

GALLERY 33: A MEETING GROUND OF CULTURES

Introduction

Gallery 33: A Meeting Ground of Cultures is the anthropology gallery in Birmingham Museum. It is an exhibition about the way people live: beliefs, values, customs and art from around the world. It displays art and everyday objects from over 100 societies. The oldest are from ancient Egyptian times and the newest are from present-day Birmingham.

It is a rich resource for teachers and classes of all ages. It has application from Key Stage 1 to post 16 and beyond. It can be used to address general topics or as a basis for specialised studies across a range of subject areas.

Aims of 'Let's Go to Gallery33' Pack

The very diversity of the gallery means that a pack such as this can only provide a general orientation for teachers and give examples of the kinds of work the gallery could support.

The pack has the following aims;

- to provide insight into key concepts
- to introduce the contents
- to provide suggestions as to its educational potential
- * to give guidance on an introductory activity: object study
- * to give guidance on a follow up activity: making a class collection.

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Booking

All school visits must be booked in advance by telephoning Schools Liaison Department - **0121 303 3890**

Teaching sessions for visiting classes from Birmingham LEA schools can be arranged through the Schools Liaison Department.

Worksheets are available for use by visiting classes from all schools.

In addition, Schools Liaison can run INSET sessions for teachers from all schools.

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GALLERY 33 'A MEETING GROUND OF CULTURES': KEY CONCEPTS

Gallery 33 sets out to reflect the **similarities** and the **differences** in the ways people have organised themselves and done things down the ages and across the world. It does this through themes common to people in all parts of the world.

Equality or Cultural Superiority?

Gallery 33 presents different ways of life from the point of view of parity. It sets out to counteract a **eurocentric** point of view - the assumption by white European society that technologically advanced, mass manufactured objects tend to be superior.

Similarity and Difference

Gallery 33 attempts to show that all over the world people are involved in similar processes, whatever the nature of their society. Gallery 33 can be a useful resource for **multicultural education**.

"When we did our 'Links with Africa' it would have been lovely to have used the museum and picked out the African thing and picked out the kind of pattern and relationship with things in Jamaica."

(teacher commenting on Gallery 33)

Defining Cultural Identity

Differences are also significant. We define our **cultural** identity as much by who we are not as by who we are.

Our sense of self, of belonging to one group, often changes depending on time and place e.g. in a predominantly male group, I identify with other women; on a visit abroad, I may see myself primarily as a British person amongst foreigners. People coming to Gallery 33 will find a variety of cultures, to which they do not belong, represented there. However, closer examination may reveal examples from a group with whom they can identify.

A number of factors contribute to the development of cultural identity, such as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and political power. These are addressed through the gallery displays.

Anti-racism

Colonial history, together with assumptions of racial and cultural superiority, are illustrated in the Donor's Exhibit. Consideration of these issues can lead into work on **anti-racism**. In Gallery 33 the juxtaposition of image and object challenges visitors to question their assumptions about others. For example, pupils are fascinated by the Body Decoration exhibit. They are interested by parallels between forms of body decoration familiar to them and variations from less familiar cultures, such as Japanese body tattooing and Columbian face-painting. Such interest can open up discussion of a range of assumptions about race and culture.

Racial Stereotypes

Gallery 33 contrasts objects and photographs which represent a small sample of the real world. Decisions have had to be made about which images to display. Considerations of the problems involved in making these decisions gives pupils an opportunity to think about and discuss **racial stereotyping**

"The more chances you get to rehearse racial issues in a neutral way.....the better it is..."
(teacher commenting on Gallery 33)

**An exhibition such as this can only be a starting point.
It is an ideal stimulus for further study.**

WHAT CAN YOU FIND IN GALLERY 33?

Welcome

'Gallery 33; a meeting ground of cultures. An exhibition about beliefs, values, customs and art from Birmingham and around the world.'

