Pitt Rivers Museum Members Magazine

Winter 2025
Issue 115

£3
Free to
PRM
members

Pitt Rivers Museum

SOUTH PARKS ROAD, OXFORD, OX1 3PP

IN THIS ISSUE

Cover image: Leaders and Elders of the Ecuadorean Shuar Community visiting the PRM. See page 4. Photo © PRM

Museum Musings

Photo © Anthony Flemming

Following the death of Jane Goodall this summer her life has been much celebrated for her work on environmentalism, her feminism and above all for her work on chimpanzees. In 1960 Goodall famously first observed chimpanzees using tools; in response her mentor Louis Leakey opined: "Now we must redefine tool, redefine man, or accept chimpanzees as human". As it happened, tools remained tools, chimpanzees remained chimpanzees, and it was our definition - our sense of ourselves even - that changed. And that makes Goodall's contribution as important to the Pitt Rivers Museum as to our neighbours in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History next door. The more so, because Goodall went on to observe differences in tool-use among different chimp populations. Different social groups fashioned sticks to fish out termites in alternative ways, some groups used stones to open nuts while others did not. This was not driven by ecology (e.g. the availability of nuts or stones), but were learned behaviours passed from generation to generation, customary activities within specific social groupings. They were cultural differences. In these observations we glimpse the cognitive glimmerings that, in our own lineage, led to the contents of any and every cabinet in the PRM. Inevitably this challenged our tendency towards hubristic exceptionalism from the natural world and helped reshape our attitudes towards it – it is no accident that Goodall became a prominent environmentalist, rather a logical conclusion of her work. That said, much evolution lies between us and chimps: they do not have limited liability companies, football teams, smartphones, or museums. Indeed, walking under the gothic arch from the OUMNH to the PRM, you cannot take the view that we are no different to the animals. But through Goodall's work we recognised that these differences are not absolute, but a matter of evolutionary degree; we are firmly rooted in the natural world and not outside it.

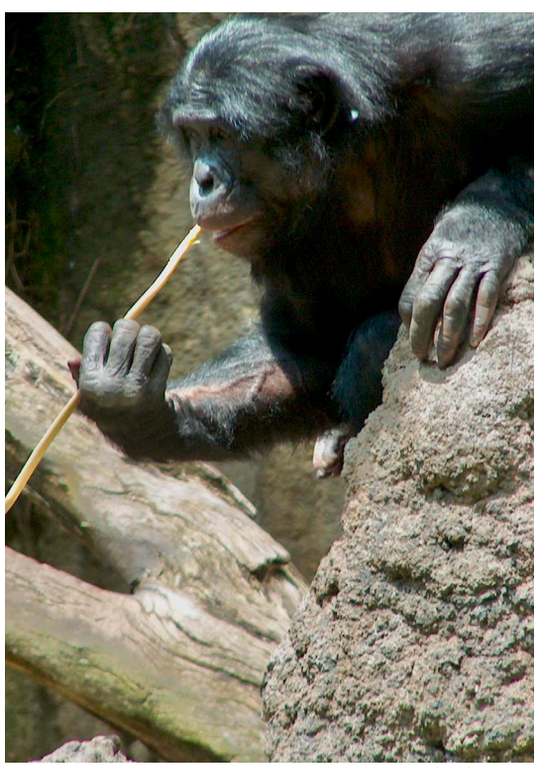


Photo: © Commons wikimedia.org

A Bonobo or Pygmy Chimpanzee using a twig as a tool to 'fish' for termites from a nest. San Diego Zoo, photo by Mike Richey.

Anthony Flemming, *Member*

Editorial

Photo © Dawn Osborne

Amidst apparent economic gloom it is heartening to document the PRM go from strength to strength! See the Director's report on Page 3 for record attendance figures and the PRM on the world stage as it engages with Indigenous peoples on issues of global importance. Specifically I was delighted to attend the event with the Shuar people recently (see my report on page 4) and many will have attended the Makereti event (see page 5) honouring an Indigenous woman.

For the ways in which Members could engage with the Museum over and above visiting see details on late night special events on crafting (see From The Museum page 3 and 8), purchasing a handcrafted item from our shop (see page 9) or participating in a workshop (see pages 10 and 12).

You will join me in giving thanks to the Oxford Museums for setting up the Collections Teaching and Research Centre to uniquely identify items and store them in ideal conditions for the benefit of us all (see page 6). It is also lovely to see the PRM lending objects so they get a wider audience (page 7).

