

# ANNUAL REVIEW

## 2022-23

**NNNI**  
**NATIONAL**  
**MUSEUMS NI**



# ABOUT NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI

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Welcome to our Annual Review, where we provide a comprehensive overview of the extensive work carried out by National Museums NI over the past 12 months. As an organisation entrusted with the management of four diverse museums - the Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk Museum, Ulster Transport Museum, and Ulster American Folk Park - we proudly serve as custodians of the National Collection, encompassing a remarkable 1.4 million objects. Our overarching vision is to celebrate our collective heritage by sharing the stories of our past, challenging the present, and shaping the future.

Underpinned by our founding legislation, National Museums NI has a range of responsibilities pertaining to Northern Ireland's rich heritage. These include the care, preservation, and expansion of our collections, ensuring their accessibility to the public through well-crafted exhibitions, effective interpretation, and availability for research and study. Additionally, we are committed to fostering awareness, appreciation, and understanding across multiple domains: art, history, science, ways of life and traditions, and the migration and settlement of people.

This review serves as a comprehensive account of how we have fulfilled these responsibilities during the financial year ending on 31st March 2023. We have structured this report around the four core commitments outlined in our Corporate Strategy 2021-25, providing a clear framework for our achievements and future plans.

As we embark on this review, we invite you to join us on a journey through the substantial milestones, noteworthy accomplishments, and strategic endeavours that have defined National Museums NI in the past year. The projects we have highlighted help to showcase our unwavering commitment to maximising access to our museum service and delivering the highest possible social impact.

Thank you for your interest and support as we reflect upon and celebrate our achievements. Together, we can continue to inspire and connect communities, fostering an appreciation for our collective history and shaping a future steeped in cultural understanding.

# CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S INTRODUCTION

At National Museums NI, we find ourselves amidst a significant journey of change, where exciting progress unfolds within each of our four museums on a regular basis. Our collective belief in the pivotal role of museums, along with our unwavering desire to see them serve as inspirational public resources, has been the driving force behind this transformative process.

Over the past year, I have witnessed tremendous strides forward in the pursuit of our ambitions. Notably, our museums welcomed 661,825 visitors - a remarkable achievement that brings us back to pre-Covid levels, following two significantly disrupted years. This exceptional performance is a testament to the enduring appeal and relevance of our museums, even in the face of challenging conditions. Our focus on expanding our audience base has also yielded successful outcomes. We surpassed our targets for increasing first-time visitors and lapsed visitors - those who haven't visited our museums in over five years. This achievement signifies our commitment to audience growth and our ability to reach the widest possible demographic, ensuring that our museums remain accessible and appealing to all.

Yet, the impact of our museums extends far beyond the physical footfall. In addition to the 661,825 visitors, we generated an additional 532,776 engagements through various avenues such as online interactions, stores visits, research enquiries, and volunteering. When considering these opportunities, the total number of engagements reached a count of almost 1.2 million over the course of the year. This panoramic view of our engagements emphasises the extent of our



museum services and the significant impact we create in the community. While success cannot be measured by numbers alone, these results serve as a deeply encouraging indicator of the progress we have made together. We have worked diligently to emerge from a challenging period, whilst simultaneously making substantial strides in amplifying the impact of our services.

Undoubtedly, we will continue to find ourselves in a challenging environment. However, our positioning is strong, and we remain resolute in our commitment to be relevant and navigate the ever-changing landscape. This year's Annual Review serves as a testament to the sheer diversity of what we offer as a comprehensive museum service. Our endeavours range from captivating audiences with Turner Prize-winning artworks to effectively communicating our exciting redevelopment projects and even launching a new trail inspired by the wonders of the solar system.

As you read this review, I invite you to explore the multifaceted nature of our museum service, embracing the vibrancy and creativity that underpin our work. Together, we forge ahead, celebrating the past, inspiring the present, and shaping the future through the invaluable work of the people at National Museums NI.

**Kathryn Thomson**



Image: Triona White-Hamilton, Curator of Modern History, and Ellen Magee, Volunteer, at St George's Market for Black History Month 2022

## EXTENDING THE IMPACT OF OUR COLLECTIONS

At the heart of our role as a national museum lies the fundamental responsibility to care for our collection, enrich it with new acquisitions and share its significance with the wider public. This commitment forms an integral part of our overarching Corporate Strategy. Over the course of this year, we have made remarkable strides in fulfilling this commitment, effectively developing and managing our collection to maximise its impact and reach.

## COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT

Throughout 2022/23, our collecting efforts have been dynamic and purposeful, aimed at reflecting and encouraging dialogue about our shared history and contemporary experiences. Notably, the Natural Sciences department has expanded its curatorial capacity, leading to renewed field collecting initiatives and stronger collaborations with recorders and collectors. These endeavours breathe new life into our collections. In History, we are actively working across all four museums to enhance the diversity and inclusivity of our collections. In Art, significant acquisitions have greatly enriched our holdings, reinforcing our role as the national gallery for Northern Ireland.

We extend our gratitude to the generous donors who have contributed, as well as to our funders, including: the Department for Communities; Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; Art Fund; National Heritage Memorial Fund; Esme Mitchell Trust; IFPDA Foundation; and Friends of the Ulster Museum for their vital financial support.

# ACQUISITION HIGHLIGHTS

We are pleased to present a curated selection of ten significant acquisitions from the past year, showcasing the diverse and inclusive nature of our collecting efforts. Each acquisition holds special significance and contributes to our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world and the world around us.

