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Museums and COVID-19

Approaches to pandemic-related collecting,
displays and public engagement

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Stay Home Stories

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This report presents experiences, lessons learnt, policy insights and recommendations drawn from interviews with museum professionals for the project ‘‘Stay Home’’: Rethinking the Domestic in the COVID-19 pandemic’ (‘Stay Home Stories’), funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation rapid response to COVID-19. This project is based at the Centre for Studies of Home, a partnership between Queen Mary University of London and the Museum of the Home, and in partnership with the University of Liverpool, Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) and National Museums Liverpool.

The research for this report has been led and conducted by researchers at Queen Mary University of London.

www.stayhomestories.co.uk

@stayhomestories

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Introduction

“*In times of drama and crisis and depression, you need museums more than ever to give you joy and inspiration, and to be an anchor institution in a community...it's our time if you like...We've never been so relevant.*”

Elen Phillips,

Curator of contemporary and community history and of dress and textiles, St Fagans National Museum of History, Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales

This report shares experiences and insights of museum professionals whose response to COVID-19 included the collection of both tangible and intangible material related to the pandemic, work with diverse audiences, policy development and staff support. It draws on interviews undertaken primarily between March and April 2022, on Zoom, with curators, learning staff and others across England, Wales and Scotland. Discussions centred around rapid response and participatory collecting strategies both digital and in person; the nature of the collections; partnerships and from whom material was collected; documentation and what the collections tell us about

people's experiences of the pandemic. Other discussions explored the sharing of pandemic-related material in the public domain – online, through social and other media, in physical displays and through community engagement; links with social and racial justice movements; the challenges faced by, and support needs of, staff; lessons learnt and how the experience of the pandemic will change museum policy and practice in the future.

Those who kindly participated in this research were:
Beatrice Behlen, Senior Curator, Fashion and Decorative Arts, Museum of London
Véronique Belinga, formerly Documentations Assistant, Museum of the Home, London
John Betts, formerly Museum Officer, Hackney Museum, London
Julia Bryan, Learning and Participation Lead, National Museums Liverpool
Brendan Cormier, Senior Design Curator, V&A South Kensington, London
Fiona Hayes, Curator of Social History, Glasgow Life
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Selina Hurley, Curator of Medicine, Science Museum Group
Kay Jones, Lead Curator of Urban and Community History,

Museum of Liverpool (National Museums Liverpool)
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Elen Phillips, Principal Contemporary Curator, St Fagans National Museum of History, Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales
Matt Turtle, Co-founder, Museum of Homelessness, London
Natasha Vicars, Curator, Curating London, Museum of London

This report stems from a larger project, 'Stay Home Stories', a collaboration between Queen Mary University of London, University of Liverpool, the Museum of the Home¹, National Museums Liverpool and the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers).

Project outputs available at www.stayhomestories.co.uk are included in the table below

Reports	<p>Burrell et al. (2021) At Home in Liverpool During COVID-19, Queen Mary University of London: London</p> <p>Blunt, et al. (2022) At Home in London During COVID-19: policy recommendations and key findings, Queen Mary University of London: London.</p> <p>Lawrence, M., Owens, A., and Blunt, A. (2022) Home, Faith and COVID-19: insights from the pandemic and opportunities for the future. A guide for people of all faiths, Queen Mary University of London: London.</p> <p>Nightingale, E., Blunt, A., and Owens, A. (2022) Artists, other creative practitioners and COVID-19, Queen Mary University of London: London.</p>
Films	<p>Eid Textile Tales, with Praxis, a charity for migrants and refugees</p> <p>Our Home, Our Stories, with project artist-in-residence Alaa Alsaraji about her installation at the Museum of the Home</p> <p>My Place, My Space, with Write Back, a charity working with young people in Barking and Dagenham</p> <p>Life Under Lockdown, street photography in East London with Adam Isfendiyar and Eithne Nightingale</p>
Podcasts	<p>Episode 1: Museum of the Home 'Stay Home' Collection</p> <p>Episode 2: Religious belief and practice at home during the COVID-19 pandemic</p> <p>Episode 3: Migration, COVID-19 and community support in London and Liverpool</p> <p>Episode 4: Sounds of Lockdown with artist Calum Perrin</p> <p>Episode 5: The representation of stay-at-home policies in journalism and political debate</p>
Online gallery	Maps submitted by children and young people aged 7-16
Teaching resources	Stay Home teaching resources for Key Stages 1 and 2
Blog posts	Blog posts across the work of the Stay Home Stories project

¹ The Stay Home Stories project took place at the same time as ongoing protests about the statue of Sir Robert Geffrye on the buildings of the Museum of the Home. See the [project website](#) for a blog post about the impact of the statue on the project and links to other resources and see the [Museum's website](#) for its current position on the statue.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from interviews with 16 museum professionals from 11 national, local authority and private museums across England, Wales and Scotland as well as Museums Galleries Scotland, the national development body for the museum sector in Scotland. They draw particularly on the final questions ‘What support is needed to help museums, galleries and their staff, come out of this pandemic and thrive?’ and ‘How do you think the experience of the pandemic will change museum policy practice in the future?’ They are also informed by insights shared throughout the interviews on such topics as collecting, documentation, public and digital engagement and staff wellbeing.

The research team approached both large- and small-scale museums who they knew to be pro-active in collecting about people’s experience of the pandemic including their changing relationship to home. We did not approach specific museums in Northern Ireland given the parallel project Museums, Crisis and COVID-19 based at Ulster University. We are aware that there were many other examples of good practice that are not captured here but hope that these recommendations can reflect some of those broader experiences and inform debate across the museum sector as a whole.

Themes	Recommendations
Contemporary and participatory collecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt museum wide strategies and collaborative working across departments but, particularly during a time of crisis, ensure flexibility and delegation around decision making. • Recognise the power of public participation in democratising collections of real life-experiences but that targeted appeals for specific material or to specific audiences can often generate a more effective response. • Understand the importance of collaboration with outside organisations in drawing on external networks and expertise, and in reaching objects and voices that reflect diversity. • Simplify administrative procedures and forms around participatory collecting. • Review how museums can collect and document crises, mental (ill)health and the impacts of social isolation in a sensitive and ethical way. • Develop and share good practice on how to collect digital material including media, social media, oral histories, video games.
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider and share best practice in preserving digital material for the long term. • Review, share expertise, develop training and mentoring in documenting rapid response, digital, story-based collections that are participatory, transparent and value different forms of knowledge production both within and outside museums.

Public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance engagement with COVID-19 material through specific online and in person events/displays but also integrated into displays/events on other themes. • Continue dialogue and research on appropriate timing of COVID-19 related museum displays/events and find angles that shed fresh light on the pandemic. • Build on people’s stronger connections to local neighbourhoods, towns and cities, and increased interest in local history, developed during the pandemic. • Build on people’s deeper understanding of, and increased interest in health, medical care, nature and the environment, developed during the pandemic. • Open up museum spaces, particularly outside, as hubs of activity for communities. • Encourage people to return to the museum in person, interacting with each other, real objects and life experiences.
Digital engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploit the potential of online engagement for the housebound, people with disabilities and/or who are unable to attend a live event for other reasons whilst recognising not everyone has access to information technology, is confident in its use nor can afford it. • Adopt and share effective, creative hybrid approaches for audiences to access exhibitions and events either online or in person. • Exploit potential of hybrid teaching to reach more students, including international students, those with disabilities or with caring commitments. • Invest more in new technology – equipment and software - and training to improve the online offer.
Social and racial justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw inspiration from museums that prioritise social justice activism such as the Museum of Homelessness. • Identify ways that inequality issues, highlighted by the pandemic and reflected in public responses and museum collections, can contribute to policy change e.g. COVID-19 enquiry, policies on housing, environment, racial and socio-economic inequality. • Ensure visibility of material online, in displays, and events e.g. of Black Lives Matter material in order to help museums reflect the heritage and experiences of diverse communities. • Review how museums can reflect and help sustain the solidarity and growth of mutual aid that increased during the pandemic.
Staffing issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve the right balance of hybrid working – recognising the positives of home working – and the need for in-person interaction with colleagues. • Improve access to new technology for staff working from home, including for teaching and learning. • Develop training/mentoring in rapid response collecting including on ethical, sensitive issues and in use of new technology for public engagement. • Review expertise, support and training needs of staff collecting and/or working with the public on traumatic experiences.
Financial sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review income generation given the lack of footfall, room bookings, shop purchases because of closures and support through such government/sector initiatives as the Recovery and Resilience Fund in Scotland.
Evaluation/sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish this report in order to, “have a reminder of who did what, what works, what didn’t work” (Brendan Cormier, V&A).

Challenges faced by museums

When COVID-19 swept across the UK from March 2020 museums and galleries were forced to close their doors. Overnight they were faced with various challenges. Who amongst museum staff should be furloughed, retained or let go? With most staff required to stay home, what ongoing work or special projects should continue, be put on hold or cancelled? How could work with audiences and partners be sustained or developed when people were unable to visit the museum in person? Several institutions, and individual staff within them, started to consider how to collect and document tangible and intangible COVID-19 related material for both present and future generations. But how should this be done given the constraints in which people were working and during a global health crisis when there were other institutional and personal priorities?

Other priorities

Although staff at Hackney Museum had started a spreadsheet of potential material of pandemic experiences in May 2020, in June they were then redeployed to other areas of Hackney Council such as the Rough Sleeping and Civil Protection teams. Collecting started up again in February 2021 with the employment of an 18-month maternity cover post. Local authority museums in Scotland were also deployed on other work and although they were unable to access funding from the Scottish government for various COVID-19 related initiatives through Museums Galleries Scotland, they were able to access support on health and well-being and participate in knowledge exchange sessions.

The Museum of Homelessness, set up in 2015 to collect material and document the lives of those directly affected by homelessness, is run – and key decisions are taken – by those with direct experiences of homelessness. It, too, pivoted away from some of its ‘heritage’ functions so that it could engage in more direct responses to the crisis. As Matt Turtle, co-founder, observed, “What does your nervous system do when you’re in a crisis, right? It activates ... You zone in on that thing that needs to be done”. This pivot moved the focus of the museum’s work in two directions. First, those involved became engaged in practical, ‘front line’ activity to support people experiencing homelessness, particularly in north London. A core team, including Matt and Jess Turtle, the museum’s founders, trustees and others, mobilised a group of 140 people to address emergency shelter and health needs and to work with other grassroots organisations to distribute 10,000 meals to people living on the streets: “We became quite well known for our cheese and pickle sandwiches!”

“ We take direct practical action in support of the community.”

Homeless Taskforce in the West-End, 2020 (Photo: Matt Turtle), Museum of Homelessness



Second, the museum used its **campaigning voice** and social media presence to try to organise a rapid and effective response to the pandemic on behalf of those experiencing homelessness. However, as time passed and some of the emergency measures for dealing with people experiencing homelessness came to an end, so the museum began to explicitly restart some of its ‘heritage’ functions’. The proposed new premises for the Museum of Homelessness in Finsbury Park will support this aim.

Developing a COVID-19 collecting strategy

Certain museums, considering it important to capture this moment in history, responded quickly, developing a COVID-19 collecting strategy within weeks of the start of the pandemic, whilst others took more time. Some adopted a museum-wide, cross-departmental approach, involving multiple staff, whilst in other institutions one or a small number of individuals took the lead. Some museums, at least initially, kept to agreed, standardised collecting procedures whilst others, from the start, were more flexible, recognising the constraints under which people were working and the need to respond at speed if opportunities to capture the experience of the pandemic were not to be lost.

In April 2020, within two weeks of the first lockdown, the Museum of the Home launched its digital *Stay Home* rapid response collection, led by curator Danielle Patten. A few weeks later, in May 2020, St Fagans National Museum of History, part of Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales, launched its *Collecting COVID* rapid response initiative, co-led by Elen Phillips, Principal Curator of Contemporary & Community History. Both museums devised online questionnaires, launching them on their respective websites. The Museum of the Home also invited people to send in other writing, artwork, photographs, audio and video clips; St Fagans invited the public to send in up to five photographs alongside their completed questionnaire and, as a separate initiative, went on to collect objects. Although the V&A had already developed a rapid response collecting policy some years earlier, it did not react so quickly. As Brendan Cormier, Senior Design Curator, commented,

“ There is such a thing as, you know, too rapid a response. When something is incredibly complex there needs to be a slightly slower gear.”

