best, a dedicated steering group was set up that met regularly throughout the project development.

Recommendation: A dedicated steering group with representation from all relevant departments can steer the project delivery through all stages. The size and makeup of this group can be proportional to the size of the property. In some cases, small teams work well. At larger sites, teams might include the property curator, technical, marketing and visitor operational staff. Such groups must account for staff turnover, with handover plans in place to minimise disruption to potentially delicate projects.





Capacity within existing workloads was an issue for all our partners and, although we discussed this at an early stage, it was difficult to estimate at the outset how much time would be needed when the outcome was uncertain.

"The commissioner does need to reflect upon whether they have enough capacity to support the making of the work... and if having an artist on site is too much to handle, they need to make that decision early on."

Commissioned artist

At Holy Trinity Church, the partner contact was an essential source of information for community relationships. Without this support, the commission could not have progressed so smoothly or with as much depth. Signposting the artist to key people within the community who could support the artist's research was critical.

"The community, especially the ones who were involved really, really got it, which I knew they would."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

Equally, where the contact was split between site staff or was unclear, the artist felt confused as to who was responsible for which element of the project. Lack of clear agreements or a written record of what had been agreed created an avoidable tension between artists, staff and volunteers.

"It was never really clearly communicated to me that my liaison person had changed. This created anxiety for me as to whether what I had said and planned for had been communicated to the right people."

Commissioned artist

Recommendation: If a team is not possible, the artist must have a dedicated contact within the organisation, with sufficient time set aside and a clear understanding of both the organisation and the artist's roles and responsibilities.

"I had seen it advertised and decided to visit but was spurred on by a friend's comment as they had visited recently."

Site visitor (ad hoc interview)

Marketing, Press and Communications

Publicity included 'word of mouth' and social media, while more formal channels focused on a local audience, enhancing community engagement and understanding. For example, the National Trust advertised Gibside in *The Crack* [a local arts and culture magazine] and Holy Trinity Church engaged with local radio.

"We did a radio interview yesterday, which is due to go out on BBC Radio Newcastle to promote the exhibition, which includes a clip of *Gogmagog*."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

While effective marketing can increase visitor numbers, our study focused on the longer-term benefits of contemporary art and its impact on staff and visitors. Capturing these more deep-rooted effects around interpretation and engagement is an important part of the overall publicity strategy.

"I suppose it's breaking out of the mould. Sometimes the smaller properties get left behind because the bigger ones get more visitors and get more marketing and media coverage. But actually, if you dig deeper under the skin of Cherryburn, it's got such a fabulous story to tell, it's just not had the attention."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

Arranging for artists to meet with organisation press and marketing representatives, and keeping them informed, enhanced project visibility. A more integrated approach between artists and communications teams enhanced onsite interpretation, which was a significant success factor in this study. This ensured that any marketing, signage or press/communications materials not only fulfilled its role in drawing public interest, but also increased public understanding of the artwork and the site.

Arts in heritage projects can align with different publicity outlets, depending on budgets, scale and themes. It is important for artists and communications teams to work closely together to leverage the right channels. Traditional approaches, such as launch events, private views and mailing lists can transfer to heritage contexts, although there remains a lack of critical writing on the crossovers between artistic and curatorial practice in heritage contexts.

Press exposure varies widely depending on the approach taken. Mainstream media will tend to focus on relevant national angles, while local press is often geared towards community perspectives. However, traditional print media circulations are declining. The specialist arts press tends towards high-production and PR-driven quarterly magazines, so not having images of works in situ months in advance can be a restriction here. This can be addressed through proposal images or short 'teaser films' as work develops. Some heritage organisations, such as National Trust, have in-house magazines, and local (Northeast England) culture monthlies, such as *The Crack*, are an important source of exposure. Any press outreach should be backed up with a robust online strategy, including presence on heritage organisations' own websites, artists' self-promotion, and social media, especially visual-driven channels such as Instagram.

Recommendation: When marketing and communications teams were fully informed of the artist's intentions from the outset, coverage was higher, and media messages were stronger and more consistent. This underlines the broader recommendation of achieving team-wide buy-in and enthusiasm, which enables greater coordination across the whole project, including marketing.



Budgets

Being partly funded by an academic research grant, the MCAHE budgeting framework was atypical for the sector. Nevertheless, the full implications and costs of contemporary arts commissioning for heritage can be complex. The creation of the artwork is only one part of the overall project budget; the full costs of the commission should be considered from the outset, recognising that aspects such as transportation, installation, insurance, technical assistance, de-installation, marketing, launch, documentation, print design, and landscaping and conservation requirements can add considerably to the overall budget. Public-facing events and workshops are also important, as are set-up costs, such as competition fees. Realistic budgeting involves some less obvious considerations, not least, artists' own research and development. Arts Council England and sector support organisations can provide advice about budgets and project planning.

"There was no budget for marketing and so marketing should have been part of the project plan right at the beginning."