# 2



In *L'allée au bois*, Renoir's tiny brushstrokes combine to create an immersive woodland scene, giving the viewer the sense of entering a forest glade where light breezes gently rustle leaves and grasses in the heat and dappled shade of a summer's afternoon. It is the first French Impressionist painting to enter a public collection in Northern Ireland and is a significant acquisition for the Ulster Museum. It will help give our audiences a deeper understanding of the work of the 'Irish Impressionists' such as Roderic O'Connor, John Lavery and Paul Henry.

*L'allée au bois (The Woodland Path)*, 1874-1880  
Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919)  
© National Museums NI

# 1



This George Cross was awarded to Health & Social Care (HSC) staff in Northern Ireland, in recognition of their service, dedication and commitment during the Covid-19 pandemic. On 5th July 2021, Queen Elizabeth II announced that she would be awarding a George Cross to the National Health Service (NHS) in the four nations of the UK. The George Cross is the highest civilian gallantry award in the UK, and it has only been awarded collectively twice before. The medal was donated to National Museums NI by the Department of Health in 2023, and is now on display at the Ulster Museum.

# 3



The Skelton motorcycle collection is an outstanding group of seven motorcycles, each associated with a road racing legend from Northern Ireland. As the first racing motorcycles acquired by the Ulster Transport Museum, they fill a significant gap in the collection. The riders represented are Joey Dunlop, Robert Dunlop, Tom Herron, Owen McNally, Philip McCallen, Ryan Farquar and Frank Kennedy. The motorcycles range in date from the 1970s to 2017, and as they are 'works bikes' each is unique and bespoke to its particular rider. They will be on display in the Ulster Transport Museum from autumn 2023.

4



Collecting material associated with the campaign for women's suffrage is a priority for National Museums NI, so we are pleased to have acquired this 'Votes for Women' rosette for the Ulster Folk Museum. From the early 20th century, the rosette is contemporary with the majority of the Folk Museum's collection and is relevant to themes of social and political change and campaigns for equality. It is in the green, white and purple colours of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

5



*Sunday Tied-Up Swings* depicts how swings and playgrounds were chained up on Sundays in Northern Ireland so that no one could play. Catherine McWilliams sketched the scene, along with the sectarian graffiti, after she felt compelled to stop the car whilst driving with her children in North Belfast. McWilliams was born in 1940 in Belfast and attended the Belfast School of Art. She combined a teaching career with painting and, in 1986, opened the Cavehill Gallery with her husband Joseph McWilliams. Her Troubles-related work is significant, as it depicts everyday life in Belfast at the time.

***Sunday, Tied-Up Swings, 1975***  
Catherine McWilliams  
© Catherine McWilliams

6



Gifted by HMRC, this is the first Rainbow flag to be flown from a Government building in Northern Ireland. It was hoped that by raising the flag on Pride weekend, HMRC would demonstrate how they reflect the diversity of society that they serve. After much effort and research into legal requirements under the Flag Regulations (2000) Northern Ireland, and discussions with HMRC Estates; Cabinet Office; Northern Ireland Office; Northern Ireland Government Offices in Stormont; Parades Commission; and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the flag was flown at HMRC offices in Custom House Square, Belfast, on 1st August 2014.

7



Funding from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has enabled collecting through a pilot project in partnership with the Ballinderry Rivers Trust. The mayflies, stoneflies and caddisflies that have been collected are important indicators of changes in freshwater ecosystems. They respond to changes caused by human activity, such as pollution, as well as long term environmental factors. The specimens collected during this research represent a valuable addition to the voucher specimen collections for the Ulster Museum, providing the backbone for comparative environmental studies over time.

8



In 2022, an incredibly rare single female burial of Viking ancestry was discovered on Rathlin Island during work for a new house build. The burial consists of two items of jewellery, including the beautifully decorated brooch pictured; human remains (dated to the 8th century AD); and a small amount of excavation archive material. This is noteworthy as the first excavated female Viking burial in Northern Ireland and from the very place, Rathlin Island, where the first Viking raid was recorded in Ireland, in AD 795.

9



On International Human Rights Day 2022, National Museums NI marked a landmark acquisition of 14 pieces from the Conflict Textiles collection. Conflict Textiles - whose online archive is hosted by CAIN (Conflict Archive on the Internet) at Ulster University - holds a large collection of transnational textiles all of which portray conflict and human rights abuses. The acquisition demonstrates National Museums NI's commitment to local and international partnership and collaboration when it comes to developing rich collections that support our ongoing work associated with the legacy of the past, peace and reconciliation.

10



National Museums NI was delighted to be the 2022 recipient for the prestigious Richard Hamilton Acquisition Prize, enabling us to purchase artworks from the International Fine Print Dealers Association (IFPDA) Fair in New York. Artworks selected in line with our collecting priorities included *Man* 1975-2003 by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012), an acquisition which helps us to tell the full story of women's impact on printmaking in the early and mid-twentieth century and represent artists of colour who were an important part of this movement.

***Man, 1975-2003***

Elizabeth Catlett

© Catlett Mora Family Trust / VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023

# COLLECTIONS CARE & ACCESS

**Collections care and access are at the core of our mission as a museum service. We recognise the importance of preserving our collections for future generations while also ensuring their relevance and accessibility in the present. It's not simply about storing away precious artefacts, but about creating dynamic spaces where the collection can be explored, researched and enjoyed.**

To support our commitment to managing and preserving our collections, we made significant investments this year. We upgraded our collections management system, which has allowed us to better organise and provide access to the collection. A major outcome of this project is the launch of Collections Online, our new user-friendly platform for digitally accessing the collection. This new website enables us to enhance and expand online access to our collections, offering a whole new level of engagement for audiences to enjoy.

