

## Footsteps in the Forest: Looking at our colonial past through the lens of art



**By Christine Rostron**

On a cold, but sunny autumnal day in Scarborough, children from Hertford Vale Primary School, stepped off their bus to visit the Rotunda Museum to become 'Explorers' and take part in a learning programme called 'Footsteps in the Forest'. The project was devised by Scarborough Museums and Galleries (SMG) for local primary schools with a view to exploring learning opportunities and starting conversations with pupils and teachers about material presented in 'From Local to Global', a project supported by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

'From Local to Global' explored shared histories and the impact of our colonial past through the lens of a museum collection, 'The Harrison Collection'. Colonel James Harrison (1857-1923) of Brandesburton Hall, East Yorkshire, undertook expeditions across Africa, India and America, hunting for sport. He visited the Congo in 1904 and 1908 and, in 1905, brought back to England six indigenous people of the Ituri Forest for public exhibition. The Harrison collection is now part of SMG and comprises animal trophies (taxidermy), diaries, gramophone discs and photographs. It forms a unique and comprehensive record of our colonial past.

After a mapping exercise of the national curriculum with local schools, 'Explorers' was identified as a popular topic theme. However, Euro-centric perspectives and the often glamorous portrayal of exploration in popular culture can present a singular narrative of the impact and legacy of colonial explorers. As part of this project pupils followed in the footsteps of Harrison and then undertook their own exploration of the local environment, comparing and contrasting the outcomes and impact of their own journey and discoveries with that of Harrison. 'What qualities do you need to be an explorer or collector?' 'To be an explorer do you have to travel?' 'How can you record what you see when you travel?' 'Is it OK to taxidermy animals and put them on



display?’ The simple strapline ‘Is it OK...?’ became a useful tool to reflect and debate during conversations with pupils.

A series of four workshops for Key Stage 2 were devised to facilitate in depth exploration of the collection through an eco-lens, encouraging pupils to think about wider national and global issues and topics, including conservation, biodiversity, habitat loss and the rights of indigenous peoples. The workshops took place at the Rotunda Museum, Scarborough Library, Raincliffe Woods, a local, ancient woodland, and an outreach workshop at the participating schools. The latter two workshops were led by artists Viv Mousdell, Kate Rider and Rose Iredale and the final outputs included a public exhibition of children’s artwork, an installation of a rainforest, at Scarborough Library. Art was intentionally used to provide a lens to reflect on the past and the present with an aim to develop thinking around how humans’ impact on the environment, with a focus on unique forest and woodland habitats both now and in the past, and how we can take responsibility for ensuring environments are preserved for future generations.

The project was a learning process for the children, teachers and museum staff alike and inevitably involved engaging in difficult and challenging conversations. Learning staff attended training to develop a better understanding of ‘decolonisation’ and as part of a wider team welcomed ‘decolonising principles’, debating what this meant for our own practice, alongside attending IVE’s training programme ‘Step Up Now: Teaching for a Diverse Age’.

To inform and shape conversations with children, key vocabulary was identified, and a series of questions devised by the learning staff and a local teacher, with a specialism in oracy, to support shared and sustained thinking around the museum collection. With student wellbeing at the forefront of our minds, objects and images were edited to avoid any distressing images but due to the nature of the ‘The Harrison Collection’, animal trophies resulting from hunting, as well as images of colonial exploitation, were used in the workshop. A planning session with the class teachers was held in advance and all adults were mindful of creating a safe environment for children, encouraging them to say what they were thinking, discuss and debate, and listen to each other, in turn creating an environment of mutual respect. This was especially important due to the demographics of the classes accessing the material; with only 2.5% of Scarborough being ethnically diverse, compared to 14% nationally, the wellbeing of minority communities needed to be prioritised, especially with regards to how images of people of colour were presented, used and contextualised and any potential racism arising. (NYCC, 2021)



Back at school the children extended the conversations in the museum and wrote balanced arguments about Harrison in response to the question ‘Was Colonel James Harrison someone to be admired?’ During a Parents’ Evening many parents revealed that their children had even been discussing him at home. Alongside the balanced arguments children developed their computing skills and used the internet

to undertake research and create facts files comparing and contrasting the Ituri Rainforest and Raincliffe Woods.

The pupils were fortunate that with support from IVE it was possible to facilitate the delivery of Arts Award Discover, devising workshops which aligned with the award and providing an opportunity for the children to record their learning journey and reflect on their experiences. A specially designed logbook was created that covered each step of the Arts Award but also allowed the children to document key learning points and activism they undertook in their local environment, such as litter picking. From the outset, there was a commitment that the study of a colonial explorer would motivate children to think about their own actions, explore local environmentalism, take action and make a difference in their own way.

One class teacher talked about the impact of the project on both the children's thinking and literacy skills: "Throughout the whole project, I've really been surprised by the deep level thinking from certain members of the class. The SEND children in my class have also really hooked into the project and I've been extremely impressed with the observations they've made and how articulate they've been at justifying their reasonings." The impact of working with artists in schools was welcomed, with staff observing improved wellbeing and teamwork and children enjoying trying new techniques: "It was good using the rollers as I haven't used the rollers before to create art."

Increased staff confidence to teach art was also observed, and the outputs gathered were described as good evidence for Ofsted 'deep dives' in History and Art. The recent Ofsted review of art and design education states that "When pupils learn theoretical knowledge about art, craft and design, they learn about themes and diverse connections that have existed over time and in different places. One writer has described this as pupils recognising the way that art and art practices are 'embedded' in 'socio-cultural matrices'.<sup>[footnote 67]</sup> The meaning of images, objects and artefacts can also change over time. Art takes place within cultures, societies and history. If teachers do not contextualise art, craft, and design traditions, pupils can build profound misconceptions about the ways that humans make and understand art<sup>[footnote 68]</sup>" (Ofsted, 2023). The depth of this project enabled pupils to look at and discuss material culture, including art, craft and design, from a specific period of British history, progressing to creating their own work which reflected a contemporary and contrasting social and cultural context, supporting personal responses to a difficult subject. In the future, the school said they will be much more likely to plan museum visits as part of a topic.

Further information about From Local to Global can be found on the website [www.fromlocaltogloball.co.uk](http://www.fromlocaltogloball.co.uk)

#### Bibliography:

North Yorkshire County Council, 2021. North Yorkshire Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2021 Scarborough Borough Summary Profile. Available at: [scarborough-profile-2021.pdf](https://www.northyorkshire.gov.uk/media/10000/scarborough-profile-2021.pdf) ([datanorthyorkshire.org](http://datanorthyorkshire.org))

Ofsted, 2023. Research review series: art and design. Available at [Research review series: art and design - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/research-review-series-art-and-design)

Photos by Esme Mai