The sudden and unexpected onset of COVID-19 meant that the Science Museum, whilst recognising that the occurrence of a global pandemic provided a unique opportunity to add to its substantial medical collection, found it had little time to develop a strategy as much of its initial COVID-19 collecting work was relatively informal and serendipitous. However, over time, as the Museum started to collect in a more co-ordinated manner across the different institutions of the Science Museum Group and with other museums, it introduced a web page **Collecting COVID-19 Project**

announcing that,
“ Our curators are actively, and sensitively, researching stories and identifying objects to collect on the nation’s behalf... providing a permanent record for future generations of medical, scientific, industrial, cultural and personal responses to the outbreak and chronicling its impact on society.”

The Science Museum Group also used the **website to appeal for donations** of COVID-19 related material, and developed a specific **ethics policy** around Collecting COVID-19 emphasising that it “will not distract healthcare professions from their vital work”.

Contemporary collecting, in partnership with community groups and organisations, is business as usual for the Museum of Liverpool so it quickly adapted to the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless Kay Jones, Lead Curator of Community History, considered it important to ensure support from across the organisation. She wrote a collecting plan from home, considering short- and long-term objectives, conservation and health and safety issues. She then shared this online with teams across National Museums Liverpool before presenting it to the ethics team, also online.

However, Kay Jones did most of the fieldwork herself, often collecting objects at a social distance and in person.²

² Jones, C. (2020) **Interview with Kay Jones, Lead Curator of Community History, Museum of Liverpool about collecting objects and stories around the COVID pandemic**, International Council of Museums UK

Digital collection of COVID-19 pandemic experiences

The Museum of London, under the leadership of Beatrice Behlen, Senior Curator of Fashion and Decorative Arts, involved more than 20 curatorial, learning and outreach staff in both the development of strategy and its implementation, holding weekly meetings online with relevant staff. This was a markedly different approach to the V&A where Brendan Cormier reported that,

“There was no Museum-wide coordinated response... I need to compile a list of everything everybody's collected, but it's spread across several departments.”

The management of St Fagans National Museum of History trusted Elen Phillips and colleagues to collect without gaining prior agreement at the monthly acquisitions board unless there was an ethical, conservation or material issue. Fiona Hayes and Isobel McDonald, Curators of Social History at Glasgow Life, who volunteered to collect material

around the pandemic in response to a request by the Head of Research and Curatorial, mainly followed standard procedures – writing a report on proposed acquisitions, passing it by colleagues in conservation, learning and access and presenting this to the collection committee before it was signed off by the head of the museum. Given such procedures are always time consuming but, during the pandemic, became even more protracted, sign off was partially done in retrospect with some items being acquired provisionally in consultation with the head of the curatorial team. However, opportunities to collect material were still lost.

Museums Galleries Scotland, the national development body for museums in Scotland, realised that many museums had no experience of collecting contemporary material during a crisis. In response they ran a workshop on rapid response policy and practice for museums across Scotland, encouraging volunteers, in particular, to collect stories and objects from local communities.

Digital material about COVID-19 made up all, or a proportion of, what most museums collected. This was clearly practical in that it avoided health and safety risks and other challenges in the collection, storage and preservation of physical material during a pandemic. But the focus on digital content also reflected people's enhanced use of the internet and social media in all aspects of their lives during the pandemic – for work, learning, shopping, communication, entertainment, creativity, medical advice, worship and to talk to loved ones as they lay dying. For example, all of the Museum of the Home's *Stay Home* collection was digital, as was the *Animal Crossing*

Diaries initiative by the National Videogame Museum approximately a third of the extensive Museum of London's material was digital – blogs; tweets; Instagram stories; a WhatsApp chat between young women about their experience of **Ramadan in lockdown**; films; digital artwork; 'a **data visualisation**' – reimagining London's geography through the iconic structure of the COVID-19 virus, oral histories of people working in grass roots organisations and the **recordings of dreams**, a partnership initiative with the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London and the Museum of Dreams in Canada.



Guardians of Sleep project, 2021. Museum of London in partnership with the Museum of Dreams based at Western University in Ontario, Canada.



Stay Home collection, Lahiru lives in Ruislip in West London in a two-bedroom flat with his wife and their two-year-old daughter, Museum of the Home, 2020

i) Online public responses to the pandemic through questionnaires and other media

An effective way of capturing people's lived experiences and, at the same time, circumventing problems associated with the physical collection of material objects, was through inviting public responses online. The Museum of the Home's *Stay Home* rapid response collection, launched through the press and on their website, sought to explore how COVID-19 changed the way people lived and their views on the future of home life. Respondents were asked about the type of home they lived in, whether they lived on their own or with other people; how the pandemic had changed their use of space, routines, relationships within and beyond their home; what they appreciated about where they lived; their frustrations of lockdown and feelings of belonging.

The Museum of the Home's relatively open format online allowed people to respond flexibly and take ownership of how they expressed themselves. Over 500 people submitted writing, images, video and audio recordings; a selection of these responses are available [online](#).

The varied and moving responses underlined the differing impacts of those with or without outside space; those living on their own or with others; those working at home or as key workers. Many experienced the pressures of home schooling; the importance of neighbours particularly for the isolated or ill; the key role of new technology for work, education and in sustaining and building relationships within and across borders. These issues are explored in a [podcast](#) made as part of the AHRC *Stay Home Stories* project.



Social distancing, 13 June 2020. Photograph by Louise Martin. Image donated as part of Amgueddfa Cymru's *Collecting COVID: Wales 2020* questionnaire project

© Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales.

Inspired by public questionnaires sent out between 1937 and the 1980s, St Fagans National Museum of History launched a Welsh and English *Collecting COVID* questionnaire on 15 May 2020, publicising it through their website, *The Guardian*, *Western Mail*, social media channels, third sector organisations, Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales and Welsh regional museums.³ Devised by curators from different disciplines, the questions covered four areas – daily life, health and wellbeing, government information and how to think about this period historically. People could also upload five images. The questionnaire remained live until October 2020, a period of five months, attracting 1019 written responses and 200 images, the bulk in the first three weeks.

An analysis of the questionnaires showed that what brought people joy during this first phase of the pandemic were the small things – communities pulling together, the NHS clap, WhatsApp, Zoom and quizzes. People talked about their connection with their immediate neighbourhood; the importance of nature and fresh air; their concern for the environment. There was anxiety about separation from family, not seeing people who were ill or being unable to attend funerals. Other stress factors included the price of food, getting food slots, over or under eating, having to celebrate Eid at home and not being able to travel abroad.

Certain findings from St Fagans' questionnaire echoed those of the Museum of the Home's *Stay Home* initiative. Homeowners were aware of their privilege, at having a garden as well as space to work from home and for schoolwork. This contrasted with those who lived in more precarious housing, for example, in rented accommodation that was repossessed when the landlord defaulted on their mortgage. Being confined to 'home' led to tension, particularly in a women's refuge, but while some people during lockdown became estranged from those with whom they lived, others became closer. Home schooling caused stress for parents juggling work and created anxiety about not doing it right although some families enjoyed the challenge, particularly if their children did not like school or were being bullied. The internet was a lifeline, allowing people to connect with family, with others of the same faith and with choir members. There was also more in-person interaction with neighbours.⁴

³ Responses to St Fagans' *Collecting COVID* questionnaire can be found [online](#), along with photographs submitted with the survey responses. A [baseline analysis](#) of the first dataset collected before the Christmas 2021 lockdown and the introduction of the vaccine programme is also available. A second questionnaire, from June to September 2021, to which 200 people responded, focussed more on the vaccine.

⁴ For more on these themes see: Burrell, K. et al. (2021) *At Home in Liverpool During COVID-19*, Queen Mary University of London: London. Blunt, A. et al. (2022) *At Home in London During COVID-19: policy recommendations and key findings*, Queen Mary University of London: London.

Other responses to St Fagans' detailed questionnaire revealed an undercurrent of activism around food distribution, cooking and inequality, especially in relation to race and the Black Lives Matter movement. Women, in particular, were keen to contribute to change when the pandemic was over. References to government and the political landscape were particularly significant with a strong element of respondents being glad to live in Wales and positive about Mark Drakeford's leadership as First Minister of Wales. England was seen to have opened up too quickly. For many, the Dominic Cummings scandal highlighted the fact that there was one rule, at least in England, for the elite and another for the rest of the population.⁵

ii) Online capturing of pandemic experiences through the videogame *Animal Crossing*

At the start of lockdown, the National Videogame Museum in Sheffield was under threat of permanent closure. At the same time video games saw a surge in popularity due to people being confined to their homes. Many used video games to entertain themselves and stay connected with friends and family.⁶ Supported by a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Museums Association the museum put out a call, in summer 2020, asking people how they had been experiencing lockdown through *Animal Crossing*, a videogame that became particularly popular during the pandemic. Some 150 people, more than the anticipated 60, responded to the public call out in a variety of formats – essays, audio visual pieces, YouTube videos and comic strips. Michael Pennington, digital project curator, commented,

“ I think it caught lightning in a bottle, in like the weirdest way possible... for people to be stuck indoors with a game that is deliberately slow paced, that tries to do escapism on like an almost extreme level.”

Michael followed up several submissions with online interviews.

The game entails creating your own avatar and arriving on an island to start a new life, joined by a cast of eight or nine computer-generated characters.

“ For me 2020 was the year of New Horizons. Through all the bad there was this little game that was bringing people together like a little light shining through the darkness.”

Gamer response quoted in online exhibition *Animal Crossing Diaries*

The online exhibition, *Animal Crossing Diaries* explores the thoughts, feelings and experiences of *Animal Crossing* players during the pandemic. It presents a selection of stories of people's experience of the game from March 2020 to April 2021 along certain themes.

Keeping a Routine explores how players found a sense of stability during an unstable time, for example, ignoring the news by visiting their island – the worst health crisis on the island was being stung by a bee.

Making your Space reflects players' shaping of their virtual space during a time of lockdown and limited travel.

Sharing Creativity showcases the range of artistic and cultural responses such as an art curator making an art gallery space. A teacher recreated a classroom for her students and another gamer created a Fringe Festival with livestreamed performances.

Finally, *Staying in Touch* shows how people maintained social relationships – and created new ones – through *Animal Crossing* by meeting friends in desert island town centres and going on dates. Some of the entries, about the bereavement of pets, or of family members, using the game as an emotional outlet and as remembrance, are particularly moving.



East Gallery, inspired by Yayoi Kusama's art after missing a visit to Kusama's *Infinity Rooms* during lockdown, *Animal Crossing Diaries*

iii) Oral histories

Several staff opted to interview people online; for example, Danielle Patten for the *Stay Home* initiative at the Museum of the Home⁷, Ana Baeza Ruiz to include different voices alongside academics for the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture's podcast, and Michael Pennington at the National Videogame Museum for follow up interviews for the *Animal Crossing Diaries*.

Other staff were more cautious. Glasgow Life staff felt that it was difficult to do oral histories online in a way that would be acceptable. St Fagans' staff shared this view.

“ Although they did the online training, they did not have the confidence to collect oral histories online and felt the ethics around it were too complicated.”

Elen Phillips

When restrictions relaxed St Fagans' staff conducted oral histories with Black Lives Matter activists. The Museum of London also decided, after thorough risk assessments, rather than conducting oral histories from home on Zoom, to allow curators to do oral history interviews in outside spaces from summer 2020. This guaranteed better personal interaction although it was difficult to achieve good audio quality in outside settings. Oral histories in person

were an important aspect of the work of the Museum of Homelessness but as Matt explained,

“ We saw people really, really struggling with their testimonies. Some of the interviews we had to do were some of the hardest I've done ... [when] collecting objects [for the museum].”

Curators at the Science Museum, while keen to capture the significance of grief and loss in people's lives, felt it too sensitive to collect oral history accounts of such traumatic experiences.

iv) Online curatorial and academic research and comment

The V&A blog *Pandemic Objects* set out to tell design stories about the pandemic through everyday objects, including those in the V&A, many written by V&A staff.