At our Cultra site, we recently completed the refurbishment of the Library, creating a more open and accessible space for the public to engage with its significant archives and resources. The Library holds a significant collection focused on the languages and dialects of Ulster and Ireland including Hiberno-English, Irish and Ulster Scots as well as their connections with Great Britain, surrounding islands, and Europe. While language can sometimes be a sensitive topic, it provides a valuable lens through which we can explore the history of this region, foster shared understanding and promote mutual respect. The renewed access to this resource lays the groundwork for further development of our Languages of Ulster programme in support of the public policy initiatives outlined in 'New Decade New Approach'.

Also at Cultra, we completed the installation of new storage infrastructure, enhancing our ability to house and preserve the Folk Textile and Costume collection. We doubled the storage capacity of the glass plate

negative store, implemented space-efficient mobile shelving, and refurbished the adjoining photographic studio. Additionally, cantilever racking was installed in the Banbury Stores to rehouse small boats from the Maritime collection.

At our off-site stores we installed a new environmental control plant at Heron Road 2 store, providing a more stable and controlled environment. At the Transport and Industry Museum Store, we continued to improve and expand storage capacity through the installation of cantilever racking and mesh storage panels, creating essential storage and display spaces.



At the Ulster Museum, we made progress in the restructuring and refurbishment of our collections store and back-of-house spaces. Enabling works, including the clearance of old infrastructure, have paved the way for the store's transformation.

**By investing in collections care, management, and conservation, we are ensuring that our collections are safeguarded and made accessible to the public. Our commitment to providing dynamic and engaging experiences drives us to continuously improve our storage facilities, enhance accessibility and optimise our collections management practices.**



# DECOLONISATION & DIVERSITY

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Over the past year, National Museums NI, in partnership with the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI) and the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC), has embarked on a transformative decolonisation project called *Global Voices, Local Choices*. Thanks to the generous support of the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, this initiative aims to empower marginalised communities and provide them with a voice in shaping the interpretation and representation of the World Cultures collection cared for by the Ulster Museum.

Through the project, objects from this collection were shared, enabling participating communities the opportunity to engage directly with them. They received exclusive tours of the *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition and were able to handle World Cultures objects, gaining insights into their cultural significance and historical contexts.

Guided by creative facilitators, community members have delved into the meaning and cultural significance embedded within these objects. Through vibrant dialogue and knowledge-sharing, a collaborative and informed approach to interpretation and representation emerged, enriching the understanding of all involved.



Image: Agrippa Njanina, Community Engagement Officer of the *Global Voices, Local Choices* project, with Claire Njanina

**Agrippa Njanina**, Community Engagement Officer for the project, expressed the profound impact of this initiative: “The project is raising awareness and understanding of these collections and how a decolonisation approach can be implemented in a fresh and inclusive way through creativity. Bringing diverse cultures and perspectives into Northern Ireland’s local and national museums, it is proving to be a valuable learning experience for all partners and participants.”

The culmination of these shared experiences is resulting in a series of events and exhibitions within local museums and the Ulster Museum, showcasing the creative expressions of the participating communities. Art, crafts, music, dance, poetry and creative writing come together to celebrate the richness and diversity of the stories encapsulated within the World Cultures collection.

This project has been significant for the communities involved, giving them a platform to express their own histories and shape how they are told. Through this inclusive approach, marginalised groups, who have historically been underrepresented in museums, have started to gain a sense of ownership and empowerment. Concurrently, museum audiences are afforded a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultures different from their own.

For the project partners, this initiative represents a proactive response to the challenges surrounding the depiction of marginalised groups' histories. It is equipping us with a deeper understanding of the collection, enabling us to present more nuanced and informed representations.

**In an era marked by evolving perspectives and heightened awareness, the *Global Voices, Local Choices* decolonisation project serves as a beacon of change. It provides a platform for marginalised communities to reclaim their narratives, fostering a more inclusive and enriched cultural landscape. As we reflect on the achievements of the past year, this project stands as a testament to the power of collaboration, dialogue and creative expression in reshaping the narratives that define our shared human heritage.**



Image: Exploring the World Cultures collection as part of the *Global Voices, Local Choices* project

# POWER TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

The *Reimagine Remake Replay* (RRR) project drew to a close last year, marking four transformative years of creative engagement with over 4,000 young people across Northern Ireland. This visionary initiative, led by Nerve Centre in partnership with National Museums NI, Northern Ireland Museums Council, and Northern Ireland Screen, was made possible through the generous support of The National Lottery Heritage Fund's Kick the Dust programme.

At its core, the RRR project has championed a youth-led approach, ensuring that museums become spaces where young voices are not just heard but truly valued. It has been a platform for young minds to unleash their creativity, connecting them with heritage through innovative media and cutting-edge digital technologies. By reimagining, remaking, and replaying elements of our past, the project has left an indelible mark on National Museums NI's approach to inclusivity.

To celebrate the conclusion of this ground-breaking project, a group of young contributors who have been actively engaged with RRR took part in a co-curation process. Their collective vision materialised into a first-of-its-kind exhibition entitled *Power to the Young People* at the Ulster Museum, showcasing their profound impact on shaping the museum experience.



