

UMAC

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‘The Sound of Silver’: Collaborating art, science and technology at Queen’s University, Belfast.

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History and Background

Founded by Queen Victoria in 1845, the Queen's University of Belfast opened in 1849 when the first students entered the new college building designed and built by Charles Lanyon. The University collection comprises paintings, sculpture, silver wear and valuable artefacts. Until the late 1990s, however, the collection was managed on an ad hoc basis, with paintings hung in dignitary’s offices, or stashed in people’s cupboards. A ropery inventory recorded the whereabouts of pieces, and many valuable objects were kept in semi-permanent storage. The silver collection was kept in a strong room vault, brought out only for occasional ceremonial dinners, or at times displayed in insecure cabinets in the Visitor’s Centre amongst University ties and graduation memorabilia. Through investment in curatorial staff, a small budget, and eventually the opening a new art gallery in 2001 as part of the Great Hall Restoration Scheme, the ‘Naughton Gallery at Queen’s’ is now a registered museum, bench-marked by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Association. Today the gallery presents a rolling programme of six exhibitions per year and it welcomes 13,000 annual visitors including University staff, students and international tourist visitors. As well as its annual display from the university art collection, the Gallery invites local and international shows in a variety of media, not least sound art. It was through the gallery’s involvement with the internationally renowned Sonic Art Research Centre at Queen’s that the ‘Sound of Silver’ project was conceived; a new display of silverware and sonic art.

The Role of the University Museum

Like many UK universities, in recent years Queen's University, Belfast has undergone a major re-structuring. Particularly in the field of Humanities, small academic departments are being merged or closed down, and the market-driven focus is on research over teaching. In this environment a university art museum could suffer from lack of classification, or it could choose to adapt to the climate and optimise its position as a mediator between academia, university administrators and the wider community. To this end, the Naughton Gallery has initiated exhibitions curated by academics; it has fostered relationships with History of Art students studying 'Cultures of Collection and Display'; and through education and outreach programmes the small gallery team attempts to make its collection accessible to the widest range of public. The 'Day of the Dead' exhibition and procession is an excellent example of an exhibition which opened the doors of the university to the wider public.

'The Sound of Silver'

An historic silver collection, however, presents a special display challenge to any university museum, owing to security restrictions, the preventative care required, and the difficulty of making it relevant to viewers. To overcome such problems the new 'Sound of Silver' project at Queen's has three distinct, but interrelated objectives. Firstly to put items from the university's historic silver collection on permanent display to conservation standards, secondly to showcase research from the Sonic Arts Research Centre, and thirdly to develop innovative technology for interpreting objects. The project is being funded by NESTA (that is, the National Endowment for Science and the Arts), and also ADAPT NI. Part of the brief is therefore that all aspects of our design are accessible to people of a wide range ages and abilities, and focus groups have been established to benchmark the conception and creation of the exhibition.

The University has approximately 300 pieces of silver in its collection. In common with many institutions and museums, it is a diverse collection including seemingly disparate objects of varying quality and use. There are ceremonial items such as the mace and regalia, dinner

suites and table items, ٢ items of religious significance, and ٢ medals and trophies. Given that the collection has been amassed almost exclusively through donation and bequest, each piece also has an emotive value attached to it, such as memory, loss, affection, nostalgia, respect or triumph. All of which provide rich evocations for artists, and in this case for composers of digital sound.

A new collaboration with SARC brings the gallery in line with cutting-edge research in music technology, composition, signal processing, internet technology and digital hardware. The sonic laboratory was opened in 2003, and enables research teams to develop and implement new initiatives in the creation and delivery of music and audio through loud speaker design and placement. Ten international sound artists have now been selected to create soundscapes in response to ten silver pieces: their history, provenance and emotional significance. ٢ These soundscapes will be played from speakers built into the base of two large display cabinets in the Naughton Gallery, and will be activated by hand-held computers. ٢ When the visitor approaches the new display, rather than being provided with interpretative text in the form of labels, they will have the option to explore the collection using these PDA's capable of activating different layers of information for each object: Firstly Text (including reasons for the creation, donation and use of the piece); secondly music (that is, the six-minute soundscape), and also Images (for the visitor will be able to rotate and manipulate a virtual image of the silver piece).

The responses from sound artists from our call for commissions has been very interesting, Some will focus on sounds associated with the materials and techniques of silver production, while others will focus on the history and provenance of objects, not least pieces relating to colonial or imperial history such as the 'Sir Robert Hart' suite of table decoration. ٢ With its elaborate bamboo and dragon figures, this set displays the opulent style of decoration typical of the late Victorian obsession with Revival imagery and colonial symbolism. ٢ It was donated to the University as part of the Sir Robert Hart bequest. Hart worked as Inspector-General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Custom between 1863 and 1908, and was presented this set on his retirement by the Chinese Empress Dowager. For one artist, viewing the suite took him on a

journey to an imaginative space of travel between cities in Britain and China, and sounds associated with his imaginary cities will be incorporated into his composition through spatial cues to help listeners to detect distance, atmosphere and the size of cities. Another artist has taken a longer view of the history of the silver piece. She is interested in exploring sounds that might have 'come from' or be 'stored in' an object as a way of helping individuals to invest their own imaginations in the object and its history.

This response to the silver collection is at once a close sensorial engagement by an individual artist, and it desires to bring the object to life again. By stimulating in the audience the journey through which the piece has travelled, we re-imagine the silverware before its new life as a museum object. One of the interesting things about sonic art composition is that it is possible to listen to several pieces of music simultaneously without conflict between them. This capability is being integrated into the speaker and PDA designs and has raised some interesting problems of conflict between Sonic Art researchers and curatorial staff. While the first group would like to create an installation of sonic art composition, we the curators need to insist on the primacy of vision, and to maintain a balance between the three layers of interpretation; image, text and music. Accessibility issues are also at stake, and so a large screen will be situated between the cabinets to enable partially-sighted visitors to enjoy the display, and a video documenting the creation of a new silver commission by local silversmith Cara Murphy will also be accessible here. Interestingly, one of the soundscape commissions will respond to the conception and creation of Cara's piece. Not only the film maker, but also a sound artist will follow the process of making the piece in her workshop. One composer has proposed deriving the raw materials for his composition directly from the metalsmithing process: the pings of the hammer and anvil; the grinding of the saw and bit; the whoping of heat on cold. Firstly recording these sounds, then combining and editing them digitally, he will re-work the raw material to form an aural narrative.

It is hoped that when these sounds resonate through the historic Black and White Hall at Queen's from the mezzanine above, the display will not only attract visitors to the Gallery, but

also demonstrate the rich possibilities of inter-departmental collaboration and interdisciplinary initiatives in a University museum setting. Once the silverware collection has been re-imagined, perhaps other university collections of seemingly less interest or relevance to the university community and wider public can be re-housed to conservation standards at Queen's. To this end, having never had a purpose-built museum in the 19th Century will provide a clean platform for the university museum to realise a 21st Century display providing research returns for academic departments and adapting meaningfully to the pressures and needs of both the University and Museums worlds.