

CASE STUDY

The McManus

Ellie Diamond's 'Denise The Menace' outfit

In this case study Carly Cooper, Curator (Social History) at the McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery and Museum talks about the purchase and display of Ellie Diamond's 'Denise The Menace' outfit that Ellie showcased on RuPaul's Drag Race UK Season 2.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

GRANT INFORMATION:

- MGS 2021 Small Grants Fund
- The project was awarded £11,833

THE PROJECT:

In 2021 we purchased Ellie Diamond's 'Denise The Menace' outfit that Ellie showcased on RuPaul's Drag Race UK Season 2. The outfit was made to celebrate Ellie's hometown – Dundee.

Having announced the purchase and received positive and negative comments we knew it was essential to get the outfit out on permanent display as soon as possible. Funding was received from MGS to have a bespoke mannequin made for display, as well as arranging for staff to undergo training on how to talk about the outfit to audiences.

The outfit was funded by the National Fund for Acquisitions and was a collaborative process between Ellie and ourselves. It fitted into our Collections Development Policy and was a direct link to an earlier project that our Learning Team had worked on, in collaboration with Shaper Caper, called Here.Me.Out.

“We've had a few folk ask about the significance of the costume which we're all happy to chat about and after we've spoken about Ellie ... people tend to see a different side of it and seem to be a bit more understanding.”

Sarah Clark, Visitor Assistant at The McManus



CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

- Liaising with the manufacturers of the mannequin from a distance was challenging. Frequent updates made for a very successful outcome.
- Arranging for all staff to undergo training. This was achieved by the trainer delivering a virtual session, which we recorded, as well as delivering two in-person sessions. Now that we have the recording it can be used as part of the induction process for new staff. It's also useful to have as a reminder of the session.
- It was a major challenge to organise time off the floor for the Visitor Assistants to receive training. This was achieved by Curatorial and Creative Learning staff stepping in to cover their roles, and our Engagement Officer doing a fantastic job with the rotas.

THE IMPACT IT HAS MADE:

- We have redisplayed one of the permanent cases at The McManus, bringing it up to date to reflect more diverse voices.
- Staff felt more confident to talk to people about the outfit after the training.
- The outfit has a bespoke mannequin which also showcases the make-up and art of drag with a realistic looking head, something not captured in our other costume displays.
- Shows the legacy of a long-term project and a tangible outcome.
- We have better connections with underrepresented communities.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Teamwork was essential and frequent updates made for a very smooth project.
- Plan, plan and plan – have one last meeting just to be certain! Always expect the unexpected!
- Work with the artists. When issues on social media arose, it would have been better to take a coordinated approach.

- From the LGBTQ+ training received we learned that staff need to take a united approach. It's not about trying to change people's opinions but open up a conversation; if there is negativity surrounding a project/object bring the conversation back to why the museum delivered said project or collected that item.

GUIDANCE:

- Be organised! Regular chats and updates from the mannequin makers made for a good working relationship. Also, internally we had monthly updates.
- We offered places on the training sessions to other cultural organisations nearby so a great way to foster relationships at no extra cost.
- Think of how training sessions can be recorded and get permissions up front.
- For projects where an external company is manufacturing something for a costume display take as many measurements as possible, even ones you think are unlikely to be needed!
- Use staff properly. Let the most experienced person work on the element they know best.
- When paying freelancers remember they need to eat so add a per diem to their quote if they haven't included it.
- Try and get the best trainer for what you need, not whoever is nearby. Aim big! Even if it is only for a virtual session.
- Be prepared for social media and the media – have a plan. A lot of the time it is best to ignore negative comments online – after the initial backlash and negativity these people tend to go away and focus on something else.
- Be bold and have the backing of your senior managers, board, council, councillors etc. Ensure everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet. If your project/object has an element of controversy surrounded it – not everybody has to love it but all staff should be delivering the same message. Be a united front.

USEFUL RESOURCES:

Read about the MGS Grants Programme: www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/fundings/

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