Image: *Power to the Young People* exhibition at the Ulster Museum

The exhibition itself embodied the spirit of innovation, featuring a myriad of digital interactives and creative activities. Visitors were immersed in a virtual reality (VR) experience, guided through a bespoke augmented reality (AR) app, and captivated by vibrant projection mapping. These state-of-the-art technologies served as new avenues to engage with museums and heritage, orchestrated under the direction of the young curators.

Driven by their passion and aspirations, the young people carefully selected three vital themes for the exhibition: Climate Justice, Arts & Wellbeing, and LGBTQIA+ Rights. These pressing issues, resonating deeply with the youth of today, were woven into the fabric of the exhibition and reverberated through the curated object selections.

**Cailín Lynn**, Programme Development Manager for National Museums NI, shared her admiration for the boundless energy the young contributors infused into the museum collections. She remarked, "The young

people brought an incredible vitality and fresh perspective to our museum collections. Their enthusiasm and innovative ideas injected new life into the exhibition, challenging us to see museum collections through their eyes.”

While the exhibition itself had a temporary presence, the lasting impact lies in the invaluable learnings and insights gleaned from the co-curation process. It serves as a reminder of the importance of amplifying diverse voices and embracing new perspectives. Such endeavours require courage and a commitment to innovation, as we strive to create spaces that truly reflect the ever-evolving nature of our society.

In reflecting on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Ulster Museum in 1972, we find great significance in the inspiration and insights drawn from this next generation of museum visitors.

Their engagement and vision have fuelled our collective aspirations for the museum’s future, reminding us of the vital role they play in shaping the ongoing narrative of our cultural heritage.

**As we bid farewell to the *Reimagine Remake Replay* project, its impact resonates far beyond its duration. The project’s legacy serves as a testament to the value of empowering young voices, reminding us that when we provide the space and opportunity for their imagination to flourish, they become the architects of a more inclusive and vibrant museum experience for all.**



Image: Some of the *Reimagine Remake Replay* youth participants who co-designed the exhibition



Image: Protest banners on display in *The Druthaib's Ball*  
© Array Collective

# THE DRUTHAIB'S BALL

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

In February 2023, the Ulster Museum unveiled a significant acquisition - *The Druthaib's Ball*, Northern Ireland's first Turner Prize-winning artwork. Created by Belfast-based artists, Array Collective, the immersive installation transports visitors to an imagined sibín, an illicit pub where trauma, dark humour, frustration and release coexist.

*The Druthaib's Ball* was conceived by Array Collective in 2021, a period when the centenaries of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland coincided with ongoing campaigns for marriage equality, reproductive rights and an Irish Language Act. The artwork offers a glimpse into the political and social causes that have gained prominence in "post-conflict" Northern Ireland, shedding light on the evolving landscape of art and politics in the region.

The acquisition of *The Druthaib's Ball* was made possible through the support of the Department for Communities and the Art Fund. Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive of National Museums NI, expressed her enthusiasm for the artwork's arrival at Ulster Museum, stating, "*The Druthaib's Ball* highlights the evolving nature of both art and politics in Northern Ireland. National Museums NI's role is to support exploration and dialogue regarding our past, present, and future. The Ulster Museum is an engaging space where contemporary issues can be examined, reflected on and discussed."

Stepping into the immersive installation, audiences are invited to share in an alternative history within the sibín. This long-established tradition of an unlicensed bar becomes a space of contradiction, dark humour and craic. Over 250 carefully selected objects, artworks and furnishings populate the space, sparking discussions surrounding cultural identity and rights. Through a playful amalgamation of protest, performance, and ancient mythology, *The Druthaib's Ball* creates a unique and thought-provoking experience.

**Anna Liesching**, Curator of Art at National Museums NI who curated the exhibition, expressed her excitement, saying, “It was an incredible moment for the art community in Northern Ireland when Array Collective were awarded the 2021 Turner Prize. The win drew attention to the historic connection between art and social activism in Belfast. Now, we mark this moment by bringing the prize-winning installation into the Ulster Museum collection, joining our existing works of art that focus on socially engaged practice.”

The inclusion of *The Druthaib’s Ball* in the Ulster Museum not only elevates the cultural landscape of Northern Ireland but also offers visitors a powerful and immersive experience that intertwines art, politics and community engagement. It serves as a testament to the ever-evolving nature of artistic expression and its ability to challenge, provoke and reflect the complexities of our society.



Image: Laura O'Connor and Emma Campbell from Array Collective with Kathryn Thomson and Anna Liesching in the sábin

# BAD BRIDGET

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

The Ulster American Folk Park unveiled its new exhibition, *Bad Bridget*, in April 2022. This immersive display shines a spotlight on the experiences of thousands of Irish women who embarked on a journey to North America between 1838 and 1918, often finding themselves facing adversity and grappling to survive in a foreign land.

Marking the first new display in the museum's galleries in four years, *Bad Bridget* brings to life an important story that has been unrepresented in the museum narrative to this point. Through a captivating fusion of visuals, sounds, scents and objects, the exhibition takes visitors on a journey, tracing the lives of these women from their time in Ireland to the hardships that drove them to migrate.

Unlike female migrants from other countries, hundreds of thousands of Irish girls and women made the arduous journey alone. *Bad Bridget* offers a glimpse into their experiences at sea, shedding light on the dangers and difficulties they encountered. Upon arrival in America, they were faced with the harsh realities of finding employment and housing. Living in poverty and bombarded by temptations, many of these women found themselves drawn into a world of crime. The exhibition delves into their tenement living conditions and exposes the treatment they received from the authorities.



