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Cabinets of curiosity

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Cabinets of curiosity: museums past and present

By Dr Elaine Farrell and Professor Chris Marsh, History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics

Taught for the first time in 2017/18, 'Cabinets of curiosity: museums past and present' considers the development of museums from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. In this optional level 2 module, students explore both the history of museums in the British and Irish past and the presentation of history in museums today. They encounter seventeenth-century elite gardener John Tradescant junior, whose cabinets of curiosity formed the basis of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum after his death, a legal battle between his widow Hester and scholar Elias Ashmole, and then later Hester's death in suspicious circumstances. And they encounter contemporary museum professionals like Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History director Nina Simon, described by Smithsonian Magazine in 2010 as a 'museum visionary', who advocates for audience participation in museum and exhibition design so that visitors can leave something of themselves behind.

The module combines academic research on the history of museums and museology-focused classes with a hands-on, practical dimension. As part of the assessment, students work with a local museum to develop their own exhibition of historical objects. Working in pairs or small groups, students select objects from the museum stores, research the object's provenance and context, and write an accompanying label. This year, focusing on the theme of 'Work and play', students selected objects for display from the rich stores of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra. Each group applied

museology techniques learned across the lectures and seminars to educate, engage and excite the visitor through a single object. Students responded extremely well to the challenge; using objects such as a toy aeroplane, an ink pot, a Yardley perfume bottle, and a ginger beer bottle, they commented on broader themes such as childhood, education, leisure, and courtship in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ulster, and through their lively and informed labels encouraged visitor dialogue and reflection.

By providing a historical framework to the study of museums, students learn the important impact of individual

museum professionals and staff bodies, governments and councils, and visitors on individual museums and the wider sector. By providing a broad historical background, they can trace changes and developments across decades and even centuries, and assess how contemporary concerns have influenced and continue to impact practices and policies in museums. The module can act as an initial step towards a museum career or collaboration, but also allows students to reflect on the materiality of the world around them.

For further details, please contact e.farrell@qub.ac.uk



An object handling session with 'Cabinets of curiosity' students and History curator Fiona Byrne at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, March 2018



'Cabinets of curiosity' students at the display launch of 'Work and play' at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, with tutors Elaine Farrell and Chris Marsh, 21 April 2018