This statement greets you as you enter. Immediately on your left is the Faces of Birmingham exhibit, a montage by local photographer Vanley Burke, reflecting the population of contemporary Birmingham. There are greetings in a number of languages and a summary of information about Birmingham's population today.

Popular Topics

Around the walls are exhibits on popular topics such as Eating and Drinking, Masks, Body Decoration. Each section is illustrated by photographs and artefacts. Information panels briefly and simply explain underlying concepts.

Societies

A central exhibit called 'Societies' is more theoretical and explores the nature of human society in seven sections, each headed by a leading question.

Donors House

The other central exhibit is the Donor's House . This helps explain how many of the objects in Gallery 33 come to be in Birmingham Museum and why they were collected in the first place.

CURRICULUM RELEVANCE OF GALLERY 33

Gallery 33 has potential as a teaching resource linked to English, Art, Science, Design/Technology, History, Geography, Modern Languages, Social Studies, Music, Religious Education, PSHE and Citizenship.

AN INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY: LEARNING FROM OBJECTS

The objects in Gallery 33 are diverse in terms of the materials from which they are made, the places from which they originate, the manner of their production, the date of their use, their values to different people. The ideas below help to teach pupils how to learn from objects in preparation for their visit.

Why use objects?

Objects can be a source of information about the present, about the past, about diverse cultures. They present an alternative to books, an immediacy lacking in video and film. Since a museum's main medium of communication is through objects you will also be teaching pupils how to enjoy and learn from museums.

"What do you know?"

Once pupils learn to examine an object carefully they find they can deduce a great deal and soon be quite knowledgeable about something they have never seen before.

"What can you guess?"

Stress the value of pupils' own experience and knowledge of the world in studying objects. Their confidence will develop as they find knowledge from outside school has application within. Sometimes they will make assumptions based on their own cultural perspectives (as we all do) and find they are mistaken. For example, in Gallery 33 they are likely to be

surprised to find that a Malaita Fathom is not an enormous shell necklace, but a traditional form of currency in parts of the Solomon Islands. Object study, even of everyday items, gives opportunities to explore our assumptions and what they are based on. It allows us to consider other viewpoints too.

"What else would you like to know about this?"

Pupils will be faced with the fact that there are some things they cannot find out from the object itself. They will want to test the validity of their hypotheses using other forms or evidence. Object study can be a good starting point for research from other primary sources - e.g. archive material.

How to use objects

You can start by bringing things in from home, or by taking out a Schools Loan from the Museum.

There are five aspects to consider:

1. **Examining the object's physical features:** its colour, smell, texture, sound, weight; the materials from which it is made; whether it is complete; whether it has been altered, repaired, is worn.
2. **Examining its construction:** whether it is hand-made, machine-made, or moulded; the process by which it was made; how it has been fixed together; whether it was made by one person or several.
3. **Examining its function:** what it has been made for; whether this particular object has been used for that purpose; whether it has been used for any other purpose.

4. **Examining its design:** whether it does what it was designed for effectively; whether appropriate materials were used; possible constraints on the designer; whether it is decorated; whether pupils like its design and decoration; whether others do.
5. **Considering its value:** what its value is to those who made it; to those who used it; to those who have it now; to pupils themselves; to a bank; to a museum; whether it has symbolic value.

APPROACHES TO A GALLERY 33 - DISCUSSION

"Some of these questions are available as a worksheet"

Faces of Birmingham

1. What can you find out about the current composition of Birmingham's population?
2. What languages are spoken in Birmingham/your class/neighbourhood?
3. How does your own perception of Birmingham relate to that portrayed in the exhibit?
4. Review the exhibit for the Evening Mail

Music

1. Which of the instruments are familiar and which are new?
2. Look at one family of musical instruments (e.g. strings) from all over the world. What similarities/differences can you see?
3. What is the relevance of the recorded songs to the rest of the exhibit?
4. What instruments would you include in an exhibit about music in Birmingham and why?

