

# **ANNUAL REVIEW**

**2020/21**

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National Museums NI is made up of four diverse museums and serves as a custodian of the 1.4 million objects within the National Collection. Our founding legislation establishes that National Museums NI has the following responsibilities with reference to the heritage of Northern Ireland:

- To care for, preserve and add to the collections
- To ensure that the collections are available to the public through exhibitions, effective interpretation and availability for research and study
- To promote the awareness, appreciation and understanding of:
  - Art, history and science
  - The way of life and traditions of people
  - The migration and settlement of people

The purpose of this review is to reflect on how National Museums NI has met these responsibilities in the financial year ending 31st March 2021.



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# A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

As Chairman of the Board of Trustees of National Museums NI, I am delighted to be able to present to you the Annual Review 2020/21. The last 12 months have been extremely challenging for National Museums NI and I can only anticipate that the shadow of the pandemic will pervade as we look forward to the year ahead. As Trustees, we recognise that keeping and building momentum in these volatile and uncertain times will be a key challenge.

Despite this challenge, however, I can highly commend what National Museums NI has achieved. This Annual Review reflects a spirit of working together through adversity, indisputable commitment to the cause and a restlessness for progress. With these traits so clearly evident, I believe that we can look forward to a future where our museums and collections support improvements in health and wellbeing, build skills and confidence and stimulate learning and enjoyment.

Looking back on 2020/21, I take confidence in the strong foothold and forward momentum that the organisation has built in recent years, and which it sustained throughout the last 12 months. This resilience has enabled an effective navigation of this current pandemic and will continue to enable even further progress in the year ahead.

Miceal McCoy  
Chairman of the Board of Trustees



## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME



I'm sure that I am not alone in feeling that the past twelve months have been an endurance test – for me, for our organisation, for the wider sector and for society at large. To meet the demands of this test, maintaining perspective has been critical for us to continue to survive and thrive – this is temporary and it will end, it has brought good as well as bad, and positive progress has and is still being made.

With perspective in mind, I welcome this Annual Review as an opportunity to step back and reflect. I reflect on how we have responded as an organisation to unprecedented challenges, navigating through uncharted waters to best support and stay connected to our audiences and our people. The closure and reopening of our museums on several occasions has been a substantial programme of work which, as visitor feedback and staff surveys evidence, has been delivered very successfully. We embraced the opportunity to highlight and celebrate key aspects of our work that more clearly demonstrate our core purpose, for example: showcasing the ongoing relevance and success of key programmes such as Making the Future and Reimagine Remake Replay; launching our Access For All initiative on reopening; developing and rolling out our new virtual education programme; creating more relevant online content through social media and virtual exhibitions; developing new partnerships such as the conflict legacy network; and, being more proactive in stating our position and commitments to key issues within the sector such as Black Lives Matter, decolonisation and biodiversity conservation.

I also reflect on how we have also managed to keep moving forward and making progress. We have balanced the immediacy of the current situation with maintaining momentum around realising our long-term ambitions. We have completed strategic development frameworks for both Ulster Museum and Ulster American Folk Park, and have made significant steps forward towards our exciting redevelopment project at the Ulster Folk Museum. Importantly we have also developed a new Corporate Strategy 2021-25 which will re-energise our transformative journey within the new societal context in which we operate.

So, faced with testing times, I am extremely proud of how we have adapted and stepped up to the mark, despite the challenges in our way. Working together as one team across our organisation and with partners, we have every reason as an organisation to be hopeful and excited for the future.

Kathryn Thomson  
Chief Executive

# OUR VISION



**CELEBRATE WHO WE ARE,  
TELLING THE STORIES OF OUR PAST,  
CHALLENGING OUR PRESENT AND  
SHAPING OUR FUTURE**

# OUR MISSION

- Develop, manage and care for our collections to benefit current and future generations.
- Make our collections accessible to the widest possible audiences.
- Play a leading role in the economic and social wellbeing and future of this place.
- Build an organisation where people feel valued.