**Victoria Millar**, Senior Curator of History at National Museums NI, expressed her enthusiasm for the new exhibition, commenting, “We are thrilled to have opened our *Bad Bridget* exhibition to the public. Traditionally, women’s stories have been underrepresented at the Ulster American Folk Park, even though women accounted for around half of Irish migrants from 1800 onwards. *Bad Bridget* represents the beginning of a new experience here for our visitors.”

The realisation of *Bad Bridget* was made possible through funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), as well as ongoing collaborations between National Museums NI, Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University. The exhibition draws on significant research conducted by Dr. Elaine Farrell and Dr. Leanne McCormick between 2015 and 2022. They worked alongside a team of talented female creatives, including author Jan Carson; illustrator Fiona McDonnell; scent designer Tasha Marks; and sound artists Franziska Schroeder and Catriona Gribben, who lent their skills to bring the stories of these women to life.

This exhibition, which is bright, multisensory, and thought-provoking, is a critical step in the Ulster American Folk Park’s commitment to inclusivity and diversity. For the first time, it explores the experiences of Irish girls and women in cities such as Boston, New York and Toronto, during the period from 1838 to 1918, shedding light on the challenges they faced while interacting with the authorities as they struggled to survive. *Bad Bridget* has already garnered overwhelmingly positive feedback from visitors, emphasising its necessity and relevance in telling these untold stories.

**The Ulster American Folk Park’s *Bad Bridget* exhibition stands as a testament to the museum’s dedication to illuminating marginalised narratives, fostering inclusivity and through its collections offering visitors a deeper understanding of the profound impact of migration on the lives of Irish women in North America. It serves as a poignant reminder of their resilience, struggles and contributions to shaping the diverse tapestry of history.**



Image: Members of the *Bad Bridget* project team at the exhibition launch



# NEW EXHIBITIONS

At National Museums NI, our commitment to providing diverse and captivating exhibitions remained unwavering. This year, our galleries came alive with a tapestry of immersive experiences, offering visitors a multitude of ways to engage with our rich collection and showcasing exciting new loans that captured the imagination.



## Celtic Wave: A History of Surfing in Ireland

An important new exhibition that explores the roots of surfing as a sport in Ireland and offers new thinking into how displays are developed at the Ulster Transport Museum in increasingly innovative and environmentally friendly ways.



## Against The Image

In collaboration with Belfast Photo Festival, this exhibition explored the authority of the photograph in an age dominated by mass media and widespread (mis)information.



## Royal Ulster Academy: 141st Annual Exhibition

The Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition, a highlight of the Northern Irish art calendar, left a lasting impression in the spacious Gallery 6, eliciting awe and admiration from all who experienced it.



## A Collector's Story

A significant exhibition which showcased the contribution made to the Ulster Museum's collection by Tom Hartley, the celebrated local historian and former Lord Mayor of Belfast. Since 2001, Tom has made a sustained and significant contribution to the Ulster Museum, donating over 2,000 objects across a broad political and social spectrum.



### A Unique Silence

A captivating display which focussed on six etchings by the famed Dutch artist, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, which were gifted to National Museums NI through the Acceptance in Lieu of tax scheme.



### Anything Goes! Fashion in the 1920s

A carefully curated treasure trove of luxurious fabrics and elaborate garments. This deep dive into one of the most influential eras of fashion gave visitors an opportunity to experience how the 1920s changed fashion forever.



### Goya: Doña Antonia Zárate

A display of *Doña Antonia Zárate*, one of Goya's most striking female portraits. On loan from the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, it was the latest in a series of partnership loans which focus on a single exceptional painting.

© National Gallery of Ireland



### Bloomsbury: A Collective

This exhibition included works from The Courtauld Collection and Ulster Museum in order to take an introductory look at the Bloomsbury Group, specifically three central artists within it - Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant.

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE: VOLUNTEERING

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

*Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility*

*Creating More Ways To Get Involved*

**At National Museums NI, we firmly believe that volunteering is a cornerstone of community involvement and an invaluable resource in shaping the experiences we offer. This year, we are delighted to highlight the exceptional contributions of 171 individuals who generously dedicated over 20,000 hours of their time to support our museums and heritage sites.**

At the Ulster Museum, we witnessed the emergence of exciting new volunteer roles, specifically designed to enhance the visitor experience. Volunteers became instrumental in supporting the Discovery Centre and Visitor Services teams, igniting a sense of wonder and curiosity in visitors of all ages. Moreover, we extended our volunteer programme by involving passionate individuals in the delivery of our highly anticipated Bluegrass Omagh festival at Ulster American Folk Park. This marked a meaningful expansion of our volunteer engagements, providing individuals with unique opportunities to contribute to vibrant cultural events.

The immersive experiences at the Ulster Folk Museum were further enriched through the engagement of volunteers. Their passion and dedication shone through as they cultivated heritage fruit and vegetables in our cottage gardens and actively supported seasonal events such as Harvest, Halloween and Christmas.



Image: Volunteering in action at the Ulster Folk Museum

These invaluable contributions breathed new life into our themes of living, making and growing, and fostered a deeper connection between the customs that shaped our past and present day participation.

