

# The Sloane Lab: Dealing with a challenging past

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## What

Funded by the 'Towards a National Collection' (TaNC) Programme of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK, the 'Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections' will devise automated and augmented ways, that will be relevant to bringing together other collections in museums, galleries, libraries and archives, in mending the broken links between the past and present of the UK's founding collection in the catalogues of the British Museum, Natural History Museum and the British Library. For this, we will use the collection of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) as a microcosm through which to explore the technical, infrastructural, conceptual, historical and social challenges faced in bringing together digital cultural heritage collections so as to help audiences use, learn and benefit from them.

## A Challenging Past

Sloane's collection was created through the economic, political and cultural processes of Britain's increasing global entanglements of the 17/18th century, to which the infrastructure for a 21st-century national collection must respond. The project aims to develop new and better computational approaches to the detection and visualization of loss, absence and bias, so as to help publics, researchers and cultural heritage organisations to shape and engage with digital technologies in truly transformative ways. It aims to facilitate richer, more critical understandings of the origins and development of museum collections by devising computational and conceptual approaches to the detection and exposition of often-hidden processes like colonialism, empire and slavery that have shaped collections and their classifications.



## How

The project pursues a participatory methodology, and seeks to engage diverse audiences, project partners and the wider heritage sector. The objective is to elaborate a digital cultural heritage research paradigm that accommodates a plurality of perspectives and voices and does not limit publics to interacting with the national collection as curators, librarians, archivists and computer scientists. The flagship of our participatory approach will be 10 short-term Community Fellows that we will support financially and technically. Starting in 2023, the fellowships will be open to all who wish to undertake creative and critical projects on or reusing Sloane's collections, demonstrating the new possibilities for research that the project will facilitate in areas that may include local and family history, environmental histories, the history of collections, history of science and medicine, studies of past species distributions, art and art collecting, histories of information and knowledge production etc.

## Outcomes

The Sloane Lab aims to demonstrate how a participatory design can lead to a new quality of human-centred digital heritage information seeking environments. It will accordingly foster data-driven engagement with heritage collections, informing digital cultural heritage research and practice globally. The work is expected to culminate, in 2024, in the public-facing, open access Sloane Lab of content, tools and applications, opening new ways for the digital national collection to be researched, explored, interlinked and creatively engaged with. The Sloane Lab will comprise of: a search interface (to the reunified present-day collections, historical catalogues and external resources), content (Sloane's historical catalogues as machine actionable datasets for reuse), tools for managing and researching the data (to support e.g. network analysis, text analysis or AI-led interrogation of collections and records); documentation covering uses of the data (e.g. schemas, licensing details); and resources that support the participation of heritage institutions in digitally unified collections (e.g. white papers and code-books).