Heritage organisation, staff member

In the current climate, artists and commissioners must also work flexibly within many different budget frameworks. The arts sector as a whole is facing significant challenges in post-Covid Britain and new funding frameworks are likely to prioritise competition, agility and efficiency – to 'do more with less'. Artists themselves can budget in different ways. For example, some of the MCAHE commissioned artists were able to sell their work after the installation had ended, increasing their personal income. Arrangements like this must also be factored into the overall budget as recoupment costs can be included as potential income. MCAHE also observed several examples of joint funding – pulling funding from different pots, even within one organisation. Budget clarity, rather than the overall value of the project, is particularly important for artists, especially awareness that funding often now comes from multiple sources.

"You want to kind of stretch to that challenge and think, 'Oh, what could I do? This is great; I've got this opportunity...' But at the same time there's that sense of, 'Look, what's realistic here?' You might have this great wild idea but can it actually be delivered within this budget and this timeframe? And if it can't, you just have to shift your thinking a bit and do it differently."

Commissioned artist



Recommendation: Heritage organisations need to be realistic about the full scope of a project and its associated costs. Flexibility and ingenuity, as well as a clear understanding of artists' and venue requirements, and of different budget lines, is necessary. It is important to seek opportunities for joint-funding and for budget optimisation.

05 Commissioning Art in Heritage Venues

Creation

Artists do not work in a vacuum. This project recognised the importance of creative involvement for organisations commissioning contemporary artworks in heritage environments, with implications for planning and budgets, staff training, effective communications and shared understandings.

Choosing the right site and context for the artwork

For the purposes of this project, a range of locations – selected in discussion with our project partners – was needed to gain a proper understanding of different scales and contexts for contemporary art projects. It was important that the site/location/narrative must be interesting for artists and audiences alike, and that each site presented a different visitor experience. All sites provided a clear starting point for the artist's brief: Gibside offered a strong narrative of women and power (through the National Trust initiative); Belsay Hall presented an architectural space rich in atmosphere; Cherryburn, as the birthplace of one of England's most important printmakers, had a strong artistic identity and an intimate physical space; and Holy Trinity Church, once at the heart of the community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is being re-invented as a cultural centre.

"It's really important that we have something that feels right for the property; we're bringing its history alive."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

"There's something so unique about these places, they're so rich for artists. Well, for me they spark a whole new line of enquiry and research."

Commissioned artist

The importance of the artist's brief

The artist's brief is the essential document in which the property has the opportunity to guide the artistic response and to create the 'space' in which the artist can deploy their creativity and imagination. While usually developed by the heritage organisations, the project team worked closely with all sites to draw out threads of historical narrative that exemplified their uniqueness. For example, Belsay Hall's strong architecture and starkly empty interior presented an unusual acoustic opportunity, while Gibside's dark story of abuse and liberation resonated with that year's National Trust programming theme of Women and Power. In fact, the directionality of the Gibside brief risked being constraining; one artist said they felt 'overwhelmed' by its violent narrative and initially struggled to find a suitable response. The successful commissions focused on the positive achievements of Mary Eleanor Bowes' life rather than the abusive behaviour of her husband. Some artists respond well to a directional brief...

"I think, sometimes when you are faced with the possibility of responding to a place, especially in a short timeframe, the possibilities are so open and so endless, that actually, to narrow down the frame of reference fairly quickly can be a really difficult process."

Commissioned artist





...while others preferred flexibility.

"I think that it's much more interesting, as an artist, not to have a proposal that you're locked into, but to be working in a way that is much more developmental and you don't have to predict what's going to happen with the work."

Commissioned artist

"I like challenging the brief. I say to myself: how much do I want to respond specifically to what they are asking me to respond to? I begin to think of things that challenge the brief and I think this is a really interesting process. Also the conversation that starts to emerge from the people that you are working with; they contribute to the development of the work as well."

Commissioned artist

This required some learning and understanding on the part of some heritage organisation staff members.

"I don't have experience very much of working with artists or of the commissioning process, so it was useful having help to write the brief in a way that wasn't going to turn people off."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

Recommendation: In developing artist briefs, Heritage Organisations should consider whether to give a clear 'steer' or leave things open. The brief is only one tool in eliciting and inspiring an artist's interest.

Timescales - allowing enough time

Adequate time is needed, from initiating the project idea to raising funds, writing the artist's brief, site visits, artist selection, contractual arrangements, creation of the work and installation, promotion and interpretation. The MCAHE project at each site took 18 months from first contact to installation of works. Based on this experience, we again advocate for flexibility. Artistic projects and the varying complexities of working in partnership with heritage venues can take longer than expected. If the project involves the siting of structures, as was the case in one of our commissions, the process of obtaining planning permission and the relevant approvals from conservators must be factored into the project timetable. Recruiting artists, whether directly or by *Open Call*, will take time, and artists who are well known may be committed up to two years in advance. Timescales should also incorporate reasonable slippage, to allow for unpredictable events.

Recommendation: Planning backwards from a commission's installation – usually early summer – is a useful approach for timeline development. Too short a timeframe can affect quality, whereas too much time can risk losing focus. If time is tight, consider which processes can be squeezed, e.g. artist selection. Heritage organisations should build contingency into budgets and flexibility into the overall plan.



Different methods of selecting artists

MCAHE approached artists directly, inviting expressions of interest in the first instance and working with each heritage property to select four artists to develop ideas through to full proposal. We used this method in order to experience 'real world' practice in art commissioning and to understand its advantages and potential shortcomings. However, artist selection can be done in different ways. For example, *Open Call* is a way of encouraging artists at all career stages to respond. The manner of generating interest among artists, shortlisting and selection impacts on project timescales, so this should be discussed early.