Our commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainability was further exemplified through our partnership with The Conservation Volunteers. Together, we revitalised previously dormant green spaces across our museum sites, inviting volunteers and visitors to actively participate in native tree planting initiatives, create enchanting willow walkways, and learn about sustainable practices. These rejuvenated spaces have become vibrant hubs for communal learning, inspiring individuals to become passionate stewards of the environment.

To streamline our volunteer management and enhance communication, we introduced our own dedicated digital volunteer management system. This innovative platform has not only facilitated the recruitment process, but it has also significantly improved our engagement with our growing community of volunteers. Collecting valuable feedback after each engagement, we gain valuable insights that shape the quality of our experiences.

The transformative power of volunteering is evident in the words of one of our volunteers who shared, “As someone that was struggling with mental health issues volunteering has been one of the best opportunities that I have had in my life. I have developed a confidence in myself, found a new passion, a sense of purpose and made lots of new friends through the social aspects. I describe volunteering at the Folk Museum as my light in the darkness.”

**Looking ahead, we remain committed to expanding volunteer opportunities, fostering meaningful engagements and creating a supportive environment where individuals can grow, learn and make a difference. The immense impact they have made on our museums and the communities we serve is a testament to the power of volunteering as a force for positive change.**



Image: Volunteering in action at the Ulster Museum



Image: Young visitors enjoying a tour of *Our Place in Space*

# OUR PLACE IN SPACE

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

*Creating More Ways To Get Involved*

*Building the Museums of the Future*

**The opening of *Our Place In Space* at the Ulster Transport Museum marked a momentous occasion for visitors seeking to explore the wonders of the universe. This sculpture trail, designed by artist Oliver Jeffers; astrophysicist Professor Stephen Smartt; and a creative team led by Nerve Centre, brought the solar system to life in a captivating and immersive way.**

The project exemplified the power of partnership working, with National Museums NI playing a central role in its development, collaborating with an array of creative partners, including the Astrophysics Research Centre at Queen's University Belfast, NI Science Festival, and many others.

Inspired by a research and development project and initially presented as part of UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK, *Our Place In Space* showcased the intersection of art, science, and innovation. This visionary project received support and funding from various sources, including the Northern Ireland Executive, UK Government, Scottish Government and Welsh Government. Its arrival at the Ulster Transport Museum provided a unique opportunity for visitors to engage with the creative fusion of arts, science, and heritage.

Stretching over 11 km, the trail started from the grounds of the Ulster Transport Museum at Cultra, guiding visitors along the North Down Coastal Path until reaching its celestial destination - Pluto in Bangor. The installation featured scale models of the Sun and planets, reimagined as contemporary art sculptures. Vibrant arches, adorned with Las Vegas-style lights, showcased the names of each planet, capturing the imagination and curiosity of trail participants.

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, *Our Place In Space* aimed to provoke profound contemplation. By pondering how we can better share and protect our planet in the future and examining the concept of 'us' versus 'them', participants were encouraged to reevaluate their perspective on life and humanity's place in the universe. The project sought to bridge the cosmic realm with earthly experiences, inspiring a sense of wonder and a renewed appreciation for our planet.

For the Ulster Transport Museum, this project represented more than an artistic installation - it was an opportunity for investment and revitalisation. The museum's commitment to enhancing visitor experiences was evident through the trail's development, the establishment of a new access point to the coastal path; the introduction of new infrastructure; and broader improvements to signage and presentation throughout the museum.

These investments aimed to attract attention, offer engaging opportunities, and cultivate interactivity within the museum grounds, aligning with the museum's broader plans for the Cultra estate.

**As the celestial wonders of *Our Place In Space* sparkled, almost 20,000 visitors arrived at the Ulster Transport Museum over a four-week period to delve into the mysteries of the universe, ponder their place within it, and embark on a thought-provoking journey that transcended the boundaries of art, science and heritage. The project exemplified the spirit of innovation, collaboration and discovery, embodying the essence of the Ulster Transport Museum's mission to captivate, educate and inspire audiences of all ages.**



Image: The *Our Place In Space* sculpture trail at Ulster Transport Museum

# ACTIVE LEARNING

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

*Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility*

*Creating More Ways To Get Involved*

*Extending the Impact of our Collections*

**Learning and education form a core component of National Museums NI's museum service. With a portfolio of four museums, we strive to offer active and accessible learning opportunities that directly connect to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Our goal is to empower children and young people to explore and investigate the world around them, fostering curiosity and critical thinking.**

Last year, we proudly supported over 40,000 participants through our formal learning programmes. Every year our dedicated team of museum educators develop a wide range of collections-based learning workshops, tours and discovery sessions for children of all ages and abilities. By connecting classroom learning to real-world objects and exhibits, we aim to inspire a lifelong love for learning.

In addition to those schools who make a trip to our museums, we also continue to reach out to students through our Museum on the Move programme. This unique initiative ensures that even schools unable to visit our physical museums can still benefit from our educational offerings. Through virtual platforms and loans boxes, Museum on the Move brings the wonders of our museums directly to the classroom. This approach has been particularly successful in reaching students in areas of multiple deprivation, providing them with access to enriching cultural and educational experiences.



Image: The *Urban Nature Project* at Ulster Folk Museum

One of our new schools initiatives this year has been the Urban Nature Project, a collaboration with the Natural History Museum. This outdoor learning programme, for Key Stage 3 Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Schools, empowers students with diverse learning, behavioural and mobility requirements. Through a series of workshops focused on biodiversity, the Urban Nature Project encourages children to imagine, investigate and develop scientific enquiry skills. By immersing themselves in the natural world, students gain a deeper understanding of the environment and their place within it.