Hopefully you are as interested as I am in seasonal folklore from other countries which is quite different from our own (page 11).

Thanks to all the authors, staff and Members who contribute to the content of the Magazine. At the moment we have people queuing up to contribute articles, but if you have any great ideas for articles please let me know.

Dawn Osborne, *Editor*

From the Director

Grace Nicau Chater singing.

The Museum has had an extraordinarily busy summer and start of the Michaelmas Term. Not only did we celebrate receiving our highest number of visitors ever for the academic year of 2024-2025 but also our highest visitor numbers on record for August (over 62000!).

There has also been a series of large-scale events and visits by both groups of Indigenous communities and individual scholars that showcase to our public the rich and varied outcomes of multi-year engagements with, among others, Naga, Shuar, and Maasai Indigenous leaders.

Of particular interest was a unique celebration of the work of Makereti Papakura who finally received her degree nearly 100 years after finishing her ground-breaking work on '*The Old-Time Māori*'. She passed away unexpectedly a few weeks before defending her work, which then (having been finalised by Anthropologist colleague Thomas Kenneth Penniman, later to be one of the PRM directors) became a classic reference work for anyone interested in Māori. It set the scene for Indigenous-led scholarship that we now all want to champion.

We are incredibly grateful to all the Indigenous leaders who work with us today in building new scholarship. They are incredibly generous in creating new opportunities for knowledge generation and for sharing their ideas towards deepening mutual understanding for our ever-growing number of visitors.

Laura Van Broekhoven, *Director*

The Director will be on sabbatical for the first 6 months of 2026 and Professor Christopher Morton, the Deputy Director, will be taking over. He is the Head of Curatorial, Research and Teaching at the PRM and Professor of Museum Anthropology at the University of Oxford. He plays a lead role in current PRM research and has worked closely with Indigenous communities from across Africa and from Australia and New Zealand in the curation and display of their material and visual heritage. We will look forward to his message in the next issue.

From the Museum

The Autumn leaves are very much falling as we enter our Autumn/Winter season here at the Museum. By the time you read this, hot on the step of all the amazing half-term activities, we will already have had our annual Autumnal Late Night. This year, it really has been full of wonder, with the theme of making and craft from around the world.

Even if you missed it, just pop into the Museum for some calm sparkle and respite and take a journey through the Collections. You might perhaps treat yourself or do some shopping in our shop which, quietly twinkling, has the most amazing new range of meaningful and affordable gifts. If you prefer excitement, do come over at the weekend when there really is the most wonderful buzzy atmosphere and always something for children to enjoy.

I have been reflecting that I have now been with the Museum 9 years and there are still so many things to learn and be surprised about. Each time I walk around the galleries, I find something I have never noticed before and am constantly in awe of the craft and skills of the many peoples from across our world whose artefacts fill our cases. My colleagues are immensely knowledgeable, whether working in the galleries or behind the scenes, and are always happy to share their knowledge. Remember that you can meet them at *'Behind the Scenes'* sessions (Members only and please book early).

Carved Pumpkin at the PRM

Do also look out for courses on craft and making coming your way over the winter months and join us at the PRM for some coffee mornings too. I really can't think of a better place to be at this time of year for being engaged, reflective, and inspired. Warmest wishes for the season.

Karrine Sanders, *PRM Senior Administrator*

Photos: © PRM

Re-thinking Shuar Objects in International Museums

Leaders and Elders of the Ecuadorean Shuar Community visited the PRM recently as part of a week long visit during which they were able to see tsantsas (shrunken heads) from the PRM, the Wellcome collection and the British Museum.

The PRM has 6 original human tsantsas which were taken off display in 2020 as it is a breach of international museum ethical codes to display human remains. As our director Professor Laura Van Broekhoven and Dr. Maria Patricia Ordoñez explained, tsantsas have been very little studied and certainly not with input from the Shuar. There are 300,000 Shuar in 7 provinces in Ecuador and different communities hold different priorities and views. The project has been able to study 72 human tsantsas in total, plus 7 animal tsantsas and has been exploring whether DNA testing and detailed CT-scanning can help identify whether tsantsa are original or non original, ceremonial or for trade, human or not and male or female. There are also discussions with the Shuar about the future of the tsantsas in museum collections worldwide and the project leaders have been approached by other museums who have tsantsas in their collections including from the USA, Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Leaders and Elders of the Ecuadorean Shuar Community visiting the PRM

Leaders and Elders of the Ecuadorean Shuar Community visiting discussing the objects at the PRM with the Director