The 86 blogs cover an impressive range of subjects – from windows to balconies, handwashing to hand clapping, gardens to public parks, the popularity of *Animal Crossing* to the growth of Tik Tok. Some of the key themes that emerged were how to design the division between home and work life during a pandemic; new versus old technologies – home deliveries and quarantines are, after

⁵ The Dominic Cummings scandal was a series of events involving the former PM Boris Johnson's advisor in apparently breaking lockdown rules, notably a journey of hundreds of miles from London to Durham with his family while the UK was living under the strictest lockdown rules – despite contracting COVID-19

⁶ GlobeNewswire (2020), *As a Result of COVID-19 Video Games Have Seen a Surge in Popularity as Social-Distancing Keeps People in Their Homes*, 11 May 2020, accessed 17 May 2023.

⁷ See Patten, D. (2023) '*Stay Home: rapid response collecting project at the Museum of the Home*.' In Sparke et al. eds. *Interiors in the era of COVID-19: interior design between the public and private realms*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 259-270.

all, old-fashioned ideas and, in a hyper-capitalist city like London, it was the Victorian infrastructure of parks that was the saviour for the city; and the inability to operate effectively across borders in such a crisis. Contemporary material created during the pandemic was often linked with V&A collections as with Natasha Durlacher's *Postcards from the Pandemic*. These pairs of **photographic images** juxtapose

“ the detritus of **nitrile gloves** and **face masks** found strewn on pavements everywhere, with the colourful flower petals and blossoms that could be seen at the same time ... recalling the anxiety and uncanniness of the period. The postcard may be an almost dead medium, but it finds a renewed expression here – recalling a collective memory, not from a far-off place, but from our recent past”

Brendan Cormier



Postcards from the Pandemic © Natasha Durlacher, *Pandemic Objects*, V&A

It was envisaged that the research could help the museum make better, more informed decisions about what to collect rather than to be a collecting project *per se*.

The first series of the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture's podcast, recorded pre-pandemic and broadcast in early 2020, examined various themes relating to homes and housing. The intention had been to record another series later in 2020, but COVID-19 forced the museum to re-evaluate. Under Zoë Hendon's leadership, staff brought the schedule forward, re-focused the content, and speeded up production times to ensure that Seasons **Two** and **Three** were relevant to the pandemic. In April 2020, work began on Season Two to reflect the issues raised by the COVID lockdown. A trailer included a crowd-sourcing initiative to gather public experiences of lockdown during the COVID crisis. Some of these recordings featured in the broadcast episodes. Seven episodes were released as Season Two between June and September, with a total of 2267 downloads by the end of the year.



That Feels like Home: Session 2, Episode 1: Home Spaces, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture

Curator Ana Baeza Ruiz, who conducted interviews with academics, creative practitioners and others, covered such topics as how people staged their homes for public view on the internet; the use of digital technologies; the sounds and silences of home; the blurring of boundaries between home and work as well as the public and the private; how lockdown exacerbated feelings of loneliness; the already precarious housing situation for many; and the impact of architecture on health including reference to previous pandemics. Some episodes more directly relate to the pandemic than others.⁸

⁸ Hendon, Z. (2020) *That Feels Like Home*: connecting sites of lockdown to design collections, *Museums and Society* 18 (3), 330-333. (<https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v18i3.3551>)

Collection of physical material

i) Challenges

Collecting physical material during lockdown posed specific challenges as, in the case of the Museum of London, “You have to deal with it ‘en masse’.” ‘En masse’ in this instance was over 500 objects from around 230 people. In order to adhere to all COVID-19 health and safety measures, staff developed specific procedures on how to collect objects from someone who was sheltering; rescheduled pick-ups when new lockdowns were introduced; and cleaned and kept objects in the quarantine store longer than usual. Initially staff worried about touching surfaces, something that later turned out to be less of a problem. “We’re a very, very cautious place, so we maybe overdid it.” The biggest challenge was around procedures to accession objects, particularly when working with people who may not be familiar with museum processes. Some of the paperwork, for example around copyright, was already known to be hard for a lay person to understand and digital signatures were still not acceptable, meaning physical forms had to be sent out and returned. Some of the ‘Transfer of Titles,’ giving ownership of objects to the museum, had still not been returned after 18 months, delaying the cataloguing and placing of objects online.

Individual curators in other museums took on responsibility for what previously would be the work of other staff – collecting objects personally at a safe social distance or storing objects at home. Kay Jones from the Museum of Liverpool selected smaller objects that posed less of a problem around storage. Some staff paid for objects themselves but they were not sure they would get refunded. There were other practical and ethical challenges.

“Early on in the process, a decision was made not to collect directly from medical personnel who were dealing with the stresses of the front line”

Science Museum

There were also sensitivities about collecting from people experiencing grief or from individuals and communities who were disproportionately affected, for example people who were sheltering or isolated, minoritised communities. It was also difficult to plan.

“None of us had really been through or experienced this situation or how long it would last”

Glasgow Life

In response to certain challenges, Museums Galleries Scotland ran workshops for staff on the care of objects when unable to access stores and developed a letter for use by museum staff responsible for transporting objects, classifying them as key workers in case they were apprehended by police. Despite such challenges the range and quantity of objects collected were impressive.

ii) Approaches

On 23 April 2020, the Museum of London put out a **call** on various media including *BBC Radio 4* and *Sky News* (TV) for material that represented Londoners’ pandemic experience. Initially this focussed on three strands, albeit loosely interpreted, of ‘young people’; ‘physical and virtual’ [changes to the physical city and the move to virtual working]; ‘key workers and home workers’ although the latter became more about being at home, not just working at home.

The Museum of Liverpool put out a generic call on social media and on *Radio Merseyside* asking people what they thought the museum should collect in relation to the pandemic. Although people suggested objects like jigsaws it became clear that it did not always occur to people that a museum collected such everyday material. The museum found that more specific requests for objects around Eid

and to targeted groups, for example, were more successful. Fiona Hayes and Isobel McDonald, Curators in Social History at Glasgow Life, working across several Glasgow museums, also noted that City Archives in Glasgow, through an effective social media strategy, gained a more effective response for people’s lockdown diaries than their more generic public appeal in local newspapers such as the *Glasgow Herald*. A specific open call by the V&A for children’s **drawings of rainbows** generated over 1,000 submission, of which 100 are now in the collection of Young V&A.

Museums did not solely depend on responses from the public. Staff searched the internet and social media, collected signage, took their own photographs and liaised with existing or new partners.

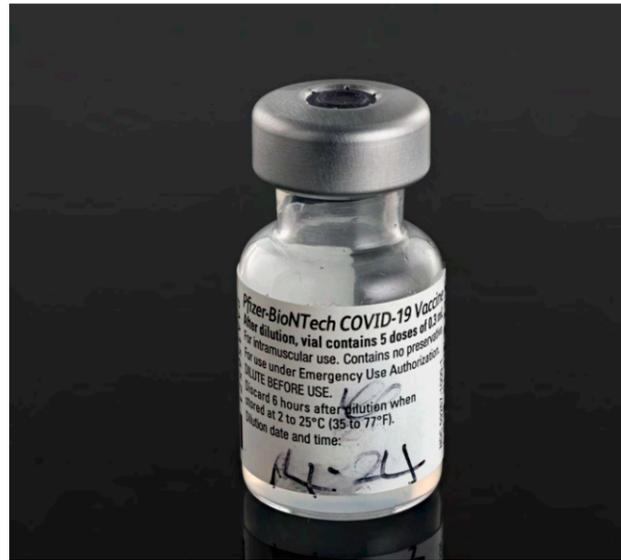


Pandemic Objects, Eliza from Ladbrooke Grove making a stained-glass window effect rainbow. Photo: Juliette Lee, V&A

iii) Nature of collections

Health-related objects

Unsurprisingly there was a significant collection of health-related objects. The **Science Museum** liaised with local shops or pharmacies to retain and donate public health signage and leant on other contacts and networks. This generated key objects such as the vials from the first-administered dose of the vaccine, materials used in medical care settings such as PPE and ventilators and objects associated with building resistance to the virus among the population. The Caribbean and African Health Network donated one of their health packs that was sent throughout Manchester and the Bromley-By-Bow healthcare centre in East London donated art and activity kits distributed to its users, including information in both English and Bangladeshi. The final report on the Science Museum Group's **COVID-19 Collecting Project** for health-related and other objects, was published in April 2023.



Vial of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine given to the first individual vaccinated in the UK's mass vaccination campaign, Margaret Keenan, on 8th December 2020 © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum



COVID-19 Home Test Kit, produced as part of the Real-time Assessment of Community Transmission (REACT-1) study, 2020 © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum

The Museum of London collected signs to support the NHS, a rattle used to make noise for the NHS, recordings and filmings of clapping for carers and oral histories with people working in the NHS, masks and a testing kit. The Museum of Liverpool collected a registration card from the first day of mass testing, free meal vouchers issued as a result of the Marcus Rashford campaign, and the banner, collected from radiographers at Aintree Hospital, THANK YOU LIVERPOOL, FOR STAYING HOME, STAYING SAFE AND YOUR SUPPORT. This portrayed Chanel, a grey African parrot who went viral on social media after going missing on a housing estate and Colonel Tom Moore.

Glasgow Life collected a broken wooden spoon from Clap for Carers, 'Clap for Carers' and 'Keep Two Metres Apart' t-shirts; masks made by a group of female volunteers at

a church and by a theatre costume designer. Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales collected homemade scrubs, empty Pfizer and AstraZeneca vials, literature posted through doors and the story of a Welsh teacher in China who compared strict measures in China with lax measures here. The Museum of Homelessness collected a pair of incontinence pants that gave one homeless man greater freedom.

Other collections reflected the global impact of the pandemic. A curator in the V&A's Asia department collected a **classic keffiyeh** (Palestinian scarf) from the last factory in Palestine that produces keffiyehs and who used the same pattern to make face masks, whilst a curator of world cultures at Glasgow Life collected a mask from Cree First Nations people from North America.

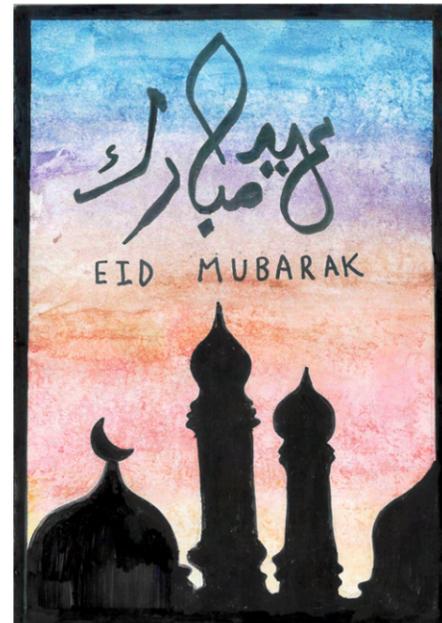


Aintree hospital staff holding Clap for Carers banner © Liverpool Echo/Andy Teebay

Other objects – faith related, craft work, games

The Museum of Liverpool collected faith related objects including cards, bangles and henna related to Eid in lockdown, VE day objects linked to street parties and hair clippers – they refused the hair.

The Museum of London collected the game Quarantinopoly and a rainbow made of Duplo. Glasgow Life collected a mobile altar used to conduct a service on Zoom from a lay preacher, a tie dye bag from a seven-year-old boy who was taught the skill by his mother with the boy donating profits from the sale of tie dye bags and pillowcases to the zoo. St Fagans collected craftwork, painted pebbles, painted toilet rolls and a patchwork quilt made by an online face group.



