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# Working in collaboration to tell the history and stories of the transgender community

## April Ashley: portrait of a lady

Museum of Liverpool  
27 September 2013 -  
7 December 2014

'April Ashley: portrait of a lady' is a collaborative project between the Museum of Liverpool and Homotopia, a Liverpool based arts and social justice organisation that draws on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender experience to unite and regenerate communities. It was funded with a £78,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and in-kind support from National Museums Liverpool (NML).

### The exhibition

The exhibition is the first of its kind to look at the history of transgender people in Britain over the past 70 years, focusing on the experiences of one exceptional individual - April Ashley.

Born in Liverpool in 1935 as George Jamieson, April Ashley MBE, a former Vogue model and actress, was one of the first people in the world to undergo pioneering gender reassignment surgery. As one of the most famous transgender individuals and a tireless campaigner for transgender equality, she is an icon and inspiration to many.

In the exhibition we explore April's story through her



An early modelling shot of April, 1960s.  
Image © Ken Walker, courtesy of April Ashley

previously unseen private archive, and investigate the wider impact of changing social and legal conditions for all trans and lesbian, gay and bisexual people, from 1935 to today.

The exhibition consists of three key areas: a community section, April's personal story, and a reconstruction of Le Carrousel Club, Paris. In the community area visitors can listen to the

diverse life stories of people from the trans community. Images by photographer Sara Davidmann give an important counteraction to mass media representation / misrepresentation of trans people. A timeline from the year 222 AD to the present day explores the social and legislative history of the trans community, alongside April's personal timeline, highlighting significant events in her life. Set within the timeline are cases

displaying loaned objects from April.

April's personal story is represented chronologically, complemented by framed and large-scale images documenting her life. Two large artworks depicting April by artists Andrew Logan and Ben Youdan add some extra glamour and glitz.

In the central area of the exhibition is a reconstruction of the interior of Le Carrousel Club, Paris, where April worked in the 1950s. Visitors can sit around tables and watch film footage including TV chat show interviews with April, Merseyside Police's Hate Crime Officer discussing what hate crime is and how to report it, victims of hate crime talking about their personal experiences, a dramatisation of April and Arthur Corbett's groundbreaking divorce court case, and April talking about her life through previously unseen photographs.

### Staff training

It was essential that all of our staff received training regarding the sensitivities around trans people and how to respond appropriately to visitor feedback. Weekday and weekend training sessions were arranged so that all staff could attend. Training was provided by equality and human rights practitioners from Merseyside In Trust, a Navajo certified lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friendly service. Staff were also given a guided tour of the exhibition and an information sheet clearly stating what the exhibition was about, why we were having the exhibition, what content may potentially not be appropriate for young family audiences, and how to address any visitor concerns. Q&A sessions and discussions raised practical issues such as how to direct people to the appropriate toilets, how to address individuals, and how to deal with any hate crime that may occur in the exhibition. It showed that our staff were very responsive and keen to tackle prejudice and discrimination.



**April in the reconstruction of the Carrousel Club.**  
Image courtesy of National Museums Liverpool

*April Ashley  
MBE, a former  
Vogue model  
and actress,  
was one of the  
first people  
in the world  
to undergo  
pioneering  
gender  
reassignment  
surgery*

### Working in partnership

Through the museum's Our City, Our Stories programme we work in partnership with local groups and organisations, offering a range of flexible temporary exhibition spaces across the museum. The April Ashley exhibition is the first exhibition in our newly developed temporary exhibition space on the first floor of the museum.

Included in our in-kind support

was the free use of our exhibition kit (exhibition display walls, cases and an interactive terminal). The exhibition was project managed by a member of staff from NML's exhibitions team. My role, as Curator of Community History, was to provide curatorial support and advise on content. I edited and proofed text, advised on exhibition design and layout, provided guidance regarding image copyright, cleared copyright permissions for newspaper reproductions, and wrote the object labels. Finally, my most important contribution (in my opinion) was to help ensure that the exhibition content increased the understanding of transgender issues to a wide audience in an accessible way.

We provided an education room, free of charge for community engagement events and the exhibition launch, supported the installation of the exhibition, provided registrar support regarding loans and insurance, and supported the promotion of the exhibition through a press and marketing campaign and press call.

## Challenges and lessons learned

Although the museum has worked in partnership in many different ways, this was the first time we had worked on such a large-scale exhibition funded by an external group. In many respects it was trial and error, and I think I can safely say that it was a learning experience for everyone involved. As Homotopia are a small team who were also working on other projects simultaneously, inevitably staff from across NML were required to support the Homotopia team in delivering the exhibition.

Understandably Homotopia were very keen to tell April's story in great detail. My role was to balance this desire against the need to present the information in an easy to understand format. Examples of text panels, guidelines of text limits et cetera were provided to assist this process.

Whilst many people were aware of April's high profile story, which acted as an important 'way into' the wider issues, it was essential to balance April's personal story with the story of the trans community, as it could have easily been taken over.

On a limited marketing budget, the power of social media was harnessed. However, we also needed to bear in mind the older trans community, who would need to be reached in more traditional ways.

Some contributors were not happy with how they sounded on their oral history interviews; the age old problem. One interview was removed, but when the interviewee attended the exhibition launch and saw the importance of their contribution, they agreed for it to be reinstated.

It was sometimes a challenge regarding who had the final say on decisions, especially whilst working with third parties and contractors.

Although we had a clear



Artworks inspired by April, created by Ben Youdan and Andrew Logan. Image courtesy of National Museums Liverpool

partnership agreement with roles and responsibilities, a toolkit giving the basic processes and requirements of developing an exhibition in a step by step process would have been useful, not just for external partners but also NML staff.

Since the exhibition opened we have highlighted the need to include sources of information and help for visitors.

### Summing up

Overall it was a hugely rewarding exhibition to work on. It helped develop good working relationships, not just with Homotopia, but with many associated groups and members of the trans community. Since the exhibition opened we have been approached by several organisations including Merseyside Police and the Community Cohesion and Hate Crime Reduction Forum to host network meetings with a special focus upon the exhibition. This has helped create stronger partnerships and potential for working together in the future.

A wide range of visitors have attended the exhibition so far, giving overwhelmingly positive

feedback. April was personally delighted and the exhibition launch, which was attended by many members of the trans community, emphasised the vital importance of the exhibition and the role of the museum in educating people about trans issues, challenging prejudice and changing lives. The following comments are taken from the exhibition comments book:

*"So proud to be part of this exhibition. To have a voice, and to share the stage with a remarkable lady, is a pleasure. She is history. I am history and we are the future"*

*"An excellent exhibition. I sincerely hope it helps to change people's attitudes and that transgender people can be accepted simply for who they are. We are human after all!"*

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