A public event was held to which Museum Directors, academics, PRM Members and the Press were invited. Firstly, Sandro Yu (Elder) and Yadira Iza (leader) performed a traditional greeting wearing their regalia, which for Sandro included a feather crown, a beaded tiger chest piece and leopard print sarong. Sandro made forward motions with a spear decorated with tiny bird feathers from the PRM collection, while Yadira raised up a woven bowl in welcome. After this Yadira and Karrina Nanchi (leader) performed a traditional women's dance. From a sleeping position they raised up calabash bowls and made a shaking motion into them. They wore wide beaded neckpieces, cuffs, upper arm ornaments and belts, 'chakapa', from which many seeds were suspended making a rustling sound as they moved, and a loud noise as the dance ended with vigorous hip shaking and jumping. All visiting Shuar wore red face paint which they believe is necessary to be protected from tsantsas energy. It is also normal practice to spray infusions and inhale tobacco for similar protective reasons before looking at them.

The Shuar were concerned that their views are taken into account and their customs and traditions respected. They recognise that they are known for tsantsas which are iconic, but explained there was much more to their culture, including wisdom such as medicine used during the Covid 19 Pandemic that saved lives, when other people who went to hospitals died. The Shuar hoped that an agreement could be reached over the future of the tsantsas. They commented that the tsantsas had been looked after well, even if they have not been kept using traditional Shuar methods with rituals. The long tradition of shrinking heads is a sacred practice that only those trained and initiated can perform and included 2 years of ritual activities while wearing the tsantsa around the neck to make sure the person who had died remained in peace and tranquility and their relatives did not seek revenge. The Shuar no longer make tsantsas and commented that their enemies now were not people, but ignorance, climate change and a poor economy. They were also concerned not to be regarded as savages or killers, because they are not.

The future of the tsantsas will be discussed between all the Shuar. However, Sandro's personal opinion was that he would be happy for some of the tsantsa to remain in international museums so people of the world could know who the Shuar are and through voices of the Shuar understand their history. Santiago Utitiaj (Elder Academic) said the Shuar are a living culture and can exchange knowledge and wisdom with the world. The Amazon is the lungs of the world, and the Shuar look after the forest and biodiversity, but they need help and support, especially since, as Jefferson Pullaguari (leader) explained, the government and globalisation had taken away their land and resources. More than anything, they wanted people to speak up for them to enable financial projects and plans to save the Amazon jungle for the good of the whole world. Several of the Shuar, had dreams after use of hallucinogenics, that they would travel to other countries, meet their ancestors and the ancestors of those who had visited them long ago. They were very grateful that this had now come to pass.

Dawn Osborne, *Editor and Member*

Makereti: Celebrating Oxford's first female Indigenous scholar

Ngahuia te Awekotuku delivering a speech at the Makereti event at the PRM

Makereti was quite the person. Born to a Maori mother and English shopkeeper, she gained a reputation while still a teenager as a charming, quick-witted tourist guide, entertainer, and storyteller. Postcards of her in traditional dress became bestsellers.

An energetic leader, Makereti formed an Indigenous concert party, to create jobs for fellow Maori and promote their culture, in this country and abroad. In 1912 she married a wealthy Briton, who lived in Oddington, on Otmoor.

Divorced by the mid-1920s, she moved into Oxford. Ever the advocate of her people, she entertained students, scholars, and other guests with Maori stories, in a room of her house decorated with her many Indigenous items. In 1926, she enrolled as a Masters student at the Pitt Rivers, but died in 1930 three weeks before her viva.

An anthropologist friend loyally edited her thesis. '*The Old -Time Maori'* (1938) is remarkable for its focus on female life, then often ignored by ethnographers. It is perhaps the first scholarly account of a people by one of them, who moreover had bothered to take her manuscript back to her homeland, to check what she had written. Western anthropologists didn't trouble to do that then.

Though it was not reprinted for 48 years, Makereti was not forgotten. Besides her work with, and for, the Pitt Rivers, she was remembered in Oddington, where I lived my finals year, 1975-6. Several locals reminded me of her burial place in the parish churchyard, as well as the large Maori-decorated War Memorial inside, which she had commissioned, for Maori who had fought in World War One.

In 2023, the Oxford anthropologist Clare Harris formally petitioned the University that Makereti be awarded a posthumous MPhil. Even though there was no opposition to this proposal, the byzantine university procedures of Oxford ensured it still took two years before official approval.