Eid card donated by Rida and Hafsa from St Helens, Museum of Liverpool



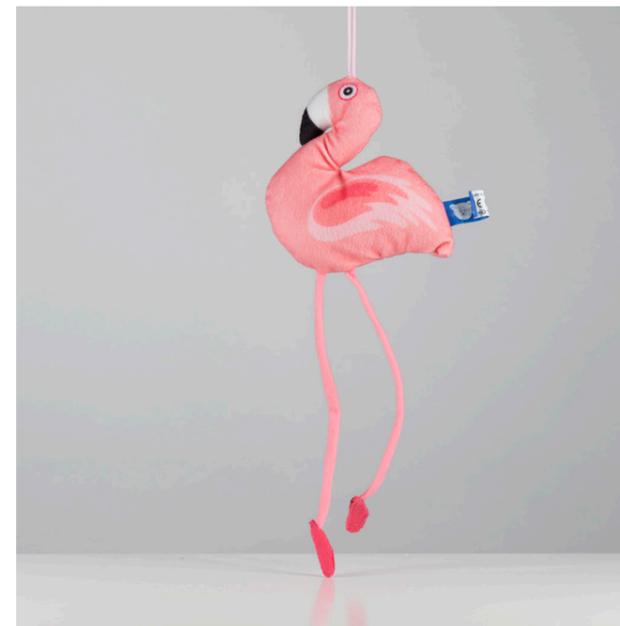
The Bubble Wand, 2021 (photo: Anthony Luvera), Museum of Homelessness

The Museum of Homelessness collected objects that spoke directly to how people stuck together and organised on the margins despite the impact of the pandemic. The objects were given by grassroots organisations and people experiencing various forms of homelessness. The bubble wand and the flamingo, pictured here, are about emotion, coping and ways people kept each other going. The wand, for example, was donated by a grassroots organiser who took the wand to the streets every day to spread joy among the street homeless community. The flamingo became a mascot of solidarity amongst homeless families in asylum accommodation and was given by a member of the team at the Magpie Project.



Garden of Hope, Caerleon. Photograph by Cher Sherwood. Image donated as part of Amgueddfa Cymru's *Collecting COVID: Wales 2020* questionnaire project.

© Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales.



The Flamingo, 2021 (Photo: Anthony Luvera), Museum of Homelessness

"This flamingo was a well-loved mascot".

Text-based objects

Text-based objects included people's lockdown diaries collected by Glasgow City Archives. Brendan Cormier of the V&A collected the *New York Times* editorial of the printed names of the first 100,000 deaths in America. "Actually, it's the lack of grief that I find quite interesting, now playing out. We're quickly approaching one million deaths in the US and it is not a news item whatsoever."

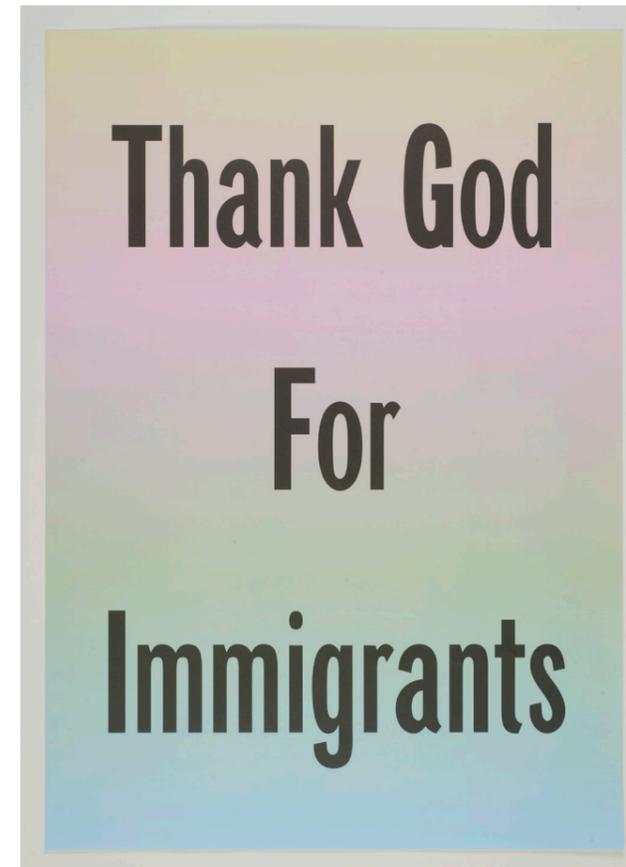
The Museum of London accepted poems, not something they normally collect, partly because they were from

people less represented in the collections – one, from a young Muslim, was almost like a prayer to Allah; another, from a teenager, was more humorous. The Museum of Liverpool's paper-based collections included the letter sent by the British government to every household, as well as people's responses to the letter, shared on social media. They also collected posters around COVID-related Asian hate crime put up around the city. Glasgow Life collected 22 large billboard posters by Women's Art collective *Power Tae the Key Workers*.



Power Tae the Key Workers (nurse, medic and bin man): © Cobolt Collective, Glasgow Life

The Museum of London collected a poster by Jeremy Deller and Fraser Muggeridge, *Thank God For Immigrants*.



Jeremy Deller and Fraser Muggeridge, *Thank God For Immigrants*, artist edition, 2020. Museum of London (2020.78). CC BY-NC-ND.

St Fagans collected placards from the Black Lives Matter movement including *Racism is a Pandemic Too*, and also stories about holding a demonstration during the pandemic.

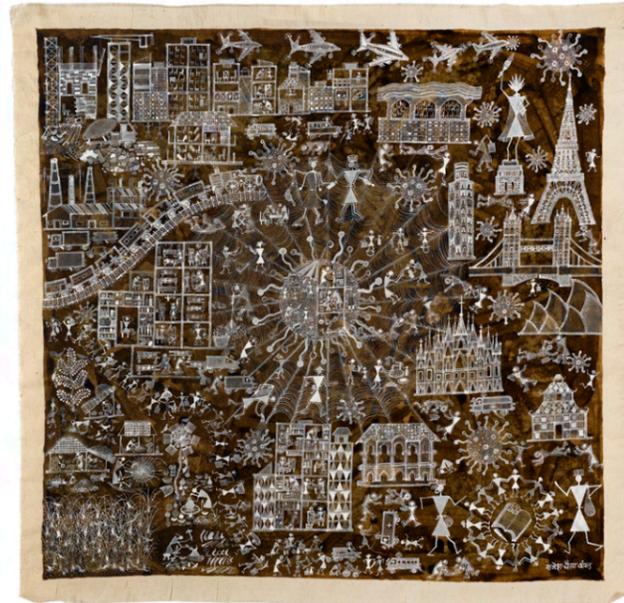


Placard used at a Black Lives Matter demonstration held outside the Senedd, Cardiff Bay, 27 June 2020.

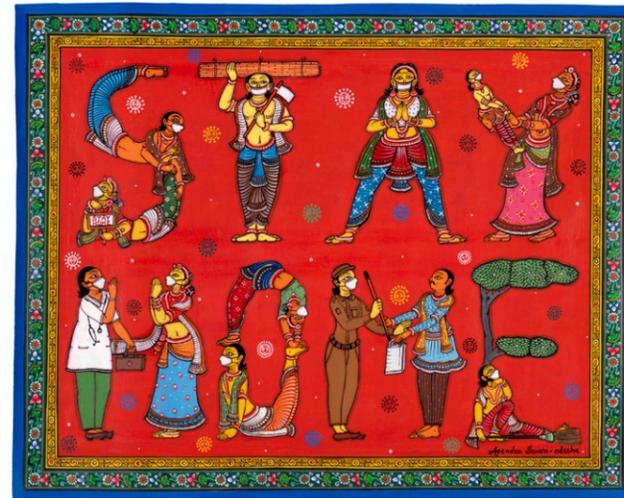
© Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales.

Artwork

In addition to text-based works discussed above, some of which could be classified as art, Glasgow Life purchased two rainbow works by Graham Fagen, four masks designed by contemporary artists sold to raise money for artists and two drawings by a young boy, with an accompanying video on YouTube, explaining the difference between a virus and bacteria. Curators also successfully fundraised to buy artwork by Libby Walker of a tenement, during lockdown, of people doing different activities. A curator of world cultures at Glasgow Life collected five artworks on the theme of COVID-19 by Indian folk artists, acquired by Glasgow Museums in 2020 with a grant from the National Fund for Acquisitions, funded by the Scottish Government. The lockdown and loss of the tourist and pilgrimage markets meant many artists struggled to feed their families, but others used the time, space and their artistic traditions to create awareness about the disease, for example, about social distancing and how the virus spread across the world by aeroplane..



Aivasi Warli painting by Rajesh Chaitya Vangad. © The Artist. (Image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection).



Odisha Pattachitra in the Oriya Pattachitra style, Stay Home, by Apindra Swain. © The Artist (Image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection).



Kachni style Madhubani painting from Bihar by Heera Kant. © The Artist (Image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection).



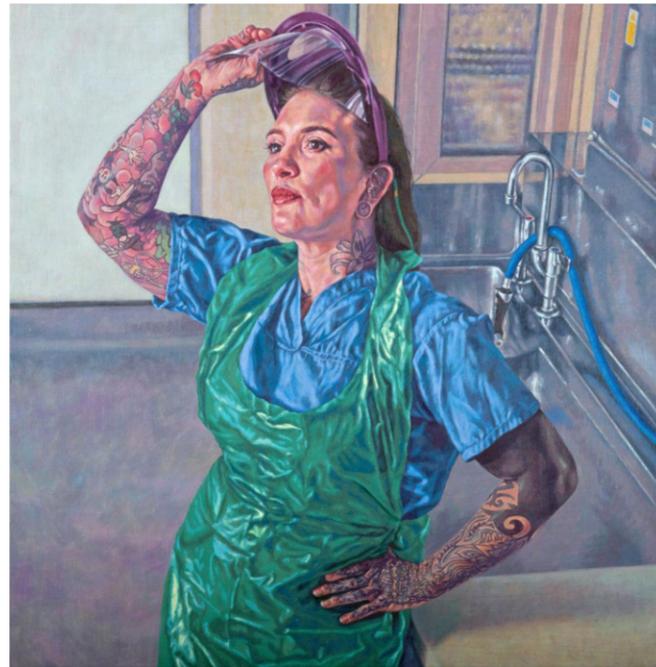
Section from Bengali patua narrative scroll by Bahadur and Rupsona Chitrakar. © The Artists (Image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection).

The Museum of Liverpool collected ten mind maps made by individuals charting their use of space during the pandemic – trips to the park and to the supermarket, for example. The mind maps were produced as a film.

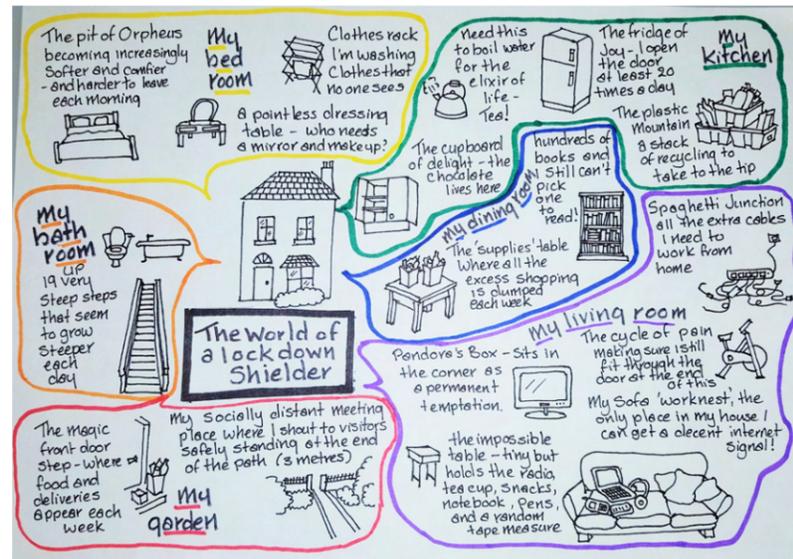
Workshops were held with the Museum of Liverpool as part of the mapping strand of AHRC Stay Home Stories project, where children and young people throughout the UK and beyond were invited to submit **maps about home** during the pandemic.

The Science Museum Group collected three pieces of contemporary art that directly engaged with the pandemic. These included Roxana Halls' **Katie Tomkins, Mortuary and Post-Mortem Services Manager**. Katie Tomkins commented on the painting,

“When I look at Roxana’s painting, I see someone who’s exhausted, slightly burned out, but determined to get the job done. That’s exactly how I felt.”