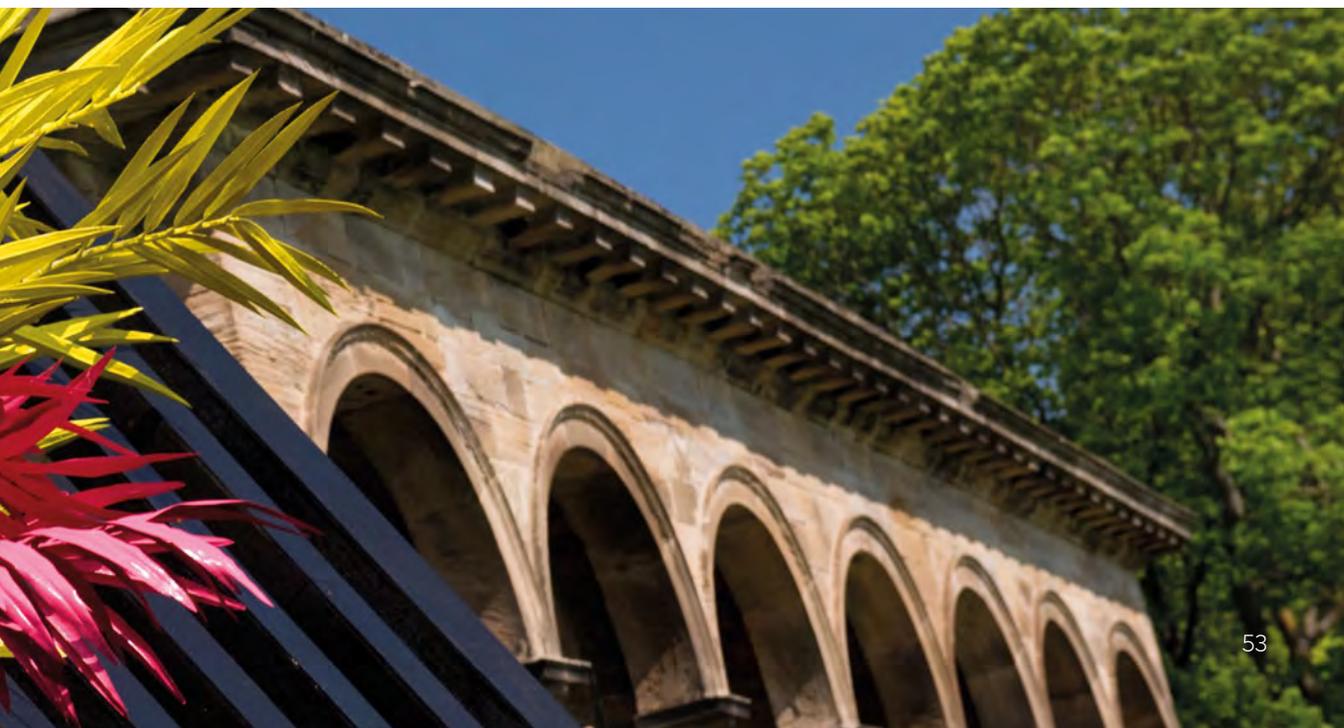
Recommendation: If using Open Call, ensure the commissioning organisation has enough administrative capacity to do this. Established artists are more likely to respond when approached directly, so consulting with curators and arts organisations is a beneficial way of creating a database of artists who could be invited to respond to briefs. Take care with invited calls to respect equality, diversity and inclusion principles.

Giving artists good information and time to visit

Site visits are an important part of the commissioning process. All artists reported that site visits, and access to curators, landscaping and operational teams, was crucial to their understanding of the brief, and significantly informed the development of their work. Property staff also valued these visits. The two-way relationship between artist and property was particularly apparent for *Gogmagog* at Holy Trinity Church, where the artist discovered one particular aspect – the peal – that was previously unknown by the heritage organisation.

"It was really good when we did the initial selection from the applications. Actually it was a bit overwhelming because we had such a big response and I think if we didn't experienced help in the room, it might have been a bit overwhelming for us."

Recommendation: Adequate time and resources should be set aside for site visits. Curators, operational staff and landscape teams should be available during site visits to explain the history and any restrictions, for example, with regard to the siting of work. Any location-specific research, and access to archives and collections should be made available. This phase is important for concept development, so curators and staff should be aware that they will be contacted by artists and, in a competitive situation, all artists should be given the same information.



Issuing a contract between the artist and the organisation

Each commissioning opportunity will require a different approach with regard to contracts and each organisation will have their own way of issuing them. It is important that artists' intellectual property rights are respected and protected, and it is usual that the work remains the property of the project while it is being shown, and thereafter is returned to the artist. Artists are paid in instalments, usually front-loaded at the signing stage to allow them to begin work. A small contractual payment is usually kept back and paid when the project has been completed.

Recommendation: Contracts can vary widely and expert advice might be required. For example, ownership of the work must be carefully considered; with clauses relating to recoupment of investment should the work be subsequently sold. Sector support organisations (some detailed at the end of this booklet) may be able to provide or signpost useful information here.