# OUR JOURNEY

In the past five years, spurred by our passion for our museums and collections, National Museums NI has embarked on an ambitious programme of transformation to ensure that we achieve the maximum public benefit through everything we do.

Through our transformative agenda we are actively rethinking the role of museums in our society. We want to connect people to their interests and ambitions in a deeper way. But we also recognise that societal norms are changing in terms of lifestyle, identity, the climate emergency and the economy; and that this requires us to change too.

We believe that our museums can set an example in adapting to change, encouraging debate, promoting reconciliation and supporting diversity and sustainability. We need to be able to react as well as reflect.



# OUR IMPACT IN 2020/21

## SOCIAL IMPACT

Our collections belong to everyone. Through the pandemic we have been extending our reach - particularly to those less likely to be connected with us already - to give the widest possible audience access to ideas and activities that bring a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment and promote new skills.

Physical visits to our museums have been our traditional measure of success. It stood to reason that more visits meant greater impact. However, the pandemic has changed the playing field in terms of how we measure success. We have not been able to welcome our normal levels of physical visitors due to several enforced closures during the year. In terms of on-site visitors we welcomed 64,076 visitors this year, which was 38% behind our business plan target of 104,000 visitors which was set before the second and third extended phases of enforced closure from October 2020 onwards.

However, in response to the closure of our museums, we successfully transitioned to a digital engagement model and are proud of the impact with new audiences beyond our traditional visitors (see pages 10-17 for more detail). The participation of audiences from lower socioeconomic groups remained steady at 21% (2018/19: 22%) versus a target of 25%. We remain committed to improving this figure over the coming years as we diversify our museum activities and tackle barriers to museum engagement. We are also committed to promoting and pursuing policies of environmental, employee and social importance, as well as respect for human rights, anti-corruption and anti-bribery matters.



## ECONOMIC IMPACT

Through the economic impact of our museum activities we promote economic health, sustainable tourism and job creation.

The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant societal lockdowns have, unsurprisingly, had a detrimental effect on our ability to provide full public access to visitors in 2020/21, but we are confident that we will maintain our standing and play our part in the recovery when normal levels of economic and social activity return.

Our economic impact was however still very positive during a difficult year with activity maintained and, in some cases, enhanced where it was safe and possible to do so.

Throughout 2020/21, we actually increased our employment levels with 239 full time equivalent staff now on either permanent or fixed term contracts, as well as providing employment and work experience to a large number of people through temporary arrangements.

Our average median salary is currently £23,000 per annum and we continue to make employer contributions to the NI Civil Service Pension Scheme for our scheme members. Our median salary is above both the NI average, and the average annual earnings in the council areas in which we operate.

Following the initial closure of our sites in 20/21, Senior Management made the decision to pay our furloughed staff 100% of their normal pre-Covid salary despite the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme only providing for a 80% rebate on gross salary, and the cost of employers' National Insurance and pension contributions not being covered by the scheme.

During 2020/21 we put special measures in place to maintain continuity and promptness of cash flow to our suppliers. We also acted quickly to make payments through the Covid-19 Supplier Relief Scheme, to support business survival and protect jobs in the very uncertain early days of the pandemic.

Through our commercial activities and construction work at our sites, we endeavor to engage local Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed businesses whenever possible. With support from our funders, we delivered capital investment of over £4.6 million in 2020/21 allowing us to carry out a range of estate improvements and acquire equipment, IT and specimens – vital for growing, preserving and enhancing our collections.

# TEMPORARILY CLOSED, ALWAYS HERE

The closure of our museums provided the opportunity for new, innovative ways of connecting with and supporting people during the pandemic. Our learning and engagement programmes overcame the challenges presented by lockdown and successfully pivoted to a digital model. This not only helped develop new skills for our teams, but also new opportunities to extend our reach and unlock new ways of connecting with audiences.