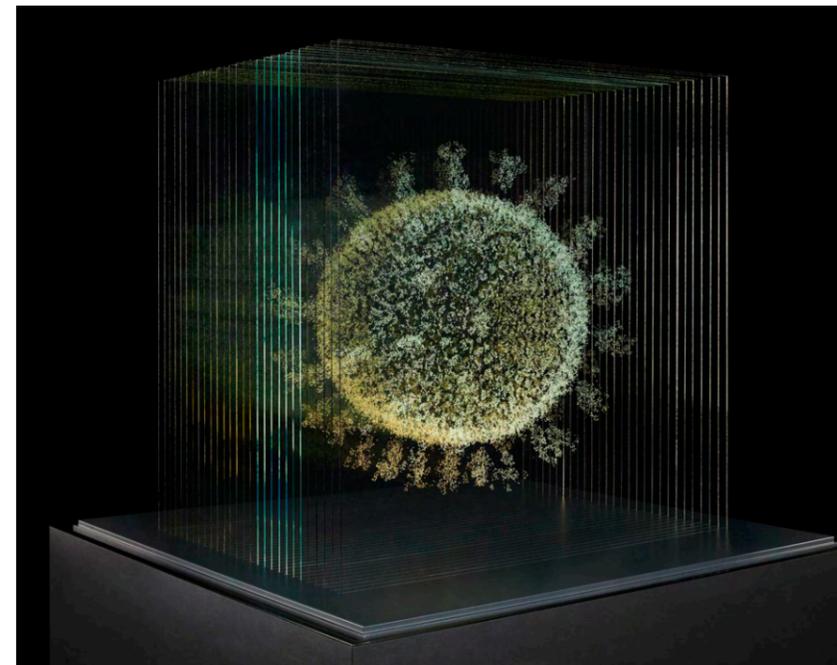
Katie Tomkins, *Mortuary and Post-Mortem Services Manager* by Roxana Halls, Science Museum Group © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum



Mind Map – Courtesy of Museum of Liverpool



Alan Measles – *God In the Time of COVID-19*, vase by Grayson Perry Science Museum Group © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum



2020: *the Sphere that Changed the World* by Angela Palmer Science Museum Group © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum

Grayson Perry’s vase, **Alan Measles – God In the Time of COVID-19** is in the form of a maiolica albarello, a historic drug jar used in pharmacies. It depicts the travails of Alan Measles, Grayson Perry’s childhood teddy bear, as God during the pandemic.

Angela Palmer’s artwork, **2020: the Sphere that Changed the World**, shows the coronavirus modelled in sheets of glass.

Collecting from whom?

Photography

Most museums collected photography whether by professionals, amateurs and/or staff. Curators at Glasgow Life took this on when the Photography Team were unavailable to take photographs of the city due to travel restrictions. A V&A curator collected Simon Roberts' photographs of sea during the pandemic. Photographs were submitted to the Museum of Home's *Stay Home* rapid response initiative – including an ironing board converted into a desk and of a beautiful wreath of garden flowers made by a woman in Cumbria for her husband when florists were closed. Black and white photos from the rapid response collecting project are on display on the walls near the entrance to the Museum of the Home's *Home* gallery.

Images that accompanied people's responses to St Fagans' *Collecting COVID* initiative included children baking, socially distanced VE day street parties, food distribution by volunteers, a lockdown library in an old phone box and religious leaders conducting services on Zoom.

The Science Museum Group collected digital photographs of railways in northern England taken during the first lockdown by Craig Scott, a guard on Northern Rail. His photographs show trains and stations all but deserted, emphasising the impact of COVID-19 on the railway network.



“The wreath I made from flowers in the garden for my darling Norman – there were no florists open because of the virus”

Stay Home collection, Museum of Home, 2020



Rev. Suzanne Brumwell presenting at a virtual church in Bridgend, 14 June 2020. Photograph by Ariane Brumwell. Image donated as part of Amgueddfa Cymru's *Collecting COVID: Wales 2020* questionnaire project.

© Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales.

Institutions used a range of methods in appealing to the public for ideas on what to collect, for actual submissions and donations. They varied, too, in the extent to which they collected demographic data on who responded. The Museum of Liverpool received a huge response to their public call out.

“Digitally we reached lots of people – four million users overall which shows there is an appetite for this conversation. The museum had asked people before for suggestions on what to collect but this was on a far bigger scale.”

Alongside this general appeal the museum used a more targeted approach to organisations and individuals.

People from across the UK, Australia and India responded to the Museum of the Home's *Stay Home* initiative, advertised through the press, museum website and social media. The majority were women, mainly, though not exclusively, white and over 40, although all age groups were represented with some children participating with their families. Danielle Patten, curator, carried out follow-up online interviews with several respondents whose stories were under-represented in the collections. This included a man who was terminally ill and a transwoman whose neighbours had become more tolerant during lockdown. Of the 1,019 responses to the *Collecting COVID* questionnaire by St Fagans 70 per cent were from women and 30 per cent from men.

The National Museum of Videogames, reflecting demographic data on general engagement with video games, attracted a younger audience for their *Animal Crossing Diaries* initiative. The largest demographic was between 16 and 25, followed by those aged between 25 and 35 and were predominantly from the UK, US, France, Australia and Canada. There was also interest by the LGBTQ community. The museum ensured the website was

accessible on phones and generated good traffic through other gaming publication websites. Finance could be a significant barrier as the videogame *Animal Crossing* costs about £40 but the Nintendo Switch device on which the game can be played costs upwards of £200.

The choice of press to advertise public call outs could influence who participated. Glasgow Life, for example, attracted a middle-class audience through their publicity in the *Glasgow Herald* – most of the responses were from white Scots. The curators reflected that the *Evening News* might have been a better outlet, given the newspaper's success in attracting a broader audience in their call out for photographs during the pandemic. Some of Glasgow's outreach work with Drumchapel, for example, that could have engaged a more diverse population ceased during the pandemic and whilst staff were aware of some of the activities they would have liked to see reflected in the collections, such as the support given by gurdwaras and by a halal fish and chip shop, it was not always evident what material to collect. The Museum of London, too, in acknowledging that most people who responded to the public call out seemed to be middle-class, realised they “Should have made more of an effort to go to other outlets that reach other communities.”

It was the Museum of London's partnership and outreach work that collected voices and objects that better reflected the cultural and religious diversity of the city. The links established with the United Synagogue, for example, led to the acquisition of a video of online weekly prayers.

Sustaining and developing audiences

i) Digital and social media

The internet and social media became key to both sustaining existing, and developing new, audiences during the pandemic. This included developing museum resources for schools and home schooling, an initiative supported by collaboration between Museums Galleries Scotland and Education Scotland to ensure accessibility, links with the curriculum and backed up by Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers by museum staff. Engagement with COVID-19 material and related initiatives was but one aspect of online engagement with audiences.

Pandemic Objects, at one time attracting 80,000 readers, supported by press coverage including in *The Guardian*, has been one of the most successful digital projects at the V&A. It attracted interest from pre-existing V&A audiences, in particular the design community. Brendan Cormier felt different content could have attracted new and more diverse audiences. “Diaspora as a subject, hasn’t come up so much. I wanted there to be more.” The few examples included old **Japanese posters** about public health with regards to measles outbreaks in the nineteenth century; a powerful **image** of people with signs and masks reading “I Can’t Breathe” as seen during a protest over the death of George Floyd in Chicago by Nam Y. Huh; and an **image** by the Mali photographer, Seydou Keita, in a blog about dreams.

The Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture’s podcast, promoted on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, achieved over 2,000 downloads by the end of 2020. While it is impossible to know exactly who the audience for any podcast is, evidence suggests that listeners included students and staff from Middlesex University as well as members of the public across the UK and around the world who became aware of it via social media or through their podcast provider. Each episode also attracted interest in different academic disciplines.

“ [Speakers who were] Geographers or historians have put their own episode on social media so we’ve reached other people we might not have before. People were listening to our podcast when they went on their one scheduled walk a day.”

The staff have discussed re-editing them in different ways to attract a wider audience, but Ana Baeza Ruiz has since left and not been replaced due to a recruitment freeze.

Whilst there has been a growth in digital engagement staff across the sector were also keen to see visitors returning to museums. “I hope we will be able to get groups back in through the door again and that’s not to say digital can just overtake the physical. It’s a combination of both depending on what the audience wants and needs are” (National Museums Liverpool).

ii) Exhibitions and displays

There were differing opinions about the appropriate timing of exhibitions, displays and events based on the COVID-19 related material. Some staff felt the pandemic was too raw and that an appropriate time for related exhibitions or displays was at some stage in the future when audiences would be more interested in the material culture of the pandemic than those living through it. Others were keen to engage audiences during the crisis but were hindered by having to close their doors at the announcement of yet another lockdown, having to scale down, postpone, cancel or adapt their plans.

When asked when the Science Museum might mount an exhibition on the COVID-19 pandemic, Selina Hurley responded:

“ I don’t think I’d personally be ready for that for five, ten years. COVID-19 has not gone away and the shock of its onset and the trauma that many have experienced through illness, the loss of loved ones and social confinement, make it a difficult topic to confront within a museum setting.”

However after an initial display of key objects from the *COVID-19 Collecting Project* in May 2021 a larger, free exhibition **Injecting Hope: the race for a COVID-19 vaccine**, that opened in the Science Museum London in November 2022 has proved extremely popular. This showcases 100 items including the handwritten notebooks of Kate Bingham, Chair of the Vaccine Taskforce, a laptop belonging to vaccine scientist, Tess Lambe and maps used by the military to plan the vaccine roll out. After its closure in June 2024 the exhibition will transfer to the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester, where content will be adapted to

emphasise its relevance to the local community, then move to National Museums Scotland and a further venue.

The Museum of London has no plans for an exhibition. “We collected primarily for the future. A few things will go online and into the museum, but most will go into storage.” Staff at the Museum of London were not convinced that two years into the pandemic was the right time for an exhibition.

“ There was a feeling that at an earlier stage maybe people were looking to museums to help them make sense of what was happening but ... I think we probably all need to have a bit of a rest from it all.”

Not displaying the collections, however, risks disappointing members of the public who responded to the museum’s call. “They would love to see it public. People have shared this experience with an idea this is like a public record.”

Envisaging an exhibition in the future, however, did inform decisions about collecting – whether there were objects of different sizes, for example, but Beatrice Behlen, Lead Curator, did not want to see the material exhibited in a “super high tech museum way” but “just make it a bit more approachable, like less museum because there’s a lot of emotion in a lot of the objects.” The museum did support an exhibition of its partnership project with St Christopher’s Hospice Community Action Team, **Telling Stories**, in which ten individuals, supported by the hospice, were facilitated to co-author an artwork on grieving and bereavement under lockdown, working with commissioned illustrator Olivia Twist. This collaboration highlighted the need to take account of the support needs and related ethics involved in capturing people’s personal experiences of the pandemic.



Riso print created through the project *Telling Stories*, 2021, by Olivia Twist and individuals supported by St Christopher’s Hospice. Commissioned by the Museum of London and supported using public funding by Arts Council England (2021.236/1b).

Brendan Cormier at the V&A rejected the idea that an exhibition about the pandemic would not attract people at present, that it was too raw, or people were experiencing COVID fatigue. He had had similar conversations with publishers and yet there were already books about the pandemic in stores, particularly on photography.

“ I think maybe people are saying, ‘You’re just regurgitating what we already saw. I don’t want to see it again’. And maybe ...they haven’t yet figured out how to show something new about it. So, waiting ten years, you’re essentially waiting for people to forget so you can show them the obvious. What you’re supposed to do is show them an entirely new way to look at what you’ve been seeing.”

However, the only exhibition the V&A mounted was a three-week display of the rainbow paintings at South Kensington before it was closed due to a further lockdown. There was an unsuccessful grant application that included the proposal for an exhibition but there were no further plans for this. Although the material about *Animal Crossing Diaries* is online, Michael Pennington from the National Museum of Video Games was keen on the idea of a physical exhibition based on the material, for example, disembarking from a plane and visiting different parts of the island where

material would be displayed but with contextual material, for example,

“ Picture the scene. It’s March 2020 and you can’t go out anymore, only for your hour’s daily allotted walk.”

There were, however, no specific plans for a physical display to supplement the online exhibition.