On 27th September 2025 that award was magnificently celebrated in a series of events in Oxford, attended by, among others, 115 Maori, many of them descendants of Makereti's family. At the Pitt Rivers' event, the speakers were Clare Harris; Ngahuia te Awekotuku, Maori scholar and activist, and descendant of Makereti; Laura Van Broekhoven, Director of the Pitt Rivers; and Irene Tracy, Vice-Chancellor of the University, while Nicau Grace Chater sang, beautifully.

Official events are usually all-too stiff affairs, with speakers unable to break loose from a near-oppressive formality. Not this occasion. Speaker after speaker expressed joy and happiness at the cause of the celebration. Tracy called it "one of the sublime moments in my job. . . the start of a continuing conversation".

The emotion was palpable. We heard cracks in otherwise fluent speeches, saw tears abseil from eyes, as usually imperturbable speakers became visibly agitated. Kin and other Maori hooted and cheered at comments from the Maori speakers. Many rose from chairs to express their delight at their compatriots' spoken and sung words. Some broke into their own Maori 'action song' '*waiata-ã-vinga*'.

Ngahuia te Awekotuku spoke of her "gratitude, disbelief, pleasure, pride, and anger" for the honour being paid, however belated, to her forebear. Feelings were running so high that her speech ended with several Maori women spontaneously joining her upfront, to perform an 'activity dance' '*mõteatea*'. Many who were seated stood up, to vigorously accompany them in their own way. When had the Pitt Rivers seen the like!

In all, this brief but impassioned event was yet another powerful demonstration of how deeply meaningful encounters in the Museum, of contemporary indigenes with their ancestry can be. It is also a reminder how highly the Pitt Rivers is regarded outside Oxford, even as far distant as New Zealand.

Long live the memory and example of Makereti.

Jeremy MacClancy, *MCR, Wolfson College, Oxford*

Photo: © PRM

Underground storage: The new Collections Teaching and Research Centre (CTRC)

Photo: © fjc studios

Fig. 1. A diagram showing the location and design of the CTRC. Lift access is through the cube on the right.

Collections Teaching and Research Centre (CTRC), Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums, Oxford, November 2023. Photo © Ian Wallman

Next time you walk up the steps to the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, glance right. Against the distant wall of the new Reuben College, you will see a large glass cube (Fig. 1). It houses a lift (3x2m in area and 2m high) that will be used to move the research collections of the four university museums (Ashmolean, Natural History, History of Science and Pitt Rivers) into the new CTRC. The person responsible for organising the move is Tom Boggis, and I recently met him to ask how it was all going.

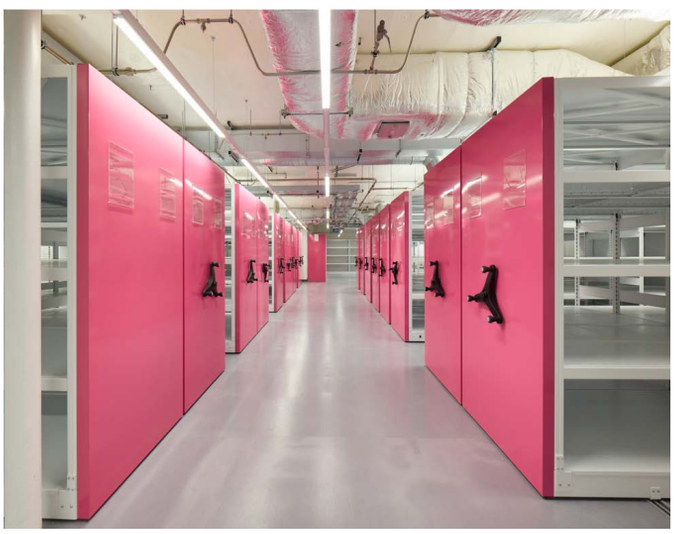


Fig. 2. A view down a main CTRC corridor showing the unfilled storage cabinets.

Why do we need the CTRC?

The four museums currently store their research collections (i.e. those not on display) in about 10 different sites across Oxfordshire and in Swindon so that access for teaching and research is limited. The University started planning some years ago to create the CTRC in central Oxford to house these collections and make them more accessible. Its entry will be in the old Radcliffe Science Library and it occupies the two floors of archive space under the front lawn, a space that extends past the museum entrance (Fig.1).

How much will the CTRC hold?