**“THE CHILDREN IN P5 WERE TRANSPORTED TO ANOTHER TIME AND WORLD THROUGH THE MUSEUM ON THE MOVE. HAVING ARTEFACTS IN THEIR OWN HANDS WAS A POWERFUL EXPERIENCE, ALONG WITH A LIVE EXPERT THERE TO EXPLAIN THEIR SIGNIFICANCE. PARTICULARLY IN A TIME WHEN CHILDREN ARE HOME OR CLASSROOM-BOUND, THESE EXPERIENCES ARE VERY MEANINGFUL.”**  
**HANNAH MCCAUGHEY, ST. COMGALLS PS**

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEACHERS

Our Education team successfully found new ways to engage with children and teachers by delivering learning experiences via video conferencing and creating a range of collections-based online learning resources.

Early in the lockdown we partnered with BBC Learning NI and C2K to collaborate on the production and distribution of learning resources, and also commissioned a new set of short educational videos filmed at the Ulster Folk Museum and the Ulster Museum aimed at primary school-age children learning at home during school closures.

Building on this early impact we developed a brand-new approach to programme delivery in time for schools returning in Autumn 2020. The Museum on the Move programme offered interactive workshops to schools via video link, each one connecting popular curriculum topics with key areas of our collections. An extensive pilot phase of the programme was delivered to ten primary schools from all over Northern Ireland between October and December 2020, creating 2,130 live engagements in over 68 sessions. In February and March 2021, we extended the pilot phase of the programme to Special Schools, working with multiple classes of children and young people with mild to moderate learning difficulties and physical disabilities in three schools.

Museum on the Move offered an exciting and multi-layered alternative to the museum visit. It offered learning opportunities for a range of ages and abilities, including sensory experiences, and maintained a firm focus on interactivity and dialogue throughout. By supplying participating schools with loan boxes of museum objects and specimens for children to explore in the classroom, we created a unique blend of object-based learning, creative investigation and virtual interaction.



Live delivery was enhanced with elements of pre-recorded video content. To help bring the outdoor museums to life, we commissioned a series of short films to help express the atmosphere and character of the buildings and open spaces, and give children a chance to hear and learn from some of the people they might meet on a real visit.

The pilot programme demonstrated that, by working in close partnership with teachers, high quality collections-based learning is possible outside the context of a museum visit, or traditional outreach. It has opened up new opportunities that we intend to develop further as a distinct strand in our programme. Teacher feedback confirmed that the combination of interaction with our team of museum educators and direct contact with museum objects was key to the success of the programme.

**“MUSEUM ON THE MOVE WAS A FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY FOR MY CLASS TO EXPERIENCE SOMETHING COMPLETELY NEW IN A TIME WHEN OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM OR FOR VISITORS TO COME TO SCHOOL ARE SO LIMITED. THE CHILDREN LOVED INTERACTING WITH THE PROGRAMME FACILITATORS VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS. THE RESOURCES PROVIDED BY THE MUSEUM BROUGHT OUT SO MUCH DISCUSSION AND LEARNING AMONGST THE CHILDREN.”**  
**LUKE MCCOLLUM, CARNALBANAGH PS**



## **CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES**

For many years, our museum spaces have been a platform for better wellbeing, new skills development and a sense of enjoyment. We were keen to find ways of maintaining these services whilst our museums were closed to offer people safe space, contemplation and escape through difficult times.

The opportunities provided through two of our key engagement projects – Making the Future and Reimagine Remake Replay - have been an oasis for participants who have felt acutely the effects of isolation. These projects have taken what was, before lockdown, face-to-face, hands-on engagement and learning, and quickly adapted to a new way of working online, across digital platforms and media. This new way of working has enabled both projects to reach out into people's homes to encourage conversation, sharing between strangers, exploration of their world right now, as well as, an opportunity for people to open up beyond the parameters that have been set by lockdown.

# MAKING THE FUTURE IN NEW WAYS

Making the Future is a collaborative Peace IV project which aims to empower people in Northern Ireland and the border counties to use museum collections and archives to explore the past and create a powerful vision for future change. The following engagement activities illustrate how the project has responded to new times and has continued to act as a source of wellbeing, creativity and learning for those involved.