Signs and Symbols

1. What are the various purposes of the signs shown on display board?
2. What do you recognise and why? Are there any differences in what different members of your group recognise? If so, why do you think this is?
3. Take part in one of the Activities: write your name in Egyptian hieroglyphics, design a coat of arms.
4. Are there signs and symbols which are not here, but have special significance to you? Would you like to have seen them included?

Eating and Drinking

1. Contrast everyday and special/celebratory objects/photos.
2. What part do eating and drinking play in religious ritual?
3. Betel chewing acts as a stimulant, and is popular in Western Pacific countries. Do you know of any similar activities/habits?
4. How has the idea of food as reward and punishment been included in this exhibit? Do you think it is successful? How might you have illustrated those ideas?

Body decoration

1. Are there any similarities between cultures which you had not considered before?
2. What examples are there of the concept of suffering for beauty?
3. What are the reasons people have for decorating their bodies?

4. How would you mount an exhibit for Gallery 33 on the topic of Hairstyles and Hair Ornamentation?

Masks

1. Find examples of Masks as Protection amongst the objects and photos.
2. Try on masks, noticing the way each one changes your appearance.
3. What makes some of the masks frightening?
4. Review the exhibit for a local radio programme.

Donor's House

1. Do these objects give an accurate picture of the people who made and used them?
2. Do you think the people who collected these objects had a right to take them away from the people who made them and their descendents?
3. What do people in these countries today feel about what has happened to their heritage?
4. Should these objects still be kept in Birmingham Museum or should they be sent back to the descendants of the people who made them? Why?
5. What differences are there between the way things are displayed in Arthur Wilkins' house and in the rest of Gallery 33 ?

Religion

1. What different religions and places of worship do you know about in Birmingham?
2. Why do you think this photograph was chosen?
3. What would you have included in the exhibit?

Life Cycle

What have been the major events in your life so far, and how could they be represented through objects?

Gender

1. How do Congratulations cards show gender differences and what is their likely impact on the child/parents?
2. Whose photo would you have chosen to go in here?

Society

What variety of social/cultural groups do you think the people in the photo and in the procession might belong to?

Ethnic Identity

What would you put in this case?

Rank

What do you see as your own position in society? Would you like to change it? Do you think change would be possible for you?

Politics

Choose an object here and say what you think its significance is.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITY: MAKING YOUR OWN COLLECTION

- **Why?**

Making your own collections in school can be fun. It will show pupils how to be more analytical about museum collections. Here we suggest a way of following up a visit to Gallery 33 by focussing on the way objects can be used to represent people and their way of life. This can open up discussion of cultural identity. You can begin with questions raised by the Donors exhibit:

- Do the objects reflect their original owners/makers?
- What do they say about them?
- How have the collectors influenced the collection?
- Are there other messages in the way the objects are displayed?

Preparation for making a collection

Start by discussing with pupils what they themselves collect and why. Explore their motives for collecting and the way this shapes the nature of the collection.

- **Collection types**

You are likely to find there are certain kinds of collections:

1. - systematic collecting of representative samples of a type e.g. the range of Pokemon cards

2. -collecting because of personal associations, souvenir value e.g. "things from Pakistan where my gran lives"
3. -collecting to enhance the status of the collectors e.g. to have the best and flashiest bike accessories

- **Constraints**

The following prevent collections being truly comprehensive:

Availability - What can you find? Be given? What will it be impossible to collect? How does being where you are affect what you can collect? What can you afford to collect?

Transport - How are things transported from one place to another? How much can be carried?

Personality - What things interest people? What do they choose to collect? Do they tend to collect things that are unusual rather than everyday? Do they choose things that reflect their own personal view?

Storage -Where can you keep it? How much will it cost to keep? Is there space to display it?

Survivability -Are there things you would like to collect but they have fallen apart or been thrown away?