**Louise Rice**, Education Manager at National Museums NI, emphasised the central role of education, stating, "Education is at the heart of everything we do at National Museums NI. We believe museums have the power to ignite curiosity, spark imagination and transform lives. Through our diverse learning programmes, we aim to inspire young minds, cultivate wonder, and foster a lifelong love for learning."

**As we reflect on the past year, National Museums NI remains committed to nurturing a love for learning and empowering young minds. We are honoured to have played a pivotal role in supporting schools and providing transformative learning experiences. By connecting with the curriculum, extending access through Museum on the Move and fostering exploration through collaborative projects like the Urban Nature Project, we continue to make a meaningful impact on the lives of young learners.**



Image: Young learners at the Ulster Folk Museum



# REAWAKENING THE ULSTER FOLK MUSEUM

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Building the Museums of the Future

**In the past year, our Reawakening the Ulster Folk Museum project made significant strides in revitalising the museum's role in society, ensuring its relevance and resilience for current and future generations. This progress builds upon the groundwork we laid in recent years, crafting a future vision and masterplan that positions the museum as a unique and inspirational heritage and environmental resource for our times.**

One of the most exciting moments came in June when we secured just over £1 million in support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, marking a major milestone in the project's development stage. This funding arrived at a crucial time, providing the impetus to propel our concepts forward and translate them into detailed plans and designs.

Supported by an Integrated Consultants Team, we worked hard to develop clear and compelling concepts outlining how targeted capital investment will serve as a catalyst for the museum's reawakening.



Image: *Bona Palooza* event which took place at the Ulster Folk Museum to engage with LGBTQIA+ audiences

Through extensive consultation with our passionate people and stakeholder organisations, the focus of the investment has centred on creating enriching learning facilities that foster greater engagement with heritage and environmental conservation, embracing innovation and inclusivity.

In March 2023, we officially launched the Reawakening the Ulster Folk Museum project by submitting a Pre-Application Notification for planning approval to the Ards and North Down Borough Council. This momentous occasion marked the culmination of nearly five years of development and collaborative input throughout our organisation. The news reverberated positively, generating interest from key media outlets and attracting support from stakeholders, partners and the public who share our vision.

Now that the project is live, we are continuing to engage with our visitors and stakeholders, initiating conversations about the project through the planning consultation process and our broader engagement initiatives both on-site and online. Our goal is to extend a warm invitation to a diverse range of individuals, encouraging their active involvement in the Ulster Folk Museum and unlocking new understandings of the museum's potential as a rich heritage and environment resource.

**The impact of our progress extends beyond the Folk Museum itself, serving as a development model for our other museums. It exemplifies that through unwavering dedication, innovative ideas and boundless passion, we can collectively advance our ambitions and propel all our museums forward.**

***Learn more about the [Reawakening the Ulster Folk Museum](http://ulsterfolkmuseum.org) project at [ulsterfolkmuseum.org](http://ulsterfolkmuseum.org)***



Image: A new arrival and orientation centre, Culture Hub, is one of the new facilities proposed as part of the plans to reawaken the Ulster Folk Museum as a heritage and environment resource

# INSPIRING A GREENER FUTURE

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

*Creating More Ways To Get Involved*

*Extending the Impact of our Collections*

*Building the Museums of the Future*

Protecting the environment and promoting sustainable living are paramount challenges facing global society. As custodians of cultural and natural heritage, museums have a crucial role to play as educators, enablers, and beacons of sustainable practice. Our natural science collections, combined with the landscapes we inhabit and the traditions we showcase, provide a unique platform for educating people about biodiversity loss and inspiring sustainable lifestyles.

## Realising the Potential of Natural Sciences

Over the past year, we have dedicated efforts to reinvigorating our Natural Sciences curatorial team, aiming to unlock the immense potential of this collection and harness its power in mitigating environmental change and fostering a deeper appreciation for biodiversity. These invaluable resources serve as windows into Earth's past and present, documenting the remarkable diversity of species and ecosystems that have thrived over millennia but face many threats and challenges today.

**Helen James**, our Senior Curator of Natural Sciences, recognises the significant impact these collections can have: "By harnessing the power of our Natural Sciences collections, we can instil a sense of urgency; cultivate a love for nature; inspire collective efforts to address climate change and biodiversity loss and safeguard our planet for future generations."