Supporting the artist while they are working on site

Artists require dedicated support from the designated site contact while they are creating the work and installing it onsite. For example, the contact at Cherryburn was essential in promoting community engagement and organising workshops with local school groups, who met the artist and discussed the work, culminating in a parade. The positive relationship between the artist, and the Churches Conservation Trust and Holy Trinity Church was also extremely effective in allowing the commission to deepen its community involvement.

"Obviously every commission is different but the commissioner does need to decide what kind of artist they want to work with. Some artists do everything offsite; you barely see them and they just turn up and deliver something. If that's what they want, that's fine but I am not that kind of artist."

Commissioned artist

"I think they thought the whole thing was going to turn up and be put there- there would be no kind of disruption."

Commissioned artist

Recommendation: Good communication between the steering group (representatives from relevant departments at the property, such as landscape, preservation, etc.), staff and volunteer team, and the artist will help to mitigate issues that may arise as the project develops.



Consumption

Visitor experiences of encountering contemporary art in heritage locations were captured through focus group interviews. We identified four distinct groups:

- Frequent heritage visitors (sampled from Beamish Open Air museum, Co. Durham)
- Contemporary arts attenders (from Shipley Art Gallery art group, Gateshead)
- Site volunteers (from National Trust sites at Gibside and Cherryburn, and from Churches Conservation Trust site Holy Trinity Church)
- Infrequent/non-attenders of heritage or arts venues (from a Gateshead charity working with carers who had little opportunity to visit galleries and museums)

Each group was interviewed four times at different stages before, during and after the commissioning projects. We also drew on extensive correspondence and individual interviews with representatives from heritage organisations and properties.

Audience development

We captured audience perspectives not only through the focus groups but also through visitor comments cards, conversations held between heritage property staff/volunteers and visitors, and interviews with visitors held in front of the artworks. Aside from introducing contemporary art to heritage audiences, some of whom may previously have been dismissive of new art, the works presented the heritage venues and their stories in new ways, helping to develop new perspectives among existing audiences and volunteers.

"The impressive visual impact of the urns in the garden creates a vivid first impression. The urns have provided a very useful hook for telling our story. In particular, our tour guides have found them an engaging way of introducing people to Mary Eleanor's story... The work has energised volunteer creativity in other ways... the group felt confident to embrace creative ways of telling Gibside's story on the back of the artwork."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

"There were a lot of young people who came and a lot of people who travelled from outside of the area, which is really good for us because it's not just about the local community, even though it's their story."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

"I used to pop down on a Saturday and Sunday and there would be loads of people sitting and listening for ages. I didn't think we'd get that. People wanted to stay or come back to listen. It was mad, strange."

Heritage organisation, staff member

"I love art where it's contemporary against something really traditional. It makes me think about the contrast between history and new."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

"I'd just like to say how different it was. It's not what I expected. I've really enjoyed every minute of it."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

"We're getting into the heritage, the family. I think it's an educational thing as well, good fun. You learn a lot."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

"We'll go home and talk about it for days. It snowballs into the next trip. You never forget these experiences."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

"We've had a larger and different audience and people that maybe hadn't visited before; we've exposed ourselves to a different market... I'm hoping that it will just provoke a different conversation with the visitor."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

Interpretation

Contemporary art in heritage properties raises complex issues around interpretation. There is a multi-faceted interaction between the heritage asset, the artwork and the audience, which combine in different ways to shape audience experiences. Some visitors appreciated the way the artwork revealed something different about the heritage asset, others preferred simply to appreciate the artwork on aesthetic terms. While visitors inevitably bring their own interpretive tools and have varying preferences for the level of explanation they encounter, heritage organisations and artists must consider the interplay between these dimensions. Understanding how interpretation worked was one of the most complicated parts of the project. Many of our findings illustrated how different stakeholders have different expectations and value 'interpretation' differently. There is a responsibility for artworks to be accessible to a wide audience, which allows interpretation to be rich and imaginative – although it must not be overpowering; where interpretation is offered, audiences should also be free to ignore it.



Using artists as a resource for interpretation ideas

A primary reason for commissioning contemporary art in heritage properties is to convey the property's story in new ways. Some artists resist the use of captions and panels and are against over-interpretation of their work, while others are very particular about how clearly their vision is conveyed. Nevertheless, at heritage venues, many audiences need a 'way in', so it is important that artists recognise that placing their work in this non-gallery situation requires some form of interpretation to allow understanding.

"It's like they want you to come and see something that they maybe don't see... or just to reveal something in some way about a place that they have this incredible investment in. I think that perhaps they hope that through doing that, you're opening visitors' eyes to a different experience as well."

Commissioned artist

For example, focus groups reported that the artworks at Gibside made them curious about the life of Mary Eleanor Bowes and the exuberant nature of the artificial flowers bursting from within the oversized Wardian Case prompted thoughts on confinement. However, the symbolic close relationship between the Orangery and the Wardian Case was less understood. The text placed on the ceramic vessels was welcomed and many focus group members spent time reading the excerpts from Mary Eleanor's 'confession' scratched into the vessel surface. A key point that emerged was the importance of offering audiences choice. Many visitors prefer to draw their own interpretations from the artworks:

"I don't want to read a sign that tells you why the work is there; I want to be more engaged with it. I want to be able to find out more and be able to ask questions."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

"It's nice to have a guide but at the same time it's nice to use your imagination and just look at the art for what it is, get stimulated through just looking at the beauty of the pots."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

"Sometimes I'm resistant to being told what the art means. I don't want things over-explained, so encountering art as a sense of interpretation is better for me."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

Provision of interpretative materials

How and where written interpretation is provided in relation to the artworks is critical.