In contrast Kay Jones of the Museum of Liverpool thought it essential to have a display during the pandemic not only to show that museums are about contemporary collecting but for the benefit of people who contributed. The one-year display in the atrium, “Had a community feel – people who had participated enjoyed it and it gave the opportunity to connect with others who had participated.” On the atrium screen was a rolling programme of films, including one made by a local trans Black filmmaker, Kiara Mohamed, who explored the sense of home during lockdown and a **film** about mind maps. Objects on display included hair clippers with the owner’s story about cutting her dad’s hair. There was no formal evaluation, but most people responded well to the display although some staff, when the idea of a COVID display was proposed, said, “Is that really the first thing people want to be confronted with?”



Covid-19: we're all in this together display, Atrium, Museum of Liverpool 2021

The Museum of Liverpool had no immediate plans for another display, but objects can be incorporated into other exhibitions. For example, the mask illustrated with the image of Hilda Ogden from *Coronation Street* has been integrated into the *Wondrous Place* gallery.

The exhibition ***We Are All In This Together: Hackney During The Pandemic*** at Hackney Museum, displaying material that focussed on people’s personal experience of the pandemic, ran from February to June 2022. A particularly powerful piece was ***Still III: Corona Diary***, a graphic journal made up of a series of drawings documenting Monique Jackson’s **experiences** after falling ill from a suspected infection of COVID 19, raising the visibility of the illness ‘Long COVID’ both nationally and internationally.

Also on display was ***COVID Replicas*** by Lorenzo Saa, a print and video of COVID-19 molecule replicas made out of fruit and vegetables. More examples of Lorenzo’s images and videos can be seen on his **Instagram** account.



Facemask featuring Jean Alexander, originally from Toxteth, Liverpool, as Hilda Ogden in *Coronation Street*, placed in *Wondrous Place* gallery, Museum of Liverpool – © Pete Carr



COVID Replicas by Lorenzo Saa, video screened at Hackney Museum

There was a significant body of photography too, on the use of outdoor space, on community support schemes such as Hackney Scrub Hub and of residents holding objects that sustained them through lockdown produced in a book, *Life under Lockdown: On Mehetabel Road and Isabella Road in Hackney, 2020* photographed, written and co-produced with residents by Eithne Nightingale, distributed to museums and for sale.⁹

Hackney Museum also displayed a new-born baby tag highlighted the challenges of having a baby during lockdown; pandemic super visors, decorated with feathers and glitter, showed the determination of artist Helene Corr to meet up safely with her friends but still feel glamorous.

The material was originally intended to go into Hackney Museum's dedicated exhibition space but because of the new COVID-19 variant, Omicron, there was a fear few would visit. There was also a concern, according to John Betts, as to whether people, "Have got COVID fatigue and want to move on." It was decided, therefore, to scale down the material and to integrate it into three separate areas of the museum's core display. It was thought that broader experiences of the pandemic such as the role of the health authority and the local council protecting people through signage, and the vaccination programme, were too current for people to engage with. A section on grieving, including a video of an open-air service beside the memory wall on Clapton Common, commemorating people who had died, and an interactive memory wall within the museum, was also excluded. It was felt that these might be too painful for some visitors although John reflected,

“The flip[s]ide of that was that people might need that space. It didn't have to be because that person died from COVID-19 ... but because you weren't able to be with them whether they're in a care home or in a hospital.”

The exhibition was also unable to highlight certain social justice issues. This included photographs and images related to a foodbank; a local charity supplying laptops; Hatzalah, an ambulance service run by the Orthodox Jewish community; a hotel block booked for the homeless in Finsbury Park and of a mosque with social distancing in place.



Lawrence, Helen, Iris and Stella above
Harriet, Iona, Elektra, Jacqui and Karim below
from *Life Under Lockdown: On Mehetabel Road and Isabella Road in Hackney, 2020* © Eithne Nightingale

In December 2021 the Museum of Homelessness decided to incorporate some of the objects they collected into a *Secret Museum* event, reflecting on COVID-19. Matt Turtle explained:

“We all wanted the exhibition to function as a way of bringing people together to make them feel provoked... but also to feel good about some of the positive things that had happened... about being together after such a long spell of isolation. So yeah, people got this pack and they showed up at the old Cardboard City side, which is now the IMAX ... didn't know each other and they were given a torch to find clues ... they even had to pick up a phone in an old phone box... there was the bubble wand... directing them along. It was very sort of dreamlike... because I think that's what it was like to be out in the deserted streets and in other settings during the pandemic, it felt very strange and surreal.”

Matt Turtle felt that whilst part of the purpose of the *Secret Museum* event was to offer a memorial and grief space it was also important to illustrate that there was a lot of togetherness and solidarity that often doesn't get highlighted. “We were looking for balanced representation.”



Installation *Our Homes, Our Stories* at Museum of the Home by Alaa Alsaraji

⁹ Also see the AHRC Stay Home Stories film [Life under Lockdown](#)



Installation *Our Homes, Our Stories* at Museum of the Home by Alaa Alsaraji

iii) Collaboration with academia

Alaa Alsaraji was employed as artist-in-residence for the AHRC funded project *Stay Home Stories*, a collaborative project based at the Centre for Studies of Home, a partnership between the Museum of the Home and Queen Mary University of London, also with the University of Liverpool, National Museums Liverpool and the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). For the installation *Our Homes, Our Stories*, October 2021 to January 2022, Alaa Alsaraji drew on the Museum of the Home's *Stay Home* rapid response collection and interviews conducted by the project's community researchers with minoritised communities and people of diverse faiths. On the floor of an abstract living room, set within a space alongside the period rooms at the Museum of the Home, were tufted floor rugs with designs reflecting the experiences of rituals of care in the pandemic – two hands unable to reach each other inspired by a daughter's way of caring for her elderly mother through not visiting; a generic pot of hot food that could feed the whole family and neighbours; people doing yoga; soaking your feet in a bowl of hot water, following a Chinese tradition, to calm the nerves; growing tomatoes; walking and taking up cycling. On the walls were digital illustrations of utopian visions of home – of a bed with roots coming out of its legs, inspired by the statement, 'Everyone should be able to grow roots in whatever shape that takes'; of affordable housing and sustainability.

It was an interactive space, full of plants, where people could reflect on, and contribute, their own experiences of home. Many visitors filled in postcards about what they would like their future home to be – whether it was a house or flat run by solar and wind energy or with a large garden and access to outdoor space. All wanted affordable housing. At the time of interview, several months after the installation, Véronique Belinga, Documentations Assistant, commented, "I think the general feeling is that people don't really want to talk about the pandemic anymore." However, she believed, "There's different ways that the conversation will be relevant that don't necessarily centre the pandemic, it will centre on other things like the environment..." A film was made about Alaa Alsaraji and her work *Our Homes, Our Stories*.

iv) Other forms of public engagement

Several museums ran pandemic related public engagement activities either alongside exhibitions and installations or separate from them. Alaa Alsaraji ran workshops with local communities including foodbank users. National Museums Liverpool invited communities with whom it had not previously worked to participate in *Museum in a Box – My Story Liverpool*, representing people's experiences of the pandemic. Staff sent out confirmation letters to groups of vulnerable older and younger people struggling with mental health issues asking them to plan what they wanted to put in the box. They also worked with writers to develop exercises to encourage people to put pen to paper about their pandemic experiences. Staff took out a conservation standard wooden or flat pack box – slightly larger than a shoe box – artistry tissue, art and other materials to community venues, although some groups, for example of hospital patients, were held online. A group of Syrian refugee families, and Afghan women with children staying in hotels, also participated.

The boxes were full of personal things – people's writing, drawings and objects such as a baby tag or the letter about isolating. Diaspora links were represented with images of a phone, FaceTime or Zoom. It was clear that people's relationship to home intensified during the pandemic but whilst for some this was a safe space, others were irritated by it; some people became more linked to their local neighbourhood and community whereas others felt constrained by the COVID-19 restrictions that limited their movement. The exercise empowered communities to be their own curators, reinforcing the idea that we are all part of history.

“It's very museum-y, but also very open ... and creative ... thinking about what you leave behind ... about your identity ... bringing in other stuff around caring and preservation. From a museum perspective it forced us to get out of our comfort zone and led to people visiting the museum.”

These boxes do not normally lead to acquisition. Packs of creative activities were also distributed through grass roots organisations such as food banks, community housing schemes and refugee groups, some translated into Arabic. Both *My Story Liverpool* and the packs revitalised community contacts and supporting wellbeing, but Julia Bryan, Learning and Participation Lead, questioned the expertise needed to run groups about such sensitive issues and the safeguards that should be put in place:

“Because we're not counsellors... we try and avoid going into territory that's particularly problematic for people, like bereavement... but that sometimes happens inevitably and that can be quite difficult for people. So it's... what the boundaries should be around health and wellbeing type of work... And ... if you are working with the practitioners, who may be more skilled, what sort of practitioners should they be? People talk about arts and health experts, but like what is that?”

The team at St Fagans participated in a Cardiff University session *Thinking Historically about COVID* with others in Europe and America but have not organised other events such as a conference or an exhibition. They are keen to carry our market research as to when is the right time to do a display, also bearing in mind the timing of the government enquiry into COVID-19.

Documentation and access

The Museum of Liverpool accessioned the objects and people's responses into their collection management system, with a selection being placed on their website. This work was eased both by the museum having already introduced less paperwork for their contemporary collecting and by processing the necessary documentation online, rather than sending it to people's homes. For staff at the Museum of London working remotely, this task, which would normally need staff assistance, became even more laborious. Some of the paperwork, for example around copyright, was already known to be hard for a lay person to understand and digital signatures were still not acceptable, meaning physical forms had to be sent out for physical endorsement. Some of the 'Transfer of Titles,' giving ownership of objects to the museum, had still not been returned after 18 months, delaying the photography, cataloguing, and placing of objects online with detailed descriptions.

John Betts from Hackney Museum procured handwritten signed documentation when he collected objects personally either from people in their homes or when they brought objects to the museum. Not all objects, loaned primarily for the temporary display, were accessioned. John Betts also compiled a database of everything he had researched, including material not included in the display in the event that the museum decided to draw on this in the future. He had not necessarily followed up on all the material. "There were certain things you had to note but not approach people, if it was too difficult or raw or if they hadn't time." By June 2023 Hackney Museum had accessioned and documented **64 objects linked to the pandemic**.



Artwork: *200m to the Shops* painted from memory by Jenny Blanchard, Hackney resident, whilst sheltering during COVID-19 collected by Hackney Museum

The documentation of digital material posed significant challenges for several museums and for different reasons. In the case of the *Stay Home* rapid response collection at the Museum of the Home, this was not only because of the size of the collection – over 500 submissions of writing, images and/or recordings - but because the Collections in XPlus database system was outdated and more appropriate for objects rather than people's testimonies. Véronique Belinga explained, "I don't want to refer to the selection as a collection of objects. It's a collection of stories, of narratives, of people's experiences." She is also concerned about how to incorporate both her own subjectivities and those of the volunteers who are cataloguing the collection: "It's about being more transparent about the documentation process. A lot of that can happen with the system at hand, it's just we have to be more innovative and creative about how we use it." The Museum of London, too, found that digital collecting posed additional problems. **Tweets**, for example, had to be remade. "Our digital curator was in touch with Twitter directly, so that really was quite a big undertaking getting all the permissions". Ensuring complete oral histories, too, were accessible was also a challenge.

Dr Zoë Hendon, Head of Collections at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, had not yet decided as to whether the podcasts were to become part of a permanent digital collection. "I don't know quite what the answer is yet." The podcasts and transcripts, however, are available as an ongoing resource and have been included on students' reading lists, for example *Home Cities: epidemics and health* for the public health course at Middlesex University. Each episode links to three or four objects in the collections and, in that way, are linked into the database. Similarly, Brendan Cormier of the V&A had not considered the *Pandemic Objects* blog as a digital collection or if, and when, the blog might be archived. "That would be fascinating to think of the blog as an object ... that's a bigger conversation with the digital team." Instead, Brendan Cormier is planning to produce a book based on material in the blog. "Because still, at the end of the day, speaking of old technologies being better than new ones, the book is still the only way to have a lasting kind of archive knowledge of something." Michael Pennington of the National Videogame Museum, too, was concerned about the longevity of digital collections. "The museum has paid for a server to store a pre-determined amount of data over a set time but what happens after five or six years – we risk losing that data for good." The material is catalogued.