There is over 3,000 square metres of object storage (Fig. 2), plus conservation, digitisation and study spaces - it is large! The collections moving to the CTRC will be those particularly used for research and teaching. Very large objects that won't fit in the lift, together with extensive collections (e.g. the PRM's set of spears) from the four museums will all be housed in a new extension to the Bodleian's Book Storage Facility in Swindon.

How much of this storage is for the PRM?

Around one third of the CTRC space is allocated to the PRM (for around 80,000 objects), more than for any of the other museums. There will also be a section of the upper floor for the Pitt Rivers and Ashmolean textile collections. This will have racks of shelves for boxed items and racks of rollers for rolled fabrics. To ensure proper care of the collections, temperature and humidity throughout the CTRC will be closely controlled to be at optimum levels.

How will the museums keep track of everything?

The Collections Management Systems now in use at the four museums will continue to be used to log the location of objects housed in the CTRC. Each shelf, bay and rack in the CTRC has a unique identifier which is then recorded in the database entry for the objects located there.

Is the space big enough for the collections?

The allocation and fit-out of space at the CTRC have been carefully planned to accommodate the objects that each museum will be moving there. Across the combined new facilities (the CTRC in Oxofrd and the Collections Storage facility in Swindon) there has been an allocation of space to allow for future growth of the collections.

How will stored items be accessed and used?

The CTRC will be open to students, staff and external researchers, for whom objects will be produced on request. As it offers access to a wide variety of collections in a single space, the CTRC will become a hub for interdisciplinary research.

I also asked Tom how he came to be involved with the project. He told me that he first worked as a curator and later in managing a number of capital projects involving collections for the National Trust, English Heritage and the Royal Household. His final comment was "The CTRC project has involved a large team of project managers and collections assistants working over a number of years. It will be very satisfying for everyone as the new Centre starts to fill and prepares for its 2026 opening."

Jonathan Bard, *Member*

Storytelling as Masking: Ioan of PRM masks to Compton Verney Exhibition

1

2

3

4

5

Some of the PRM's extensive collection of masks on loan to the Compton Verney exhibition. 1. Roughly carved Italian mask; 2. Wooden forehead mask representing a diviner with a shaved head and pigtail, Southwestern Nigeria; 3. Forehead mask with human and animal features, Nigeria; 4. Headdress mask, a carved and painted fish on a wicker base, Niger Delta; 5. Mexican carved wooden mask of a leopard with horsehair eyebrows and whiskers.

"Let me tell you a story to make you feel a little better".

This quotation from *'The Golden Ass'* by the 2nd century Roman poet Apuleius greets the visitor at the start of the fascinating exhibition, *'The Shelter of Stories'*, at Compton Verney, curated by the author Marina Warner. It illustrates the power of stories to draw the reader or listener into another world where current troubles can be left behind, or new ones, not one's own, experienced. Stories pass on wisdom and tradition down the generations and consolidate a sense of belonging to a family or group.

The exhibition shows that storytelling, one of the most ancient and ubiquitous of human behaviours, can be so much more than mere words if it is enriched by visual illustration such as pictures, puppets and masks, and by sound, including the use of song and musical instruments. It can be communicated through pantomime, opera, dance, games and toys as well as the simplicity of the storyteller's voice portraying different characters.

Mask-wearers and storytellers resemble each other in that both assume a new personality, drawing the observer or listener into a new mental space. Together with a whole-body costume and movements, masking can project a benevolent or malevolent persona (the Latin word *'persona'* means mask), generating reactions ranging from a sense of well-being to terror. At the same time as hiding an individual's identity, masking can portray a meaning that is clearly understood and experienced by the observers: consider the fear-provoking parades of the Ku Klux Klan in the Southern USA.

Ceremonial masking, for a religious ritual or a formal masquerade, is typically associated with a related full body costume, although the masks themselves do not always cover the face. The masks shown above include headdress and forehead masks, which leave the features visible when worn as designed. Crowns and mitres, worn together with the regalia of kings and queens or the vestments of priests, are essentially headdress masks.

It is not necessary for a mask to be artistically sophisticated to fulfil its function. The roughly carved, unpainted and understated Italian mask shown above (Fig. 1) was made for wearing at a carnival (masquerade) but afterwards placed over a stable door to protect the hay from thieves! In contrast, eyes can be a prominent part of a mask, bringing it powerfully to life and dominating its emotional effect. This is clear in the wooden forehead mask (Fig. 2), in which the eyes are enlarged, projecting, and white within the predominantly black surface. Isolated images of eyes can act in the same way: many years ago, I was invited by the guardians of a prehistoric once-inhabited cave in the Pyrenees; sliding down the steep, narrow entrance tunnel, I was immediately confronted by the painted image of an enlarged eye, a clear warning symbol against trespass.