"...people just look at contemporary art and then say, "it's rubbish". I say, "well read about it. You have to read about it". That's how I feel about contemporary art now; you have to read what it's about to understand."

Infrequent attender of heritage or arts venues

At Belsay Hall, a special edition publication was produced by the English Heritage Interpretation Manager to enhance visitors' understanding of the work. This was given away free to visitors and feedback revealed that it was greatly appreciated. Interpretation panels at the entrance of the Hall provided additional information and positioned the work within its distinctive context.

"There was a lot of conversation about the interpretation of the work, the panels, the description. How much do you want to give away, or how much do you want there to be an element of surprise? I don't want to pin it down as an artwork, and I think, generally, artists don't want to do that. You want to leave it open. But, at the same time, you know there has to be some way of framing it."

Commissioned artist

At Gibside, a dedicated 'leaflet station' was set up. Visitors were then required to locate the works in the landscape using a map.

"The leaflet that's been produced is fine. That gives the visitor enough and it's at the entranceway when you come in and in the café. I think the fact that there is a leaflet is what's important."

Commissioned artist

However, through discussion with property staff and other feedback, it became evident that more interpretation, specifically in front of the works, was required and this was put in place after the project launch..

"I haven't taken everything in that's in the leaflet but I'm dying to know what it's all about. If you'd gone into a gallery, there would have been something there to explain, maybe there should be something here."

Contemporary arts attenders focus group member

**"Sometimes I read about
the art, sometimes I don't.
Sometimes people assume
that everyone understands it."**

Contemporary arts attenders
focus group member





Creative forms of interpretation

Given the complexity and added layers of interpretation in heritage contexts, there is increased potential for more creative use of explanatory materials. This can also benefit the artist's creative thinking beyond the artwork itself.

"People are used to the way we tell stories. If you go to a National Trust property you expect a guided tour, you expect some interpretation and you expect the staff and volunteers to be knowledgeable. Increasingly though, we are finding that these traditional methods of engagement are not delivering the outcomes our strategy demands. Our strategy demands us to engage people on an emotional level and it's difficult to deliver that kind of emotional engagement to a modern audience through those old tools of guided tours and guidebooks."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

Short films are an effective way of deepening understandings of the artist's work and intentions. MCAHE commissioned a filmmaker to make a short film about each art commission and these have been a useful tool when presenting the project. At Cherryburn, the film of the artist talking about how he approached the commission was played in the first room, accompanied by the artist's sketchbooks, which provided extra insight into the development of the installation. One of our films was taken up by the Crafts Council and this became a way of publicising the project more widely.

At Holy Trinity Church, the artist chose to embed explanation within the structure of the work itself, by creating a series of informative evenings for the community called 'Soup Suppers'. These were held in a darkened, atmospheric room within the church, where the original vestrymen would have been served their food. The 'Soup Suppers' became an important tool in helping those involved in the making and the presentation of the work understand its direction. This in turn encouraged ownership of the project and helped 'spread the word' throughout the community. Moreover, it helped with staff and volunteer understanding of the work, enabling them to share this knowledge with audiences.

"We've built the soup suppers into the business plan. It's a really nice way of engaging with the local community."

Heritage organisation, staff member

05 Commissioning Art in Heritage Venues

The artist at Holy Trinity also designed and wrote the interpretative leaflet, which took the form of a 'chapbook' (a small pamphlet containing tales, ballads or tracts), copies of which were left on pews for visitors to pick up. These were considered by the venue staff to be sensitive to the building and the artwork. The commission, a 45-minute audioscape performed by local choirs, charted the narrative of this particular Sunderland community. The chapbooks were generally well-received but some comments indicated a need for additional interpretation.

"It would have been nice to have had the text of the song - although this might distract you from the music itself, but I think it would have benefited from knowing the words because you can't always make them out."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

Two artists wrote online blogs, which became a resource for those seeking additional information about the work and, for the Cherryburn artist, became an integral part of the commission itself.

"All the research that I do when I take up these projects, it's really never seen. The blog gave me a space to document all this and, because it was a public platform, it gave people another opportunity to read about the research and understand how I make work."

Commissioned artist

Recommendation: Understand the complexity of interpretation and be prepared to take an imaginative and if possible responsive approach. The need for helping audiences access and understand the work should be clearly stated in the brief. Where possible, involve interpretation managers in project development conversations and involve artists in the visual design of the interpretative material. Language for all printed interpretation must be clear, accessible and consistent.

"We got members of staff talking to the visitors in a more engaging way."

Commissioned artist

The role of staff and volunteers in interpreting contemporary work

Volunteers share their enthusiasm and knowledge freely about the property, offer interpretation and explain the significance of a property's assets and historical narratives. They usually receive training and/or resources to enable them to carry out this role effectively. At Cherryburn, where visitors enter through the Bewick house museum, site staff played an important role in setting the scene and introducing the artist's work to visitors.

