



UCL Museums & Collections present:

Touch and the Value of Object Handling

Workshop 6:

**“End of project conference:
Touch and the value of
object handling.”**

Touch and the value of object handling

An Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Networks Scheme organised by UCL Museums & Collections

During the winter of 2006 and the spring of 2007 UCL Museums & Collections organised a series of workshops investigating touch and value of object handling in museums. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the workshops brought together a diverse range of experts from academic and museum environments, with a view to establishing a network where information relating to the value of object handling can be shared and developed. Participants in the project came from a variety of backgrounds and brought with them a diverse range of expertise, research interests and museum access requirements. Scientists shared their knowledge of the underlying psychological and neurological mechanisms behind touch and sensation. Museum staff discussed the types of practical applications of touch employed in museum such as interactive displays, handling boxes and new technologies for interpreting objects. The union of these two groups afforded a unique opportunity to understand the true value of object handling and provide the museum world with a valuable toolkit for improving access and interpretation.

For further information about this initiative please contact:

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Workshop 6: Abstracts and prompt questions

“Getting started in touch research”

Dr Andrew Wimperis

Sensori-motor neuroscience lab(SyMoN), Behavioural Brain Sciences, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham

Quantitative research into perception in any of the senses frequently involves subjects making verbal judgments about stimuli presented to them in a carefully controlled manner. In vision, this can be relatively straightforward as complex visual images can be easily presented on a computer screen with subjects consistently seated in the same position relative to the screen. However, in touch, the construction of test stimuli (objects) and the standardization of movements made by subjects to explore them are less easily controlled, while still allowing subjects to make realistic "real life" object interactions. As a physiotherapist working in the health service, with an interest in conducting research into touch and touch impairments, the challenge has also been to develop touch testing procedures which are simple for patients to use, cheap to construct, and which retain scientific rigor. I will describe how I started to address these issues as a clinician and novice researcher undertaking a PhD in Psychology when I developed simple, low cost, but scientifically rigorous methods of quantifying touch perception. I will also outline some routes to linking in with other researchers which I found helpful as a means of testing out my ideas by presenting them and getting feedback, which is a key ingredient of getting started in research.

“'The amenable object': working with diaspora communities through a psychoanalysis of touch.”

Dr. Bernadette Lynch

Deputy Director, The Manchester Museum, University of Manchester

A new role for museums might be seen as using collections in building ethical and sustainable relationships with people. It is in this relationship work, which takes time, commitment and sustained effort that 'touch' comes into its own. Yet, despite the primacy of touch for many other cultures, the whole experience of the Western museum negates the body and sensory experience, and in particular, the tactile sense.

From the philosophical and emotional to the practical applications of touch, this paper proposes a new understanding of the amenable object and demonstrates how this can be applied in working with diaspora communities. Briefly drawing on psychoanalysis, the importance of 'active' viewing is proposed, and the sensory experiencing of the ambiguous, 'amenable object' in the museum is offered, as a way of powerfully communicating between people from very worlds. The paper finally suggests a more widespread and in-depth use value for the museum object, towards the implementation of a sensory museology.

Concurrent Discussion sessions, titles and prompt questions:

Dr. Fiona Candlin

The School of Continuing Education Birkbeck, University of London

“Histories and cultures of touching.”

1. Who touches which objects? Does everyone have the same level of access to touching objects? Does that matter?
 2. Is there a difference between object handling in museums and in galleries? If so, what?
 3. What can be learnt from touching objects? Does that learning extend beyond the purely pragmatic recognition of texture and form?
 4. Who can be considered an expert in object handling? How is that knowledge acquired? How is it or could it be taught?
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Dr. David Prytherch

Research Fellow in Haptics & Computer Interfaces for Craft, Birmingham Institute of Art & Design, University of Central England

“Touching Ghosts: Haptic Perception and Virtual Reality Technology.”

1. Could haptic interfaces and virtual objects ever serve as an adequate substitute for real touching?
 2. What might be the advantages/disadvantages of technological solutions?
 3. How effective are our current technologies?
 4. What perceptual or learning issues might we need to address with future system developments?
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Jane Samuels

Access Manager, Department of Learning & Information, The British Museum
and

Laura Phillips

Communities Officer, Department of Audience Development, The British Museum

“Touch enhanced learning for underrepresented audiences”

1. Which underrepresented audiences are particularly relevant examples for object and touch based learning?
2. How does touch enhance the learning experience?

3. Divide into groups and allocate an audience to each group. Each group to discuss how touch and handling can enhance the learning experience for their specified audience. Feed back to rest of group.

Dr Helen Chatterjee

Deputy Director, UCL Museums & Collections and AHRC Touch Workshop leader
and

Devorah Romanek,

UCL Anthropology PhD, and AHRC Touch Workshop project assistant

“Object handling - assessing impact”

1. How do we evaluate object interactions?
2. How could we analyse the impact of engaging with objects?
3. How can we look at touch and object handling in a multisensory context?



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