Animals are a vital feature of human survival, serving as sources of food, danger and companionship; they are portrayed in several of the masks on display (Figs. 3-5). The belief that gods can take the form of an animal gives the wearer of an animal mask access to the inherent spiritual power of the animal portrayed by it, enabling him/her to frighten adversaries or soothe fears as appropriate. The imagination of storytelling also merges animals and people, as when animals speak, are revealed to be a transformed human, or are hybrids like mermaids.

Finally, consider the French words '*maquillage*' and '*maquiller*'. The meanings include make-up, to disguise and to falsify. These meanings apply equally to altering our appearance with masks or cosmetics and to telling stories.

Gillian Morriss-Kay, *Member*

Multaka Crafting event

Photo: © PRM

A new display on the first floor gallery is the co-curated case *'With These Hands: Crafting a Shared Humanity'*

With These Hands: Crafting a Shared Humanity'. A new trail has launched in the galleries!

Early November saw the launch of a new display and trail around the Pitt Rivers Galleries. Starting on the first floor gallery is the co-curated case *'With These Hands: Crafting a Shared Humanity'* which invites you to marvel and reflect on communities from across the globe and how they have shared approaches to crafting and using objects in our daily lives. From stunning textiles to harvest trophies, the trail takes you on a journey around the Museum to connect with how objects not only hold pragmatic uses, but can also demonstrate a profound heritage, linking us with generations that came before us.

The launch event on November 7th was a vibrant celebration welcoming over 1000 members of the public. Volunteers took centre stage and planned activities and music that represented the wide diversity of the MultakaOxford project, but also actively engaged the public with food tasting, craft activities and music, representing countries from South East Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

The case was co-curated by volunteers and staff of the multi-award winning MultakaOxford project which started in 2017 and has worked with over 300 volunteers, engaging with 22,000 people in person and over 4 million digitally. With its person and community-led approaches, it is sector-leading both nationally and internationally. The new display demonstrates how museums have unique roles within our society as places of welcome, belonging and placemaking. The objects within the display hold profound meanings for people.

Objects tell human stories

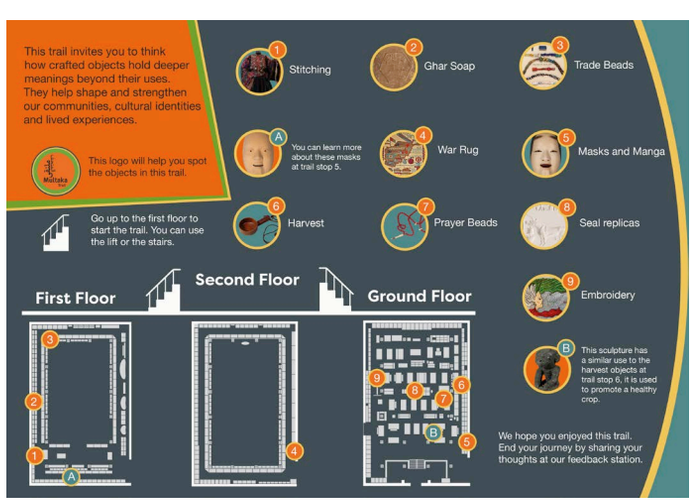
They speak of hardship and dignity, of celebration and resistance

MultakaOxford focuses on the care and social impact of its work and as you visit the trail and display, we hope you get a glimpse of the joy that working inter-culturally brings to the people, communities and organisations involved.

Nicola Bird *Employee at PRM and History of Science Museum and Project Manager, MultakaOxford*

"*Words cannot express my happiness and pride in getting to know such wonderful people who embody values, acceptance, and kindness - like you and the entire Multaka team and volunteers. Truly, you have become my second home.*"

Marwa, *MultakaOxford volunteer*



All images: © PRM

PRM Leaflet explaining the new display and trail starting on the first floor gallery. *'With These Hands: Crafting a Shared Humanity'*

Pots from Oxford Kilns: Available in the PRM Shop

The Oxford Kilns project is a research initiative exploring how woodfiring can generate knowledge as well as beauty. The kilns at Wytham Woods are both studio and laboratory, where we test different kiln designs, fuels, and firing rhythms to understand how flame creates form. Each pot is part of that inquiry: evidence of a conversation between material, fire, and human judgement. Proceeds from sales support the continuation of this research and the next generation of woodfirers.