Making a Collection

After this introduction we suggest you go on to make a class collection.

A 'My Class' Collection

- **Introducing the Idea**

Consider with pupils how they would make a collection to reflect the people in their class. Discuss who the audience might be. Will it be others in the school or a collection for Parents' Evening? Will it be for view in a public place such as a museum? Each pupil should bring in something which he/she chooses to represent him/herself.

Teachers will appreciate that this is a sophisticated concept and one that requires careful preparation and sensitive handling. Its value is that it allows exploration of ideas about identity and self-representation. It is likely to involve consideration of issues of gender, class, race, ethnic/cultural identity.

- **Selection of object**

Allow plenty of discussion as to the type of objects that could be brought. It may be something of monetary value or of sentimental value, it may relate to a special occasion or it may be an everyday item. What criteria will be used?

- something from babyhood e.g. a teddy bear
- something from a relative e.g. memento from mum's trip to Jamaica
- something of religious significance e.g. prayer cap, christening gift.

- something relating to the present e.g. poster of favourite pop star, cup won in sports event.

- **Value the contributions of all**

Your approach may be different according to your school. In schools where a lot of work has been done on respect for cultural diversity, some pupils from minority cultures may find choosing an object easy. They may select some commonly recognised way to represent themselves in terms of their cultural identity such as a religious item. Others may not see this aspect as being central to their self-representation and may choose something quite different. In schools with few pupils from cultural minorities, the few may be inhibited in selecting objects which represent them in terms of their difference from the majority.

The following example reminds us of the need to value all children's contributions and find ways of exploring the cultural identity of those in the majority culture too.

In one multiracial junior school where a class collection was made, one of the white pupils brought some conkers he had been given by his brother for his birthday. Alongside the Asian and black pupils in his class who confidently brought in objects relating to their religious identity of their family's country of origin, this boy seemed to feel embarrassed at his choice. The teacher intervened to show that conkers are objects of cultural significance too, only less obviously so.

- **The Collection**

When pupils have brought in their objects, create a situation in which they can share the reasons for their choices.

Compare the different feelings which have motivated ppupils.

Questions to consider:

- do the objects chosen reflect the individuals who chose them?
- can they reflect more than one particular facet of an individual?
- can a self-selected object still reinforce a cultural or racial stereotype?
- what does the collection say about the class as a whole?
- is it what the pupils expected? are they satisfied?

Discuss how to display the collection. What labels or information panel will you want? Will you want supplementary material e.g. photographs? Where will the exhibit be placed?

• **Extending Outward: A Birmingham Collection**

As a next step, ask pupils to make a collection illustrating Birmingham. It will be sent abroad to somewhere very different, perhaps to the Museum of the Solomon Islands. What themes would they choose? Perhaps work, recreation, family life, buildings, shopping....Whose Birmingham would their collection reflect?

• **Research and Selection**

Again pupils need to consider criteria for object selection. How will they choose objects for areas and communities with which they are not familiar? Where will they go to research, to obtain the artefacts? How will they know if they have represented their subjects to the satisfaction of all?

• **After the Collection**

When the collections have been made further questions will arise:

- why did they choose particular items? Were there items they would have liked to include, but couldn't? Why?
- to what extent did their own i nterest dictate what they collected ?
- what do they think should be included with the objects to make the picture more complete? e.g. photos, newspaper articles etc.
- do they know where the objects were made? How they were made? Would this information tell more about Birmingham and its people?
- How might a stranger react to their collection? What impression of Birmingham might be formed by someone from e.g. the Solomon Islands?

(Thanks to Development Education Centre, Bristol Rd, Birmingham for access to 'Things People Use' by Scott Sinclair, from which these ideas were adapted.)

• **Conclusion**

In the process of making the collections suggested here, pupils should learn more about themselves and their city. As they gain insights into the use of collections to convey information and concepts, their response to museum exhibits is likely to be much more discerning.