## FOLK TALES

Folk Tales used writing and collecting to take participants on a journey of the past, present and future featuring a series of online video masterclasses with leading folklorists, writers and artists.

The programme was developed as a way of connecting people to their heritage through folk tales, but also in this time of isolation the programme included an outreach element - letter writing. Participants were posted letter writing packs, with all that they would need to write to someone, anyone, their own folk tales as a way of reaching out beyond the screen.



## NEW PARAMETERS



During the pandemic, we were all encouraged to go outside for daily exercise, but had restrictions on where and how far we could go, resonating directly with our history of borders and boundaries.

The programme – which drew inspiration from the 1970s photojournalism collection – encouraged participants to creatively capture our new parameters using the medium of photography, whether inside or outside the home.

The programme was oversubscribed, with a waiting list created for the next iteration. Participants also asked that the programme be extended to continue their conversations with one another beyond the end of the project. The creative output from the project has been accessioned into the permanent collection to serve as an enduring reminder of life and times during Covid-19.

**“I AM SO THRILLED TO BE PART OF THIS. I AM STUCK AT HOME SHIELDING, SO HAVE LOTS OF TIME ON MY HANDS. ART IS WHAT GETS ME THROUGH THIS. CREATIVITY IS WHAT GETS ME THROUGH THIS.”**  
**MAKING THE FUTURE PARTICIPANT**





# REIMAGINING HOW WE WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2019 we launched a new youth engagement project Reimagine Remake Replay - funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund – to allow young people to connect with and enhance museum collections using a mix of creative media and the latest digital technologies.

Despite having a strong digital element, the project had only ever been delivered in our physical museum spaces. Lockdown forced us to quickly rethink how we deliver the project so that we could keep supporting young people through times of deep disruption to education, employment and wellbeing.

The outcome was that we doubled engagement with core participants and unlocked a whole series of new and creative ways to connect young people with heritage in meaningful ways. We were proud to be recognised for the impact we have created having been awarded the Museums Association's 'Best Museums Change Lives Project' award in November 2021.

The following examples illustrate the inspiring activities that have contributed to its success:



## HEAD & HEART FESTIVAL

For World Mental Health Day 2020, the project supported young people to deliver a three-day online festival focused on mental health, heritage and the arts. Participants commented how the project had improved their mental health, both before and during lockdown, through developing new friendships, learning new skills and feeling connected to heritage.

**“I loved every minute of this online festival. Especially connecting with others like myself who are passionate about art, mental health and wellbeing and that sense of connection and community. It definitely felt like a space I could come into and be myself which is very much appreciated.”**

**Youth participant**



**“Being part of RRR was really important to me over the lockdown period. It initially gave me the opportunity to reconnect with my creative drawing side but it actually gave me so much more than that. It gave me a community, something to thrive off, something to look forward to and something to feel really proud of.”**

**Youth participant**

## FACE MASK MAKING

This project gave participants the opportunity to design and make face masks inspired by museums collections. Participants learnt digital design and illustration skills to create their own designs, which were then printed and delivered to their doorsteps. The second half of the programme then focussed on embroidery and stitching skills to bring the designs to life.



# REOPENING MUSEUMS TOGETHER

Whilst digital engagement was providing exciting new opportunities, we also couldn't wait to welcome visitors back to our physical museum spaces to enjoy the collections in their fullest form. However, the prospect of reopening brought with it significant complexity and uncertainty which we managed through teamwork and collaboration – not just amongst our own teams, but with partners and communities too.



## WELCOMING VISITORS BACK SAFELY

Our teams – which involved a huge number of people from across the organisation - adapted quickly to a significantly different operational environment, with a broad range of health and safety measures and risk mitigations which were carefully planned in line with Public Health Agency and NI government regulations. One of our key priorities in reopening was to ensure the new measures could facilitate engagement with visitors from all communities through to designing accessible, welcoming, safe experiences and spaces.