Lisa Sjukur and Nessa Grimes of Oxford Kilns firing the anagama (穴窯) kiln at Wytham Woods.

A tea caddy or chaire (茶入) with a crackle glazed shino glaze freshly unloaded and still hot from the Oxford Kilns at Wytham Woods.

Tea or sake cups (also perfect for espresso) known as yunomi (湯のみ) fresh from the woodfired kilns at Oxford's Wytham Woods.

A woodfired Sencha teaset from Oxford Kilns, comprising teapot, tea caddy, and two small tea cups known to the Japanese as yunomi (湯のみ)

Each pot from the Oxford Kilns is a one-off, shaped by hand, then transformed by fire. No two pieces ever come out alike: flame, ash and heat leave their own unpredictable marks, creating surfaces that cannot be repeated. Each pot carries the story of its firing: the days and nights of tending the kiln, the wood that fed it, the place where it stood in the fire's path. The surfaces you see were not painted but grown in the fire itself: natural ash melts into glass, flame traces its path, and subtle variations appear that no maker can predict or repeat. These marks are not decoration; they are history; the record of an event that happened once, and will never happen again.

To hold one is to hold that history: a record of skill, chance and time. These are not factory ceramics; they are living, durable pieces meant to be used and enjoyed. They make thoughtful gifts because they feel personal: each one chosen for its individuality, each one quietly revealing the beauty of work, material and fire.

The project operates several kiln types: large anagama-style tunnels, a small anagama, and fast-fire installations, to explore material outcomes across different firing logics. Each kiln is a living apparatus: its walls record the fire, its chambers hold gradients of temperature, and its openings channel flame and ash to the pots within. By varying the load, the placement of pots, the wood chosen and the rhythm of stoking, we treat the kiln as a variable in an experimental system rather than a single recipe to be copied.

What matters to us is trace: the way a pot's skin testifies to the conditions it endured. We pair systematic thermocouple records and ten years of firing data with photographic documentation and interviews with potters. This triangulation lets us say not only what a pot looks like, but why it looks that way, which parts were exposed to direct flame, where ash accumulated and vitrified, which surfaces are the product of rapid cooling or prolonged ember contact. That evidence is the core of our academic outputs and the practical knowledge we hand to makers.

Visitors often ask: what sells a woodfired pot? The answer is practical as well as aesthetic. A successful pot makes its process legible without obscuring its utility. People respond to surfaces that feel honest, textures that invite touch, a balance of unpredictability and formal restraint, evidence of flame and ash that reads as accidental yet controlled. Provenance matters: pots that carry a clear story of place, maker and firing become objects of attention. Durability and function are part of the appeal too, a bowl that takes tea well, a jug that pours cleanly, a cup that sits comfortably in the hand. In short, people buy pots that combine the sensuous record of fire with competent making.

Public engagement is central. We curate handling sessions and termly open days where pots are taken from display and used, talked about and tested. These moments do research work: handling reveals weight, balance and surface in ways a photograph cannot; conversation surfaces tacit knowledge and sparks new experiments. We also work with historical comparisons, notably medieval Japanese kiln traditions to situate our practice in longer stories of technology and taste.

The Oxford Kilns project is therefore not nostalgia for a pre-industrial past, nor simple celebration of randomness. It is an applied inquiry into how materials remember process, how making can be a form of research, and how tactile objects can carry scholarly narratives into public life. The pots we show and loan are evidence: material arguments about craft, contingency and the slow intelligence of fire.

Dr Robin Wilson,
Department of Archaeology, University of Oxford.

Amulets, Charms and Witch Bottles: Reflections on engaging with Pagans for objects-based research using the Pitt Rivers Museum folklore collections