"It's about the experience visitors have and we want it to be a good one. If I get a reaction which isn't good, ideally I would have somebody there to talk to them about it, so they understand why the art is there and how it fits with the place and its story."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

"Cherryburn is so small and intimate... we call it a little gem because it doesn't have masses of signage and interpretation and there are enough staff and volunteers around to talk to people about what they're seeing... So, in terms of interpretation, what's right for one property, might not be right for another one."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

In contrast, although contemporary art interventions are increasingly part of heritage visit experiences, volunteers are not generally asked to perform a similar role introducing artworks. Nor are they typically offered any induction or training to help them appreciate the art themselves, interpret it to the public or learn why it has been commissioned. In the absence of information about the artwork, engagements between volunteers and visitors can default to an exchange of (positive or negative) personal responses. This risks misrepresenting the work, potentially undermining of the value of significant investment made in contemporary art projects.

Where the volunteers were directly involved with our case study commissions in other ways, there was a demonstrable readiness to engage, and typically a strong and positive response. Volunteers at Gibside were invited to collaborate on decisions about plants incorporated within the work. This subsequently manifested in positive visitor interactions and a deeper sense of involvement.

"For our garden volunteers, the sculptures have had a particular impact. They have had a real sense of pride in talking to visitors about them and why they are here. We have seen this lead to buy-in from the wider volunteer team."

Heritage organisation, senior manager

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Staff who undertook an induction programme that involved close engagement with the artist, studio visits and practical involvement with installations on site, reported that this transformed their understanding of contemporary art commissioning and as a result they felt invested in the programme. In turn, this allowed them to have a greater understanding of its value and to feel greater confidence in discussing the artworks with visitors.

"I very much enjoyed the commissioning stages. The first time we looked at all the artist's proposals and those glimpses of the different ways that the artists had viewed our property, I understood what they could bring and how they might interpret differently our property's story... It was fantastic thinking that there are all these different ways the story could be told... A story which is very close to our team and which we talk about every day."

Heritage organisation, staff member

As one of the significant findings of our research, this has led to a further AHRC-funded project to continue the work with volunteers. Working with groups of volunteers from the National Trust, English Heritage, Durham Cathedral and Ushaw Historic House and Gardens, the project will develop a digital resource and film that can be used to help volunteers interpret future contemporary art commissions at heritage sites.

Recommendation: Volunteers and front of house staff are assets to the informative presentation of contemporary artworks, so should be actively involved in the development of contemporary/cultural programming and receive in-house training to assist them in this.





Exchange

The Exchange strand of MCAHE included the mapping of past and current contemporary art in heritage practice, the development of an interactive digital resource, the delivery of a dedicated international conference, publications, presentations and legacy planning.

A new ‘commissioning industry’

The increasing presence of contemporary art in heritage venues, endorsed by organisations including the National Trust and Arts Council England, might be described as something of a new ‘commissioning industry’. Building on a 2013 audit of the sector conducted by Arts&Heritage, our desk-based research, and responses to an online survey to artists and heritage professionals, revealed a massive expansion of commissioning and artist-generated activity in this field over the past three decades. From only 15 contemporary art in heritage site projects mapped for the 1990s, activity grew to around 92 projects in the 2000s, with at least 282 commissions, residencies and exhibitions recorded in 2010-18 (fig.1).

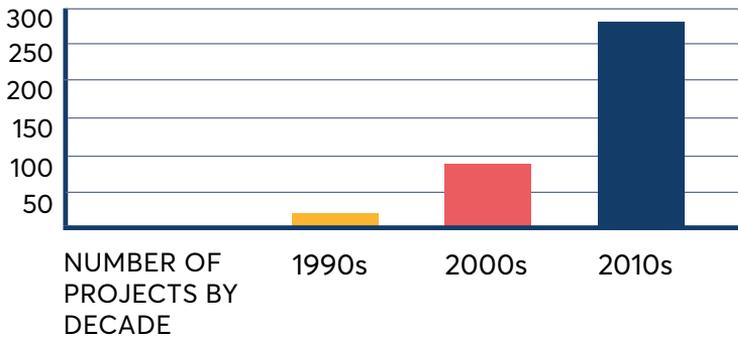


Fig. 1: Based on analysis of MCAHE research database of 389 projects (1990-2018)

MCAHE research found that while the ‘country house and estate’-type venue accounted for 40% of the projects we mapped, the field encompasses a much wider range of heritage locations, of varying scale and profile (fig.2).