The measures and adaptations were numerous and included new visitor flows, new operating hours for all sites (with the exception of Ulster Museum), as well as the introduction of the new online pre-booking system to support the introductions of reduced capacities at each of the sites.

These changes gave both visitors and staff the confidence and reassurance that they

were returning to safe and enjoyable museum experiences which were “Good to Go”. The UK-wide industry standard, managed locally by Tourism Northern Ireland, signifies how tourism and hospitality businesses have implemented the appropriate processes and health and safety measures, in line with government and industry guidelines, to ensure the safety of staff and visitors.

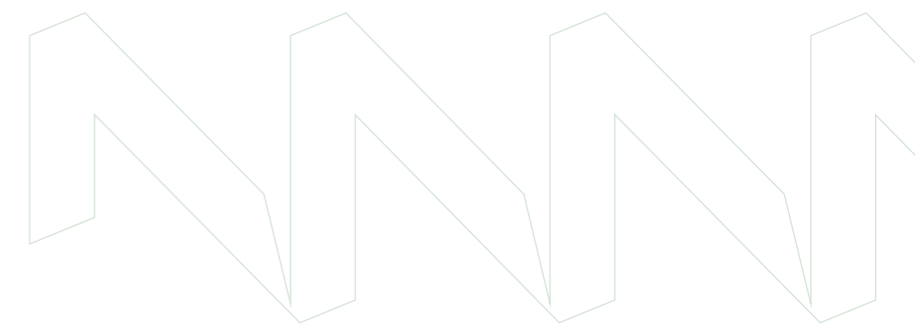
In reopening our museums, we participated in research through the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) which provided weekly benchmarks of safety and enjoyment measures in comparisons to other museums and visitor attractions across the UK. Overall, our museums have consistently scored higher than the benchmark measures, which is testament to the hard work and dedication of our teams. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and many of our front of house staff have been individually commended by our visitors for the experience delivered.



## ACTIVATING VOLUNTEERING

We believe that volunteers have a significant and meaningful part to play in how we deliver on our core purpose and that involving the communities we serve will be crucial in ensuring that our museums remain relevant and benefit from the skills, experience and enthusiasm that volunteers have to offer.

We hosted an on-site wellbeing session for volunteers in October when restrictions allowed and in March we began work on our Green Gyms project, run in partnership with The Conservation Volunteers. This project will create new ways for people to improve their physical and mental health while bringing our cottage gardens back to life at the Ulster Folk Museum.



During 2020/21 we have adapted many practices to ensure that volunteering was able to continue, and in some cases thrive, during lockdown.

## ACCESS FOR ALL

To coincide with the reopening of our museums, we also launched a new Access for All programme which has been designed to support those communities who have felt the effects of isolation during the pandemic more deeply than others. The initiative included dedicated booking slots for communities including those of older people, those with hearing loss, sight loss, families and adults with special educational needs, and those who have been socially prescribed.

Supported by the programme partners and developed in conjunction with their service users, we developed new facilitated workshops and remote sessions to bring the museum experience directly to those yet unable to visit, and offering opportunities for safe tactile engagement during visits for members of the community with sensory needs. Whilst many of the new opportunities were disrupted by the second lockdown over the winter months, we have continued to develop the new relationships with partners and communities and look forward to relaunching the initiative as a core part of our offering.



# EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

Although closure meant that our galleries were not as dynamic as usual, it meant that the exhibitions that did manage to open had extra significance and impact.



## A UNIQUE SILENCE

This exhibition offered visitors the first chance to see six etchings by the famed Dutch artist Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, which were gifted to the Ulster Museum collection thanks to HRMC's Acceptance in Lieu Scheme. These are the first works by Rembrandt to enter a public collection in Northern Ireland. Though many of his paintings are associated with the dramatic and awe inspiring style of Baroque painting, Rembrandt's etchings communicate a unique silence that is often found in the Golden Age of Dutch art; the still of nature, the intimacy of the human face and thoughtful biblical scenes.