Social and racial justice

“The pandemic in many ways was a great lens for exposing political flaws elsewhere”

Brendan Cormier, V&A

In contrast to the claim that ‘we are all in this together,’ the pandemic exposed inequalities that affected people from diverse backgrounds in different ways. Inequality in housing was a key theme reflected in the responses to St Fagans’ *Collecting COVID* and the Museum of the Home’s *Stay Home* initiatives and the *Our Stories, Our Homes* installation. Several of the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture’s podcasts highlighted how it was still women

carrying out most of the housework; the challenges of lockdown, for example, experienced by au pairs, living in someone else’s home; the loneliness felt by people whose sense of community and ‘home’ was based within spaces outside their own house, such as gay and lesbian bars, cafes or clubs; and how people with gardens could listen to birds in contrast to those without or in hospital. Two **Pandemic Objects** blogs exposed the need to review housing policy; for example, about how council estates have moved away from central heating to individual units leading to some tenants being unable to pay their bills and another about how **student protests** highlighted how universities have become major profiteers from real estate speculation.



Balconies on Columbia Road, East London. Image: Wikicommons User Justinc, *Pandemic Objects*, V&A

The Museum of Homelessness, building on its existing profile, used its campaigning voice and social media presence to try to organise a rapid and effective response to the pandemic on behalf of those experiencing homelessness:

“So we had a lot of discussions with different press contacts. We wrote several letters and fielded several consultations to try to pressure the government on the hotel route. We actually published a plan ... which is like the hotel plan. Basically, one of the earliest charities to actually do that.”

One area where Matt Turtle suggested there was a “big story to tell” was how people who were placed in hotels sought to make a home in those spaces. He referred to an example in Shrewsbury where a “family environment” was successfully created, whilst other places were “crazy” or “unsafe,” and where “bins were being set on fire”. This, and other campaigning work, placed the museum in an influential position. For co-founder Matt Turtle, the groundswell of support that the museum received and its capacity to work with other grassroots homelessness charities, was indicative of the “mutual aid” and strong community response to the pandemic, especially for those identified as being most in need, such as people without permanent shelter. Indeed, the museum’s experiences ran counter to some of the early pandemic phenomena: whereas many people were stockpiling scarce goods such as toilet rolls, the challenge in the volunteer homelessness arena was the distribution of goods and food amassed by grassroots efforts. Amidst the stress of the sudden imposition of restrictions, there was also a more positive sense that with the pandemic came a “lot of opportunity ... to do things differently”. The museum’s documentation of this “front line” work will ultimately become part of its collection and its archive of the pandemic moment.

The Museum of Liverpool was also keen to reflect how, in many instances, the pandemic brought communities together. Kay Jones collected a newsletter from the L8 district in Liverpool that illustrated how the mosques supported both Muslims and the wider community in a time of crisis. “I think it showed that innate sense of community and the importance of helping each other out. I think there’s that long tradition of Scousers coming

together... that self-sufficiency, in spite of everything else that is thrown at the city... We wanted to collect from every area across Liverpool by working with key contacts but that didn’t really work out...”. The Museum of London, too, was keen to show the key role of mutual aid organisations. Natasha Vicars undertook oral history interviews with Carib Eats in Hackney, Filipino Food for NHS Staff and Sistah Stella Headley, from Pepys Social Supermarket in Deptford, and one of the leaders of the Rastafari Movement, among others, showing how such organisations stepped up to reach diverse communities and cater for culturally specific diets during the pandemic.

For many museums it was important to document political movements that were happening during the pandemic and were intrinsically linked to it. As Véronique Belinga from the Museum of the Home explained, “It wasn’t just the pandemic. Things happened simultaneously, you know, social justice movements.” This included the Black Lives Matter movement that was resonating across the world.

This, and the supposed ‘culture wars,’ had a direct impact on the Museum of the Home due to the **controversy surrounding the statue of Sir Robert Geffrye**, a seventeenth-century merchant who made investments in transatlantic slavery. Responses to a questionnaire conducted by the museum voted in favour of its removal from the front of the building but this was prevented by a government intervention, creating conflict within and outside the museum, in particular, with local communities. Alaa Alsaraji, artist-in-residence on the AHRC *Stay Home Stories* project, responded to this controversy by integrating a motif of a statue of Sir Robert Geffrye, onto the rugs placed on the floor of the installation *Our Homes Our Stories*. The motif was then crossed out to symbolise her, and the project team’s, solidarity with the campaign to take down the statue.¹⁰

The Museum of London collected the cloth put over the statue of Robert Milligan, a London based slave trader, before the latter was removed from in front of the Museum of London Docklands in June 2020 by the local authority, Tower Hamlets and landowners, Canal and River Trust. This was without the intervention of government as it does not fund the Museum of London who supported the removal. Museums Galleries Scotland, through the Empire, Slavery and Scotland Museums project, was not necessarily

¹⁰ See the [project website](#) for a blog post about the impact of the statue on the project and links to other resources and see the [Museum’s website](#) for its current position on the statue.

addressing the toppling of statues, “but talking about the decolonisation restitution, repatriation.” Loretta Mordi, Learning and Engagement Officer, believed museums were beginning to feel more confident talking about decolonisation just before the pandemic but the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19 became catalysts to move this dialogue forward:

“A lot of these conversations would probably have been happening ... anyway, but because we had some emergency funding for museums to reimagine themselves slightly in a different world it gave museums time... as society started to re-emerge, to think what ... stories they are telling, who visits our museums, and how do we change that bit. Reluctant or not, the talk is going on right now and museums... must engage with all of this ... to become relevant.”

Knowledge exchange sessions run by Museums Galleries Scotland helped museums adopt a multi-narrative approach to the stories told through objects and to embrace change.

Several museums acquired material related to the Black Lives Matter movement, such as St Fagans with its collection of placards, photographs of demonstrations and oral histories of activists. “Because it’s all about visibility, isn’t it. If you can’t see yourself in an organisation, in the collection, in who works there, in the programming they do then you’re not going to feel that you belong.” St Fagans has a curator of Black history – a role created in 2019 and is part of the decolonising the curriculum initiative.

Véronique Belinga was keen to stress the link between past and present injustices:

“There’s a historical continuity that has been reinforced by this pandemic, this question of land ownership... people of colour and Black people’s relationship to land is one of theft, displacement and dispossession for a lot of people. So, when in the pandemic people are saying, I want a garden and to grow my own food, that is often political. It’s a political act.”

The interconnection between different injustices is powerfully highlighted by sound artist Felicity Ford’s contribution to the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture’s podcast. She reflected that the sound of a loved one struggling to breathe will be, for some, the most powerful sound of the pandemic as will be the strangled voice of George Floyd.

“Both the pandemic and the situation with George Floyd ... and that slogan, ‘I can’t breathe’, ... maybe that will be the sound that I think about which I would never record, when I look back at this historic moment”.¹¹

Another key political movement happening simultaneously was around climate change with COP26 held in Glasgow. In connection with this Glasgow Life produced an online exhibition, looking at the timeline of the built environment of Glasgow and global warming. Brendan Cormier is not convinced that the experience of the pandemic will bring long term change:

“Everyone is saying the pandemic is the dress rehearsal for the wider climate emergency. Which is true and not true. They’re so completely different. It’s unclear what lessons we’ve learned from the pandemic that can be directly applied to the climate emergency. And people saying, ‘We’re never going back to this ... to that.’ You see quite quickly, people forgetting and going back to old patterns ... we’ve really over exaggerated our ability to get rid of deeply ingrained cultural tics.”

There is clearly a difference between the documentation of others’ involvement in social justice movements and a museum’s active involvement during the pandemic as by the Museum of Homelessness, for example, in promoting the use of hotels for the homeless during the pandemic. However, St Fagans hopes that findings from the *Collecting COVID* questionnaire can be fed into the UK COVID-19 enquiry. Perhaps there are other, as yet untapped, opportunities for collections acquired during the pandemic to be used to support social and racial justice movements.



Black Lives Matter demonstration held in Bellevue Park, Wrexham, 7 June 2020. Photograph by Carwyn Rhys Jones.

© Carwyn Rhys Jones/Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales.

¹¹ Woodward, Sian; Baeza Ruiz, Ana; Hendon, Zoe; Tacchi, Jo (2023). That Feels Like Home podcast S2 Episode 3: Home Sounds. Middlesex University. Media. <https://doi.org/10.22023/mdx.23608161.v1>

Challenges for staff during the pandemic

i) Job status, working from home

The announcement of the first lockdown, and consequent closure of museums, created considerable fear over job security. In many cases, as at the Science Museum, this was exacerbated by uncertainty over local furlough schemes and wider concerns about 'restructuring' that was happening in many parts of the heritage sector. At the Museum of London, given the forthcoming new museum project and move to West Smithfield, all curatorial staff kept their jobs, but, like others, had to adapt to working from home.

In Glasgow it was the commercial arm that was furloughed, but delays in appointments, particularly at managerial level, contributed to stress. It took several months for Fiona Hayes and Isobel McDonald, Curators of Social History, to get laptops or access to work emails. Glasgow Life is an arms-length organisation which runs art and sport services for Glasgow Council but is still tied into central council services which, in turn, delegate certain tasks to a third-party organisation. In the local government sphere, museums and arts can be quite low down the pecking order and particularly during a pandemic – the team responsible for IT services, for example, was tasked with sourcing the software for tracking bodies. Sharing equipment and software (for example, Microsoft Teams) with children and balancing work with home schooling all affected staff well-being and effectiveness. As a result of the pandemic, Fiona Hayes and Isobel McDonald have pushed successfully for improved better online access to museum collections information for the public.

Staff at the Museum of Liverpool were given laptops and started to use Microsoft Teams almost immediately. Furlough in Liverpool was an option for people within the department – some took it for a short amount of time, whereas all the front of house team went into furlough for a fairly long time.

“There were specific risk assessments to do with COVID-19 – we were clear what PPE we needed, and support re quarantining objects... But yeah, the support was there.”

Elen Phillips from St Fagans did not like working from home as she enjoys working in a team but gained a sense of purpose from the *Collecting COVID* project and was glad not to be furloughed: “But obviously a huge privilege to be able to work from home because other colleagues in other departments, front of house, security, cleaners they were all going in.” Through the COVID-19 Adaptation Fund Museums Galleries Scotland were able to **support museums** in introducing health and safety measures to meet government guidelines around the pandemic. Museums Galleries Scotland also supported staff health and wellbeing through sessions on yoga and **mental health**.

Staff who took up new positions during lockdown found the transition particularly challenging. Natasha Vicars, who started work at the Museum of London during the pandemic, missed the more informal support of staff usually available on site. John Betts did not meet any of his colleagues in person for his first three months working at Hackney Museum: “It was quite strange starting a new place and not being surrounded by a team where you can bat ideas back and forth.” There were, however, daily 15-minute online catch ups and other online meetings. It was only in May 2021 when the museum re-opened that he met people face-to-face for the first time.

Once problems about access to equipment or software had been dealt with several people found benefits in home working. Michael Pennington from the National Videogame Museum enjoyed working at home as he was used to working independently and had enough support, including from his partner. Fiona Hayes and Isobel McDonald from Glasgow Life appreciated the extra time for research into collections, thereby gaining insight into their relevance to a wider Glasgow history, examining data and writing online descriptions. They also enjoyed daily local walks. Brendan Cormier found running a blog from home was manageable and a comfortable experience, despite not knowing about the future of his contract. It also gave him more time with his baby daughter. Most V&A staff were hybrid working, with at least three days in the museum. The consensus was still, however, that unless everybody was on site, which was unusual, online meetings worked best for everyone.

“At the office, things are noisy, and the internet is bad. And we haven't yet worked out spatially how to manage hybrid meetings.” There were other aspects of working through the pandemic that Brendan Cormier appreciated.

“It was a beautiful moment during the pandemic, where people were... more or less, very conscious of the fragility of everybody. I was having conversations with people who weren't furloughed and remarking that the museum under those circumstances had become strangely a much nicer place to work. On the one hand, there were less people, so it was much easier. But on the other hand, because we were in this condition it was a very supportive, solution-forward response. I remember feeling a slow sense of dread when it was starting to go back to its old ways.”

