

# What to display and what to say?

**Museums don't work in isolation, all accredited museums work within a code of ethics to ensure what they do is for the benefit of all.**

**CLARE HOWE**  
Torquay Museum

Museums view themselves as holding objects in trust for everyone, so they must be cared for and used in appropriate ways.

The Code of Ethics created by the Museums' Association states that museums must actively engage audiences, treat everyone equally, support freedom of speech and generate accurate information for and with the public.

This is a far cry from how museums may have operated in the past. Modern museums want to work with communities to create engaging exhibitions that inspire people and are enjoyable to visit.

We have a responsibility when it comes to what and how we display items.

There is a high level of trust in museums, people believe the information in them is true and impartial.

It is, however, impossible to tell the whole story of an object and

so no exhibition can be truly objective.

There is a necessity for labels to be short, and to increase readability, curators need to decide what information is the most important to include.

These decisions need to be not only accountable to the communities which the museum serves but also those from which the object originates.

Museums should not display things merely as curiosities, particularly if those things have an important or sacred meaning to another culture.

Sacred items can be particularly difficult to display as it is vital to reflect the importance of an object to the people who made it and to do this in a respectful way.

There are objects which are not suitable for display at all but have made their way into museum collections in the past.

Some of these items were made only to be seen by certain people or at certain times.



Cast of a Roman coin chosen by a member of the public for The Secret Museum exhibition

Usually the choice of which objects to display is made by a curator but sometimes members of the public are asked to help.

This has been the case with the creation of 'The Secret Museum' exhibition this summer.

For this exhibition lots of people were invited into the stores to choose an object and asked to

write a label to display with it.

This process has led to careful assessment of some of these objects that haven't been on show for a long time, if ever, to decide on the appropriate information to display.

Sometimes curators make their object choices based on the condition of an object, especially



This Egyptian mummified head is rarely displayed

if multiple examples are in the collection, the one in best condition is usually chosen.

Occasionally they choose not to display items because of the ethical concerns relating to that object or because although it may look interesting very little is known about it.

Our public curators did not follow many of these considerations when they were asked to choose an object and because of this 'The Secret Museum' will be an unusual exhibition with an interesting mix of objects.

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