Rembrandt's lack of fear in experimenting with etching led him to develop a new style and to push the limits of the technique, cementing him as a printmaker who inspired the generations that followed. The accompanying works in this exhibition were from the wider Ulster Museum print collection. They welcomed Rembrandt, through showing how the medium has evolved and yet still reflects his innovative work.



## RENOIR AND THE NEW ERA: IMPRESSIONIST WORKS FROM THE COURTAULD COLLECTION

Our partnership with The Courtauld enables us to bring great masterpieces to Belfast to be enjoyed by our local audiences. Following on from Modigliani's *Female Nude (1916)* two years ago, we are delighted to display *La Loge (1874)* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir at the Ulster Museum alongside works on paper by other famous Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists, including Manet and Pissarro.

Taking Renoir's *La Loge (1874)* as its centrepiece, the exhibition explored the Impressionists, through refocusing attention on their position as agitators and anarchists outside of the established art system. Though they have become household names and are cemented within mainstream art history, it is easy to forget that their style of painting was revolutionary and their decision to group together and exhibit in 1874 an act of defiance against the art establishment, the state and what was even considered 'art'.



# FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE – NURSING AND MIDWIFERY 200 YEARS

Florence Nightingale – Nursing and Midwifery 200 Years was originally set to open at the Ulster Museum in March 2020 before social distancing measures were introduced. However, the exhibition, which was organised in partnership with the Florence Nightingale Foundation, launched as a digital exhibition before launching physically when the museum reopened. The exhibition explored the vital work of nurses and midwives through two centuries of nursing, covering themes such as nursing in wartime, nursing during The Troubles, and nursing education and innovation in Northern Ireland.

Its timing could not have been more appropriate. When social distancing measures were first announced we were keen to ensure this exhibition and celebration of our healthcare workers was made available to the public. It paid homage to those we are indebted to and celebrate every day.

# RUA 139TH ANNUAL EXHIBITION

Founded in 1879, the Royal Ulster Academy of Arts (RUA) is the largest and longest established body of practising visual artists in Northern Ireland. The Annual Exhibition is one of the most eagerly anticipated exhibitions in the Northern Irish cultural calendar, providing a unique platform for acclaimed artists and emerging talent to showcase their artwork in the fabulous galleries at the Ulster Museum.

The exhibition contained approximately 250 examples of painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, video etc. This year there were almost 1,300 entries of which 190 were ultimately selected for inclusion. Some of the works reflected the times we are living in and allude to isolation, social distancing and surviving in Covid times. Other works shared deep messages with hope, humour, passion and integrity.

In its 139th year, the RUA has faced a grim challenge in the form of the pandemic. There were moments when it seemed like the exhibition might be cancelled but resilience and determination won out in the end.

# LA BELLE ÉPOQUE

Coinciding with Renoir and the New Era, our newest costume exhibition, La Belle Époque, contemplates the fashions of ‘the beautiful era’ from around 1870 to just before the start of the First World War. The exhibition includes two stunning recent acquisitions - an 1890s wedding dress and a 1912 court presentation dress and train - both worn by Elizabeth Balfour Clark and recently donated to the Ulster Museum.

# UNLOCKING OUR COLLECTIONS

Caring for and developing the national collections on behalf of the public is one of National Museums NI's most important responsibilities. 2020/21 has proved another eventful and progressive year in caring for, preserving and adding to the collection.

## COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT

Despite the challenges of working in lockdown, our curators have engaged in sustained and significant collections development activity throughout 2020/21.

As a seismic event that has transformed all our lives, we recognise the importance of representing the Covid-19 pandemic within our collections, as a record for current and future generations. This has meant looking at both the impact of the pandemic and the public response to it. Material we have collected includes scrubs and masks made for healthcare workers, rainbow pictures by children, and photographic evidence of public health signage in both urban and rural settings. We have also reflected the wider implications of lockdown, with acquisitions including examples of the merchandise sold to aid victims of domestic violence. We will continue to consider what Covid-19 has meant for Northern Ireland, not just as a moment in time but in the context of our past and our future.