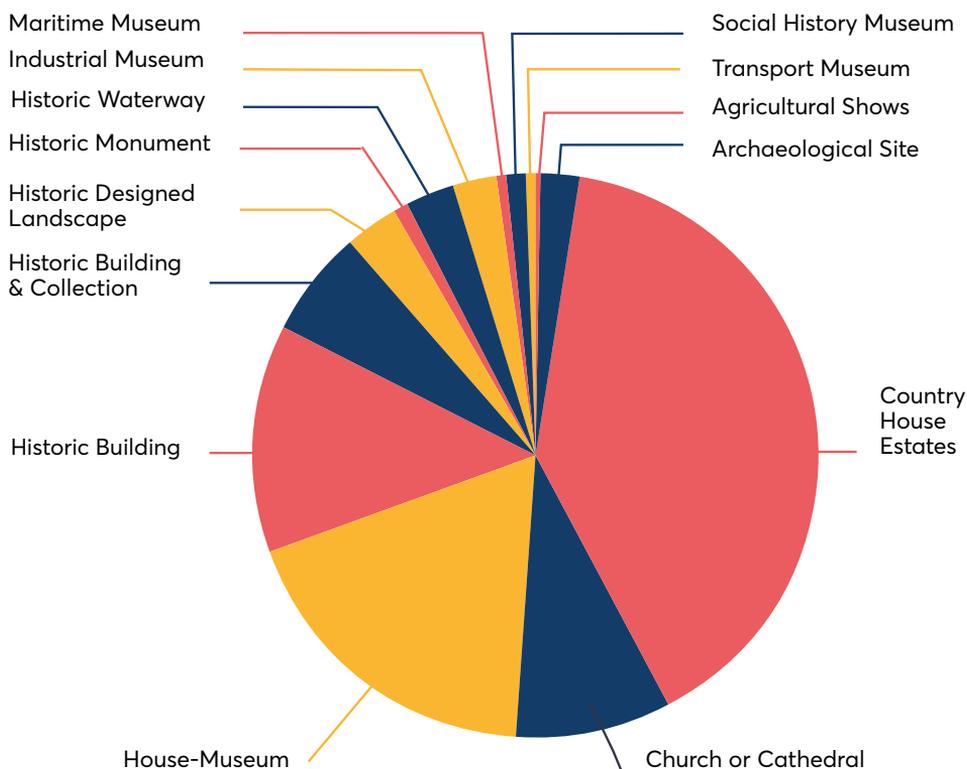


Fig. 2: Sites of contemporary art in heritage activity

Audience diversification, and artist and arts sector development are core motivators for investing in this type of commissioning. From a heritage perspective, contemporary art activity is a key opportunity to extend traditional approaches to heritage interpretation, and to deepen visitors' sensory, emotional and critical engagement, especially with hidden or untold histories. These narratives are now at the forefront of enquiry and programming, and artists are well placed to respond and produce work that prompts questions about whose history is being presented.

There is a broader desire within the heritage sector to 'develop sites as living cultural resources with real contemporary relevance' (senior heritage manager, MCAHE conference). Contemporary art can play a key role in this, but our research indicates that for this to happen, the framing of contemporary art in heritage activity needs to shift towards a more critical understanding of the practice itself, and its effects and value as a form of cultural production and programming.

Recommendation: While the UK may be a leader in the practice, understanding of contemporary art commissioning in heritage sites needs to be expanded to consider the international and global context. This includes the differing national policy and funding contexts, which support contemporary art in heritage activity.

Forums for critical exchange

As a field of practice, contemporary art in heritage lacks a developed critical language and targeted opportunities for professional and public debate. Despite some local media coverage, few commissions attract any independent critical attention. As the field expands, so too must the discussion and literature around it, especially in regard to the nuances around layers of interpretation.

The MCAHE conference held at Newcastle University provided a much-needed space for professional and practitioner exchange. The event attracted nearly 200 delegates, representing 66 organisations across cultural, governmental and educational sectors, as well as independent artists and curators. Feedback from the conference was overwhelmingly positive and revealed the need for further events and networking to support this area of curatorial and artistic practice.

"It was fantastic and I feel like it will have a considerable impact on my current projects and future practice."

Conference delegate (artist)

"My presentation was received with great interest and what I believe to be the most intelligent and fruitful feedback I have encountered so far throughout my research."

Conference presenter

As a direct result of this conference, a new curatorial forum for contemporary art in heritage practice has been set up by Arts&Heritage and Leeds University, funded by Art Fund.

The MCAHE artwork case studies have been shared widely across the art and heritage sectors, including in the recent Heritage Alliance report, *Inspiring Creativity, Heritage & The Creative Industries* (2019). Reflections on the MCAHE research are included in the book, *Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces*, edited by Nick Cass, Gill Park and Anna Powell, published by Routledge (2020).



Recommendation: Serious consideration should be given to the resourcing of future conferences on this subject, and to the development of other kinds of spaces and forums for new professional and critical exchange, including the encouragement of new critical writing on artistic and curatorial practice in this field.

Beyond site-specificity

Contemporary art in heritage is predominantly a site-specific and temporary form. Our mapping research showed that once the public exhibition period of such projects is ended, commissioned artworks have no or little remaining visibility on site or in a 'collection' or archived form – they can be lost to the cultural record. The MCAHE exhibition, *Out of Place*, enabled an examination of these issues by relocating most of the works from their original locations to Newcastle University's Hatton Gallery. The exhibition provided an opportunity for the MCAHE artworks to be seen by audiences unable to visit the original commissions and for comparisons to be made between on- and off-site forms of presentation.

"What happens when you relocate an artwork? When an artwork made by an artist for a particular historic place is redisplayed in the very different context of a contemporary art gallery, does it change its meaning or how we appreciate it?"

Introductory panel, *Out of Place* exhibition

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Participants responded to the Hatton Gallery exhibition having seen the works in their original intended sites. While the artworks had been created to respond to a specific heritage property, dislocating them from that context did not necessarily diminish their emotional impact on audiences.

