

## Revisiting Collections: An overview

Revisiting Collections (RC) is a methodology created to help museums, galleries and archives open up their collections to scrutiny by community groups and external experts; to build and share a new understanding of the multi-layered meaning and significance of objects and records; and to include these public interpretations as part of permanent collection records. Therefore, RC is a tool for museums, galleries and archives to use in order to extend and deepen true participation in all aspects of their work.

### What does Revisiting Collections do?

In principle, the collections in the UK's public museums, galleries and archives are there for everyone. In practice, we know that many communities and individuals in our society make little use of these services and feel no sense of ownership either of the collections or the institutions. They do not see themselves or their interests reflected in the content of collections or in the ways objects and records are presented and interpreted.

Any museum or archive seeking to democratise its processes and engage with its whole community must be willing to open up its collections and the information it shares about them to scrutiny, comment and challenge. RC recognises the existence of 'hidden histories' behind the objects and records in our collections and seeks to broker better understanding of their meaning and significance for diverse audiences. The methodology supports museums and archives to explore their collections in equal partnership with individuals or groups from the wider community and to gather, value, record and share external perspectives, opinions and knowledge. This enriched knowledge base allows for much more meaningful, multi-voiced co-curation of exhibitions and interpretive resources.

The RC toolkits and guidance documents show museums and archives how to run sessions where individuals and groups of external participants are prompted and supported to explore what they know, feel and think about individual objects and records and to critique the language and information contained in current catalogues and interpretation.

The methodology is usually adopted as part of a specific project or programme of work with identified outputs. Beyond this, RC provides tools to ensure that even short-term projects leave a legacy of understanding and knowledge through the capture of 'user-generated content' directly within the museum or archive's collection documentation system – ensuring that new, multi-layered perspectives become part of the core information about the collections that is recorded and retrievable for access in 10, 20 or 100 years' time. For museums, the Revisiting Museum Collections tools are fully compatible with SPECTRUM, the UK standard for museum documentation. For archives, the Revisiting Archive Collections toolkit outlines approaches to capturing user-generated content in or alongside the General International Standard Archival Description – ISAD(G).

Professionally, RC is demanding and requires a breakdown of the organisational structures that can place barriers between ‘people-focused’ and ‘collection-focused’ colleagues. To use the method, museums and archives need to pool staff and volunteers’ knowledge and expertise, with outreach and learning teams, curators and collections information managers all working together. One delegate at a training workshop commented: “I’ve never been in a room where community people and documentation people have had such a strong common goal.” RC provides a structured approach and tools to support:

- Opening up collections, current documentation and interpretation for challenge and comment – usually focusing on single items or very small groups of objects or records and capturing individuals’ responses
- Collating and holding the resulting user-generated content as part of core collections documentation so that it will be readily retrievable now and in the future
- Using that information to inform how collections are interpreted and understood

Through this fairly simple mechanism RC aims high – to support our sector to:

- Recognise and value external voices and, by including them in interpretation, help empower every visitor to feel part of an ongoing conversation
- Increase participants’ and communities’ sense of ownership and entitlement to a say in how objects and records are used and interpreted
- Develop and communicate confidence in the relevance and appeal of both ‘ordinary’ and niche collections – demonstrating their public value and that of the organisations that hold them
- Begin to embed organisational change – especially nurturing new ways of working that pool ‘people-focused’ and ‘collections-focused’ skills
- Ensure that even short-term projects with small groups of people leave a legacy of new knowledge and understanding
- Ensure that our sector’s ongoing investment in documentation delivers access to a rich understanding of the multi-layered meaning and significance of collections

This is an extract from an evaluation report “Is Revisiting Collections working?” by Caroline Reed for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. This extract and the full report are available on the Our Museum resources website:

[http://ourmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Is-Revisiting-Collections-working\\_summary.pdf](http://ourmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Is-Revisiting-Collections-working_summary.pdf)

<http://ourmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Is-Revisiting-Collections-working-full-report.pdf>

More information about Revisiting Collections can be found on the Collections Trust link:

<http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/collections-link/collections-management/revisiting-collections>