Our contested past and its legacy today remains a priority focus for our collecting, and in 2020/21 this has extended to our Transport collections. We were fortunate to source a rare RHD export LWB Series 2A Land Rover, the sole survivor of just ten vehicles made into Mark 1 Shorland Patrol Cars by Belfast engineers Short Bros & Harland, and supplied during 1966-67 for service with the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary). Whilst we will plan for this vehicle to go out on display, occasionally this process is reversed and displays lead to acquisitions. This is the case with a new artwork *Where/Dove* by the internationally renowned Derry-born artist, Willie Doherty, commissioned for a major exhibition of his work jointly curated in 2020/21 by National Museums NI and FMAV Modena and supported by the British Council. This is a fitting acquisition in this year of the centenaries of partition and Northern Ireland, as the work responds to divisive issues of national identity, nativism and exclusion that have dominated recent international debates around borders and the free movement of people.

Demonstrating close relationships between organisations north and south of the border, and beyond, the *Game of Thrones® Tapestry* was jointly commissioned by Tourism Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland in 2017. It has been closely associated with National Museums NI, as our staff and volunteers were involved in its creation and we have been the host for its subsequent successful display, so we are delighted that it will now have a permanent home in our collection. It tells a story of contemporary industry here in Northern Ireland, and also looks back to the past and our unique linen heritage. We look forward to displaying it again in the near future.



The year drew to a close with a truly outstanding, world-class acquisition. *Quiet* by James (Jacques) Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) has been allocated to National Museums NI through the Acceptance in Lieu Scheme and, as a hybrid acquisition, supported with funding from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Art Fund, and the Department for Communities.

Tissot is one of the best-known and most admired artists of the nineteenth century, who was unrepresented in our collections until this point. The painting has particular relevance for us as it depicts an Irish sitter, Kathleen Newton, with a remarkable story to tell. The acquisition gives new strength and depth to the national art collection and is a cause for joy and celebration in these difficult times.



## COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT AND CARE

Caring for and managing our national collection lies at the core of what we do as a group of national museums.

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has forced delays to the completion of our new Transport & Industry Store, we are excited that the move is now firmly underway. Important work to prepare the store for the arrival of the collection continued throughout the last year. Work is still ongoing – particularly around additional storage equipment, such as installing a mezzanine and roller racking to provide extra storage space for the small object collection and the bicycles, as well as the use of stackable motorbikes pallets, to house all the transport collections that are currently stored in the workshops at Cultra. The new store is a transformative step in a process which aims to improve not only our storage facilities but also to increase the accessibility of our collections. Once the collections have been moved to the new store, we look forward to welcoming visits and delivering ‘behind the scenes’ tours for groups, researchers and schools.

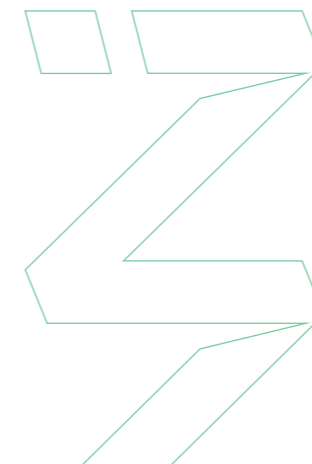
This year also saw the launch of a project which will migrate our collections information to a new modern Collections Management database. Through this project we will be able to improve our collections records so that each is easily searchable, locatable and recognisable. This improved digital access is an important first step in our aim to increase access to and engagement with our collections as we look to the future.