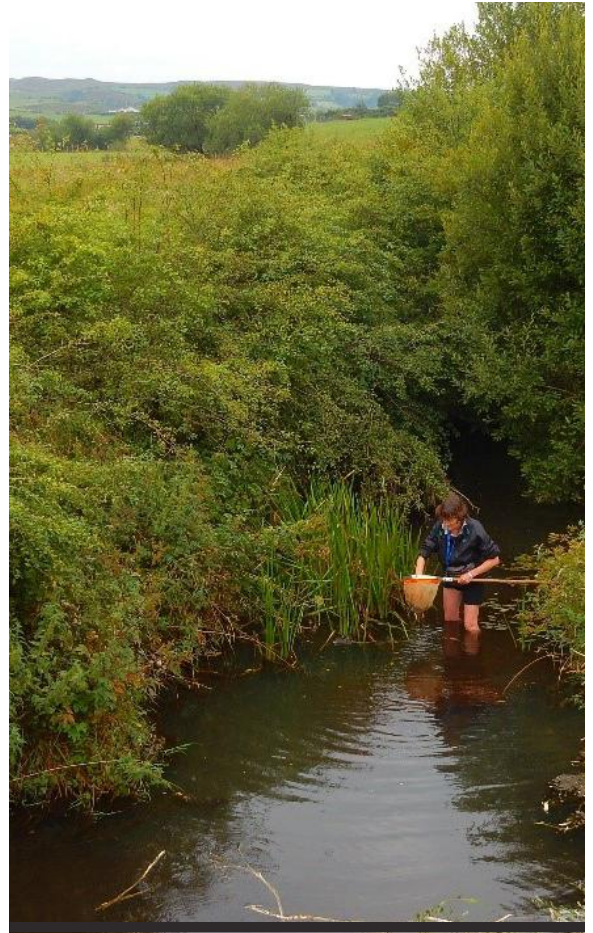


Image: Helen James, Senior Curator of Natural Sciences, taking part in fieldwork with the Ballinderry Rivers Trust

This year, Helen and her team have actively been involved in fieldwork with the Ballinderry Rivers Trust, thanks to funding from the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. They have been collecting and studying freshwater insects, and in doing so developing knowledge, contributing new data and adding to the collections. Through the study of these specimens, we gain insights into the intricate web of life, enabling us to comprehend the consequences of environmental change and make informed decisions for conservation. Moreover, by engaging the public with these collections, we evoke a sense of awe and connection to the natural world, empowering individuals to take action in protecting and preserving our planet's precious biodiversity.

## Embracing Sustainability as an Organisation

In 2021, we proudly became one of the first public bodies in Northern Ireland to complete a comprehensive carbon footprint audit, revealing a total of 8,499 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO<sub>2</sub>e). Building on this progress, we conducted our second carbon audit to establish our 2021-22 carbon baseline using the Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Protocol methodology, resulting in 5,139 tCO<sub>2</sub>e. Of this total, scope 1 (direct) and scope 2 (indirect) emissions accounted for 1,872 tCO<sub>2</sub>e, below our target of 1,904 tCO<sub>2</sub>e. The reduction in emissions is primarily attributed to the further decarbonisation of Northern Ireland's electricity network. While energy consumption has increased at most of our sites due to new installations and improved environmental conditions for collections, we have implemented Automatic Meter Reading across the estate to drive efficiency and identify areas of significant energy usage in the coming year, as part of our ongoing capital project.

National Museums NI remains steadfast in its commitment to reducing scope 1 and 2 emissions by 50% toward achieving net-zero status by 2030. We have joined the Pledge for Net Zero and Business in the Community NI's Climate Pledge as tangible evidence of our dedication.

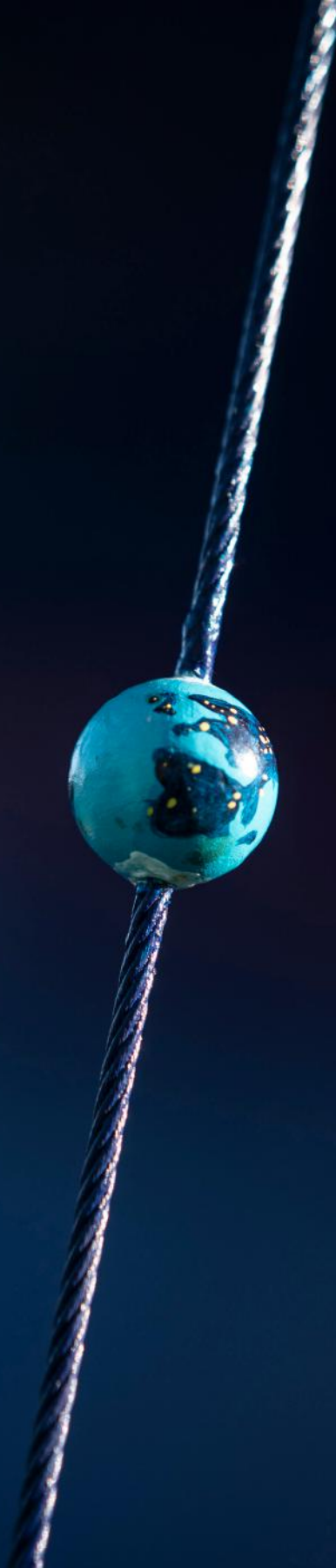
**Adrian Fitzpatrick**, our newly appointed Sustainability Manager, reflected on National Museums NI's ambition, stating, "Museums have a unique opportunity to serve as beacons of sustainable practice, leading the way in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable lifestyles. Through the procurement of renewable energy sources, implementation of energy-efficient technologies, waste reduction and recycling, we aspire to showcase tangible examples of sustainability in action throughout our museum service."

In addition, our sustainability efforts have been recognised through the Green Tourism Award, bestowed upon the Ulster Museum this year, with plans to extend this recognition to our other museums in due course. Noteworthy initiatives also include the commencement of a woodland regeneration plan in partnership with the Woodland Trust, initiating the removal of invasive species from sections of woodland within the Folk Museum site.

**As we continue on this sustainable path, National Museums NI remains dedicated to leading by example, promoting sustainable practices and inspiring visitors and stakeholders to join us in safeguarding the environment for future generations.**



Image: Volunteers assisting with the removal of invasive species



## A NOTE OF THANKS

Thanks to our funding partners, particularly our core funder the Department for Communities, and to the tremendous support of our stakeholders, board members, our partners, our colleagues and of course our loyal visitors, members, participants and volunteers.

Image: Earth in *Our Place In Space*

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