The five staff at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture were used to working at home on certain days but had to adjust to doing everything online. The work that proved to be the most challenging was teaching students. At first, staff used PowerPoint and images of the collections but later introduced a visualiser set up – an SLR camera mounted on a stand, to show the objects in real time. This had the advantage of being able to teach 40 or 50 students at a time rather than in small groups.

“I would never have thought that that would be better. I previously would always have said students need to come in. They need to see the stuff; they need to handle things themselves. In the future, I'll do a lecture with the visualiser, give them the tools to understand what they're looking at. And then if they want to come into the museum, they can, in small groups.”

When the Museum opened up again, in May 2021, staff continued to work from home and went in once or twice a week for specific sessions. The university has encouraged managers to be supportive of staff, no-one was made redundant although there was a recruitment freeze in place.

Most museum staff thought working at home for some of the week would be a long-term impact of the pandemic: “Hybrid working is definitely going to be the future for our organisation, but with that acknowledgement that we still need to meet and discuss things in person, to bounce ideas off people” (Museum of Liverpool). For the most part, this was welcomed: “So being able to sometimes work from home and... then go into the office and the collections suits most of us now.” (St Fagans).

ii) Emotional impact of COVID-related collecting

Participants from several museums reflected on the emotional impact of collecting material during the pandemic. Elen Phillips of St Fagans spoke of not wanting to pounce on people in the midst of a crisis:

“I’ve never had that feeling before as a collector curator... picking up on the sort of anxiety and trauma with the people that you’re collecting from ... many of us were in floods of tears...with some of the responses, really tragic... It’s [sighs] heavy stuff actually... not only are you living through it, you’re collecting it... But we always sometimes forget about the researcher, the interviewer, the collector in these contexts. And although it’s nothing compared to what the person, the lived experience with the person that you’re dealing with, you can’t help as a human being with empathy emotions... it’s hard to switch off isn’t it?”

At the same time, Elen Phillips found it comforting that people were experiencing the same highs and lows as herself.

Staff at the Museum of London also spoke of the emotional toll of COVID-related collecting: “We were living through the pandemic too so to have it in our work lives too was really emotionally demanding.” Turning down people’s offers of material was particularly difficult. “Some people got in touch and said someone died and they’re really distressed about it and they’d written about it and would we want it. It’s always hard to say no ... but in this case it seemed worse to have to say, we already have a few.” This impact on mental health was recognised for those working on the grieving and bereavement project in partnership with St Christopher’s Hospice: “They offered counselling to anyone involved in the project, me, the artist, not just the participants.”

Science Museum staff also noted the emotional toll of collecting while living through the pandemic, particularly as most work had to be conducted from home and without the usual supports provided by colleagues on site. Selina Hurley described a meeting in 2021 where COVID-19 related objects were being accessioned as “like reliving the pandemic ...” For many museum staff, their personal and professional lives became more deeply entwined. This

added to stress and often impacted on mental well-being. Yet Selina Hurley also noted that pandemic collecting offered a way of making sense of what was going on and led to her becoming someone who friends and family turned to for understanding.

iii) Digital confidence

There has been significant development of, and confidence in, working online. For Elen Phillips at St Fagans, “All this hybrid working, mixing the digital and the physical ... our events programme, our collecting was always dependent on face-to-face, physical contact with people... we didn’t have hardly any online content in terms of an events programme.” St Fagans staff now feel more confident about collecting digital material, processing this quickly and in working in different ways:

“As a curator practitioner it’s actually opened doors for us ... I would drive all across Wales for two-hour meetings somewhere that was seven hours away ... I have connected with colleagues in other countries. I am going to be taking part in a conference that is based in Croatia, but I’m going to do it from my own home.”

Michael Pennington, too, from the National Videogame Museum felt more confident about adopting a hybrid approach, for example, curating both an online and physical exhibition.

A survey carried out by Museums Galleries Scotland staff, including by telephone, identified the need for digital support and training for staff and volunteers during the pandemic. Funding was secured from the Scottish Government for equipment, subscriptions, training, knowledge exchange and one-to-one support. Enhanced digital confidence has eased communication geographically. Zoom and Teams are now used for training, avoiding the time and expense needed to travel to Edinburgh and allowing Museums Galleries Scotland to invite more interesting speakers. This has strengthened geographical forums with the aim of bringing together museums within different areas of Scotland for support and knowledge exchange. As Jacob O’Sullivan explained: “We really furthered how we work with the forums during the pandemic and actually have a key member of staff now to overview that.”

Conclusion

It is clear that museums, large and small, private or publicly funded, with different remits and collections, have risen to many of the challenges caused by the pandemic. In the words of Elen Phillips of St Fagans, they have given ‘joy and inspiration’, become ‘an anchor institution in a community’ and indeed shown their ‘relevance’. Museums did this by stepping in to give practical support to the most vulnerable during a crisis or collecting tangible and intangible COVID-19 related material for research, of interest to present and future generations, highlighting inequality as well as resilience.

Many museums have developed new participatory and rapid response collecting strategies, looked more carefully at the ethics of collecting in a time of crisis and the skills needed to work with stressed, isolated, and sometimes grieving, audiences. Staff have grown in confidence and expertise in the digital realm, developing hybrid public engagement programmes for online and in person audiences including for those facing additional challenges such as the homeless, food bank users and asylum seekers. All this should be acknowledged and celebrated.

Whilst still reeling from the impact on people and on institutions there may be a temptation to move on from COVID-19; for collections to remain in storage for a future

day, fearing the time is not yet ripe to revisit the pandemic. Yet the success of the popular exhibition at the Science Museum *Injecting Hope: the race for a COVID-19 vaccine* that runs until June 2024 and then tours, seems to counter this notion. There is much to be shared across the sector, whether regionally, nationally, and indeed across the globe, before we are swept up in other challenges that allow little time to digest and reflect on what we have learnt both personally and professionally.

There is no doubt that in some ways, perhaps not yet clear, that COVID-19 has transformed the sector most evidently in the balance of home working and the use of new technology. Some museums may have clear plans on how to open up collections for public research, to integrate material into other galleries and link with other issues such as health inequality, racial injustice or the environment, to build on new local and global relationships developed during the pandemic. Others may be less clear. Whatever the position and nature of the museum, it is hoped that this report can be a useful tool for creative dialogue and building resilience across and beyond the sector as we emerge from the seismic shocks and unprecedented upheaval of the pandemic

Web links and resources

Glasgow Life

<https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk>

Allan, P. (2021), ‘Collecting the pandemic: COVID folk art from India’, National Fund for Acquisitions, 5 July 2021
<https://nationalfundforacquisitions.wordpress.com/tag/rajesh-chaitya-vangad/>

Hackney Museum

<https://hackney-museum.hackney.gov.uk>

Associated objects for COVID-19 pandemic
<https://museum-collection.hackney.gov.uk/names/AUTH5688>

Hackney Council (2022), *Exhibition shows what life under lockdown was like for Hackney residents during the COVID-19 pandemic*
<https://news.hackney.gov.uk/exhibition-shows-what-life-under-lockdown-was-like-for-hackney-residents-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

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<https://www.pagesofhackney.co.uk/webshop/product/life-under-lockdown-on-mehetabel-road-and-isabella-road-in-hackney-2020/>

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<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk>

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mgs-publishes-results-of-impact-survey-of-covid-19-on-scottish-museums/

Mental Health First Aiders: COVID-19 and mental wellbeing
<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/blog-article/mental-health-first-aiders-covid-19-and-mental-wellbeing/>

Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture

<http://www.moda.mdx.ac.uk>

Podcast Season 2: *That Feels Like Home*
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Museum of Homelessness

<https://museumofhomelessness.org/>

Pandemic on the Edge
<https://museumofhomelessness.org/pandemic-on-the-edge>

A new home in Finsbury Park – opening in 2023
<https://museumofhomelessness.org/news/museum-of-homelessness-to-open-a-new-home-in-finsbury-park-opening-in-2023>

Museum of Liverpool

<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/museum-of-liverpool>

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Museum of London

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk>

Collecting COVID
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid>

Ramadan in Lockdown
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid/ramadan-lockdown>

Loss and bereavement during COVID-19
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid/loss-and-bereavement-during-covid-19>

Recording London Soundscapes, Past and Present
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/recording-london-soundscapes-past-present>

Inner Rooms, Inner Minds: How can London’s mental health crisis — intensified by COVID-19 — be documented and collected through social art practice?
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid/inner-rooms-inner-minds>

London in Lockdown: picturing the pandemic
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/london-lockdown-picturing-pandemic-covid19>

London under the microscope: This data visualisation reimagines London’s geography through the iconic structure of the COVID-19 virus, to demonstrate and sonify how the first year of the pandemic transformed the city
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid/london-under-microscope>

Museum for London: collecting COVID, 23 April 2020
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/museum-for-london-collecting-covid>

Museum of London collects ‘viral’ Tweets for Collecting COVID, 28 January 2021
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/news-room/press-releases/museum-london-acquires-tweets>

Museum of London to collect COVID dreams, 26 November 2020
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/news-room/press-releases/museum-london-collect-covid-dreams>

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<https://www.museumofdreams.org/guardians-of-sleep>

Museums, Class and the Pandemic: An investigation into the lived experiences of working- class Londoners, Museum of London
<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid/museums-class-and-pandemic>

Museum of the Home

<https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk>

Stories of home life under lockdown
<https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/explore/stories-of-home/stay-home-stories/>

Stay Home Stories: Podcast 1 Museum of Home ‘Stay Home’ Collection
<https://www.stayhomestories.co.uk/listen/episode-1>

Stay Home Stories, Film, Artist in Residence, Museum of London
<https://www.stayhomestories.co.uk/artist-in-residence>

Stay Home Stories: position on the future of the statue of Sir Robert Geffrye in front of the Museum
<https://www.stayhomestories.co.uk/robert-geffrye-statue-nav>

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National Videogame Museum

<https://thenvm.org/>

Animal Crossing Diaries: Explore the thoughts, feelings and experiences of Animal Crossing Diaries during the pandemic
<https://animalcrossingdiaries.thenvm.org/>

Island Interviews
<https://animalcrossingdiaries.thenvm.org/entry/island-interviews/>

Science Museum Group

<https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/home>

Collecting COVID-19
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/project/collecting-covid-19/>

Ethical Guidelines- Collecting Covid-19
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SMG-Ethical-guidelines-Covid-19.pdf>

COVID-19 Collecting Project: final report
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/COVID-Final-Report.pdf>

Coronavirus
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/tag/coronavirus/>

Roxana Halls' portrait of mortuary manager Katie Tomkins
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/blog/artwork-roxana-halls/>

Grayson Perry's vase, Alan Measles – God In the Time of COVID-19
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/blog/artwork-grayson-perry/>

Angela Palmer's artwork, 2020: the Sphere that Changed the World, showing the coronavirus modelled in sheets of glass
<https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/blog/covid-19-pandemic-art/>

St. Fagans National Museum of History, Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales

<https://museum.wales/stfagans/>

COVID Stories; Collections and Research
<https://museum.wales/collections/collecting-covid/>

COVID: Images
https://museum.wales/collections/online/?field0=string&value0=covid&field1=with_images&value1=1&page=20

Collecting COVID Questionnaire 2020: analysis of responses
https://museum.wales/media/53025/Collecting-COVID-2020_English_Final.pdf

Coronavirus and Me Results (Children's Commissioner for Wales)
<https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/coronavirus-and-me-results/>

V&A

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/south-kensington>

Pandemic Objects
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/pandemic-objects>

Pandemic Objects: Postcards
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/pandemic-objects-postcards>

Pandemic Objects: Keffiyeh Masks
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/design-and-society/pandemic-objects-keffiyeh-mask>

Pandemic Objects: Rainbows
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/pandemic-objects-rainbows>

Pandemic Objects: Dreams
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/pandemic-objects-dreams>

Pandemic Objects: The Balcony
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/design-and-society/pandemic-objects-the-balcony>

Pandemic Objects: Student Housing
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/pandemic-objects-student-housing>

Other resources

Decolonising Museums, Museums Association
<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/>

Museums, Crisis and COVID-19 based at Ulster University
<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19>



Kachni stuyale Madhubani painting from Bihar by Heera Kant ©The Artist (Image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection).

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