## COLLECTIONS RESEARCH

Over the past year, collaboration with our key local partners has resulted in the development of some exciting opportunities. We received funding from the Northern Bridge Doctoral Training Partnership - with researchers from Queen's University Belfast and Newcastle University - to map the oral soundscape of Hiberno-English speech that was undertaken in the 1970s by staff from the Ulster Folk Museum, with a student starting in 2021. An important two-year project, in collaboration with Dr Briony Widdis of Queen's University Belfast, began this year, which will examine the relationship between museums, the British Empire and contemporary identity in Northern Ireland. Dr Widdis' work will involve use of the World Cultures collections to explore whether connections persist to this day.

Research internally also resulted in some interesting, and important, publications. Dr Karen Logan, Senior Curator of History concluded her Art Fund-supported Headley Research Fellowship with the completion of a new book, *Curating Conflict: The Troubles and Beyond*. Anne Stewart, Senior Curator of Art, supported by the British Council, worked with Fondazione Modena Arti Visive in Italy to curate an exhibition of Willie Doherty's career and practice, entitled Willie Doherty WHERE. Dr Mike Simms, Senior Curator of Natural Sciences, was involved in exciting research that confirmed bones found on the Antrim coast in the 1980s, and now in our collections, were actually dinosaurs - the only remains of dinosaurs to have been found on the island of Ireland. The publication of these research findings captured the public's imagination and attracted significant national and international media coverage.





## ENABLING & SUPPORTING OUR PEOPLE

National Museums NI is committed to developing an organisation that is highly skilled and engaged in achieving our aims and objectives. This year proved that, more than ever, we need to ensure that we are agile, resilient and striving for excellence in our challenging operating environment.

Over the course of 2020/21 we placed a significant focus on supporting our people through the pandemic. Along with regular communications we also had a range of activities to help ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of teams across the organisation. As part of our commitment to enhancing staff engagement we conducted a staff survey in September based around our response as an organisation to the pandemic and also hosted a two-day virtual staff conference in late March.

## LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

As well as supporting a wide range of learning and development opportunities ranging from areas of statutory compliance, best practice, professional and personal development, we had a particular focus on activity supporting our reopening programme. This included service standards, health and safety, safeguarding and diversity and inclusion training delivered in conjunction with our access partners.



# KEEPING A FUTURE FOCUS

Whilst much of our operational attention this year has been on issues arising from Covid-19, we continue to maintain a strong eye on our future and have made significant progress on a number of fronts.

## CORPORATE STRATEGY

With our previous corporate plan expiring at the end of the financial year, we embarked on a strategic process to produce a new Corporate Strategy 2021-2025. Despite obvious challenges, we approach the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reflect on and rethink the role of culture and museums in public and civic life. Now more than ever, we are determined to show that museums can be a force for good in the world. We carried this positive energy throughout the planning process and sought opportunities to align our organisation's transformation, that we have already begun, to local and global change agendas including New Decade New Approach and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The result is a re-energised organisational strategy focused on societal outcomes such as inclusivity, learning for all, accessibility and sustainability. This strategy will be crucial in consolidating and focussing our progress in the next five years and beyond.



## DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

In the past three years, we have established development frameworks for each of our museums – in consultation with partners and stakeholders – so that all future investment can be focussed on improving the functionality of our museums and enhancing their ability to maximise long-term public benefit.

Our redevelopment project at Ulster Folk Museum has been significantly progressed this year. Following a competitive expression of interest process in early 2020, we were invited to apply for the development stage of the National Lottery Heritage Fund's 'Heritage Horizon Awards' funding programme. Throughout the year our team developed and submitted an exciting application that will reignite the museum's founding principles and reinvent how people connect with the past, make sense of the present and build the future. In parallel, we have secured the necessary ministerial approvals and have launched a major procurement for the Integrated Consultants Team to work with us to develop the project further.

Separately, we have completed the development frameworks for Ulster Museum and Ulster American Folk Park and have been exploring sources of capital funding and progressing stakeholder support. At Ulster Transport Museum, we have been developing a new 'Museum of Innovation' gallery which will provide a platform for exploration and insight as we continue to progress the future direction of the transport and industry collections. The gallery opened in July 2021.





