

Communicating Culture: New Horizons for Museums

The Linacre Lecture Series is a high-profile public lecture series, rooted in an ethos of interdisciplinary research. Hosted by Linacre College since 1991, a long list of leading academics from around the world have been invited to Oxford to share their research with members of the College and the wider University community. This year, the Linacre Lecture Series was hosted and organised by Linacre Fellows Dr Ashley Coutu, Dr Tea Ghigo and Dr Vibe Nielsen.

The lecture series reflected the interdisciplinary backgrounds of the organisers, across anthropology, archaeology, art history, and science: as a Research Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, a Lecturer in the History of Art, Materials and Technology at UCL, and a Museum Anthropologist and Researcher at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek and the University of Copenhagen, the organisers used the lecture series as an opportunity to delve into the dynamics of cultural communication and explore the unprecedented challenges and opportunities facing museums in a rapidly changing world. Inspired by the interdisciplinary conversations on museums and communication that the organisers have had during their time at Linacre and fuelled by their experiences leading public engagement activities, such as museum tours and exhibitions, the lecture series was born out of a wish to address how museums and other cultural institutions can ensure that their narratives remain relevant and relatable.

The lecture series focused on issues related to the impact of new conservation theories and

practices, including their effects on audience engagement, the practices of decoloniality in museums and the most effective strategies that have emerged from them, as well as questions related to how museums can effectively communicate issues surrounding materials in an increasingly digital environment, harness the potential of AI and technology in cultural communication, and use these tools responsibly. Being highly interdisciplinary in its scope, the series targeted primarily professionals across the Galleries, Libraries and Museums of Oxford and the interdisciplinary academic community at Linacre College. Furthermore, the lectures were livestreamed and internationally advertised to broaden their impact. The organisers wanted to provoke thoughtful reflection on creating interdisciplinary narratives that leverage the full spectrum of tools and strategies available in the modern world to engage museum visitors. The theme of the series resonated with many people within the Linacre community and beyond. The lectures were very well attended online and in-person, even scholars briefly visiting Oxford joined enthusiastically, and the discussions

about cultural communication and the future of museums were lively and thought-provoking.

Starting with two inspiring lectures by Professor Salvador Muñoz Viñas from the Universitat Politècnica de València in Spain and Professor Katrien Keune from the Rijksmuseum and the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands, the potential of scientific and 'technical disciplines' were discussed in relation to heritage conservation and the ways in which it can be harnessed in museum communication. In his lecture on 'Conservation as Meaning-making and Unmaking', Professor Salvador Muñoz Viñas demonstrated that the conservation of cultural heritage is a captivating and ever-evolving field, which over its two-centuries long history, has undergone significant transformations. Professor Katrien Keune's lecture on 'Unlocking Art's Wonders: Science as a Bridge to Public Engagement' explored how integrating scientific research into art museums can enhance public engagement and understanding. Drawing on her experiences at the Rijksmuseum, she discussed 'Operation Night Watch', a live, public examination

of Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch', and Mission Masterpiece, an interactive children's exhibition on conservation science.

In the third session of the series, the attention was turned to another timely matter within the field of museums: Namely, how museums with so-called ethnographic collections deal with their colonial legacies. To address this issue, two prominent figures within the field of what might be called decolonial museum practice, Professor Wayne Modest, the Director of Content of the Wereldmuseum in the Netherlands, and Professor Laura Van Broekhoven, the Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, were engaging in a thought-provoking conversation, chaired by Dr Vibe Nielsen. Members of the audience eagerly participated in the discussions and contributed to the conversation with questions to the speakers about how the Wereldmuseum and the Pitt Rivers Museum have been dealing with the colonial legacies of their institutions in the past and what challenges lie ahead.

As May turned into June, researchers and curators of the Gardens, Libraries and Museums of Oxford, gathered at Linacre College for the fourth session of the series: a GLAM Round Table Discussion

chaired by Professor Christopher Morton, Deputy Director and Head of Research at the Pitt Rivers Museum and Linacre's Vice-Principal. The Round Table sparked many inspiring conversations and potential future collaborations, as panellists Professor Silke Ackermann, Director of the History of Science Museum, Dr Ricardo Perez de la Fuente from the Natural History Museum, Dr Sarah Edwards from the Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum, Dr Virginia Llado-Buisan from the Bodleian Libraries and Dr Gina Koutsika from the Ashmolean engaged with the audience in a lively debate about how the narratives of the Gardens, Libraries and Museums of Oxford can remain relevant and relatable, in a rapidly changing world.

In the last week of Trinity Term, the series rounded off with two more lectures: In her lecture 'Museums as Spaces of Living Practice: Lessons from MOWAA's Emergence', Dr Ore Disu, Director of the Museum of West African Art in Benin City, Nigeria, presented how MOWAA is dedicated to the preservation of heritage, the expansion of knowledge and celebration of West African arts and culture. She discussed how the recently opened museum is being developed as a centre of excellence, creating opportunities

for African and Diaspora artists and scholars. The last lecture of the series was given by Dr Matthias Wivel, Head of Research at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Denmark, who presented some of the creative and scholarly choices behind the Michelangelo Imperfect exhibition at the National Gallery of Denmark. In his lecture, 'Beyond the Auratic: Michelangelo Multiplied', he described aspects of the creative collaboration behind the new facsimiles of the Michelangelo Imperfect exhibition, examined its critical reception and suggested possible paths forward.

Dr Ashley Coutu, Dr Tea Ghigo and Dr Vibe Nielsen are very grateful to everyone at Linacre College who supported the making of the series and to their wonderful lineup of speakers, who provided some thought-provoking insights and inspiring conversations on the future of museums. The organisers would like to thank everyone who attended the lectures – from the Linacre community and beyond – and actively engaged in the lively discussions that the series provided.

(Pictured below - Professor Laura Van Broekhoven, Dr Vibe Nielsen, Professor Wayne Modest, Dr Tea Ghigo and Dr Ashley Coutu.)