"Seeing the works in a different context was exciting, their scale changed. In some ways, I preferred them as objects in this setting, though they lost some of their resonance. I got good feedback."

Commissioned artist

"I enjoyed seeing them all again, but I feel privileged, as having seen them in their original context, the works seem lost from being presented in the gallery space."

Frequent heritage visitors focus group member

Recommendation: More institutional attention should be given to the legacy of commissioned artworks beyond their initial timescale and site-specificity, including developing appropriate modes of archiving. Artists can benefit from considering how their work might be received outside of its intended context.



Diversity

The MCAHE research identified areas where practical change, and reviewing commissioning processes, can enable heritage sites to present more diverse histories. By examining how historical narratives are identified and actively focussing on how these are told, the visibility and knowledge of our hitherto avoided and untold histories can be increased. In particular, the research revealed that:

- i) Site-specific art in heritage venues has the capacity to change the way public audiences and heritage organisations think about heritage. Creative artists offer distinctive insights, and tell different and previously untold stories that consider our inclusive heritage in new and different ways.
- ii) Despite heritage organisations prioritising Equality, Diversity and Inclusion within their cultural programming, artists and curators from marginalised groups, particularly those at an early career stage, are still under-represented.

Cultural programming that reflects these avoided or 'unremembered' histories would therefore benefit from further promotion. Despite being limited to four sites, the MCAHE commissions aimed to reflect a diversity of historical narratives. Gibside's commission was deliberately developed within the National Trust's theme of Women and Power for 2019; the artist's brief for Holy Trinity Church was to increase the visibility and relevance of the building back into its immediate community. For the conference commission, Martin Hylton's *Prospects* drew upon Dr Martin Luther King Jr's speech that resonates and addresses issues still present in our society today.

"There was another element to this project for me, to do with colonial histories... that's a kind of history, another layer of history that fascinates me."

Commissioned artist

Future research

Cultural engagement in the UK is evolving and, up to 2020, there has been a clear trend for commissioning new art in heritage contexts. While the post-Covid future remains unclear, MCAHE provided a useful start in mapping this expanding field and exploring the issues that can arise. This is valuable knowledge for heritage organisations seeking to broaden their audiences and income streams, and artists exploring new creative approaches and more diverse career options. In particular, there is a need for new research in the following areas:

- 1** We need a better understanding of the international picture. Given the complexity – and in many cases, unfamiliarity of arts commissioning in heritage contexts – it is vital for organisations to share best practice and to understand how this type of work fits with global trends.
- 2** In a notoriously precarious profession, there is a need for more longitudinal data on how artists engage with less traditional outlets. While heritage commissions enable another income stream, they can also inform artists' creative approaches and have long-term effects on their practice.
- 3** There remains a lot of work to be done on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) within the heritage sector. The past year has thrown this into sharp relief, with debates around how colonial narratives should be framed and how to better represent more diverse histories through artistic interpretations.
- 4** Volunteers play a key role in conveying heritage narratives and interpretation of the artworks. This human element can help to maximise the value of contemporary arts commissions. More understanding by volunteers is needed about artists' work and how it has responded to place and narrative. Regular updates with volunteers and meeting the artist as work develops will result in a greater sense of ownership and understanding.
- 5** Artworks commissioned for heritage sites have no or little remaining visibility beyond their on site exhibition period. To prevent this work being 'lost' to the cultural record and to maximise the value of institutional investment and public interest in such projects, work needs to be done to explore the potential for collecting and archiving temporary site-specific artworks.

MCAHE was carried out pre-COVID but its findings and the questions raised remain relevant. The pandemic has changed society, economies and priorities. Both the heritage and arts sectors now hold new positions, with arguably greater value but less funding. This has served to accelerate the need for research into making best use of resources and maximising the impact of both heritage and art in a rapidly changing society.



06 Information



Listed below are Sector Support Organisations funded by Arts Council England that may be useful for heritage organisations and museums seeking advice, support and training on how to develop contemporary art programming.

Arts&Heritage

www.artsandheritage.org.uk

Advocates for the inclusion of contemporary art programming in museums and heritage contexts and demonstrates best practice. Offers support, mentoring, training and funding for the heritage sector through their commissioning programme, *Meeting Point*.

ArtQuest

www.artquest.org.uk

Supports the professional visual arts through advice, information and opportunities for visual artists.

Association of Independent Museums

www.aim-museums.co.uk

Mutual help and support for the museums, gallery and heritage sectors to create a network for mutual help and support which would share good practice and create a voice for the specific needs of the growing independent sector.

Culture 24

www.weareculture24.org.uk

Advice and support for museums, heritage and cultural organisations.



Museum Development Managers Network

Most English regions have Museum Development organisations, funded by ACE to offer advice, guidance, training, programmes and the administration of small grants for museums.

Museum Development East Midlands
www.mdem.org.uk

Museum Development West Midlands
www.mdwm.org.uk

Museum Development Yorkshire
www.museumdevelopmentyorkshire.org.uk

Museum Development South West
www.southwestmuseums.org.uk

Audience Agency

www.audienceagency.org

Supports the cultural sector and leaders with public engagement strategies to enable organisations to use our national data to increase their relevance, reach and resilience.

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