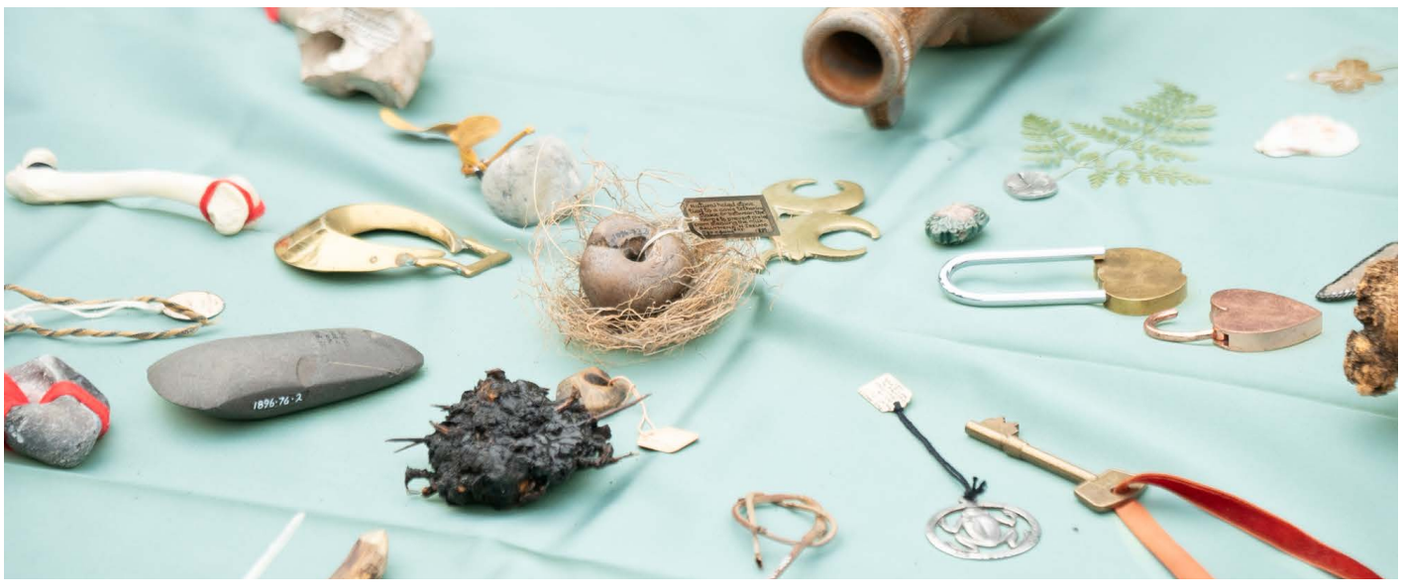


Photo: Hanna-Katrina Jędrosz

Cyanotype in progress.

Objects connected with historic British, European and global magical and spiritual practices have formed a significant part of the Pitt Rivers collections and curatorial focus since the Museum's founding, and still do. In January 2024, archaeologist Nigel Jeffries (MOLA) (Museum of London Archaeology) and museum curator Tom Crowley (Gunnersbury Park Museum) led a two-day workshop at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. The key focus was upon these collections, such as charms, amulets, talismans and witch bottles from British folk magic traditions, and how these collections in the Pitt Rivers (and other museums) were perceived by members of the Pagan / contemporary spiritually invested community.

An important aspect of the workshop was to start a conversation between Pagans, archaeologists, academics and the museum sector. The evaluated workshop was co-designed by this community, and took into consideration issues of ethics, access and interpretation, as well as considering best practice concerning the role of the museum in displaying and collecting Pagan material culture.

Pagans seek inspiration in literature, art, history and importantly - museums - to explore their own beliefs and inform their devotional and ritual practices, and thanks to the generosity of Pitt Rivers staff Faye Belsey and Bryony Smerdon - who were present throughout and a key part in the design of the project - were able to use folk magic motifs from the Pitt Rivers collections to explore contemporary responses. We explored amulets, witch bottles, hag stones and a bull's heart pierced with nails that was retrieved from a chimney at Shutes Hill Farm, Somerset. Other creative sessions explored themes of sub-creation (secondary worlds created by artists that are mirrors and reflect meaning in the real world) and the interconnectedness of art, play, and magic; and others knot-magic, chanting, and the creation of hag-stone, key, and spirit bottle charms. The topics and issues explored over the workshop sessions were multi-faceted and can only be touched upon here: they took the form of reflective and responsive gallery tours and considering display, design, labelling and curation.

Participants also spent time looking at objects and how relevant catalogue entries are created and managed, and this led to discussions of how knowledge is recorded and/or excluded. Catalogues were seen by the Pagans in the group as sites of inspiration: the level of detail in a good catalogue entry, it was observed, could lead to countless possibilities for further research, artistic responses and spiritual enrichment.

In essence, the project looked at how the Pitt Rivers and other museums with folklore collections engage with the keen museum-going Pagan community. In the summer of 2024, the project team of Nigel, Tom, and partners Sarah-Jane Harknett (Evaluation Associate at University of Cambridge Museums), Dr. Christine Oakley-Harrington (founder of Treadwell's bookshop in London), Dr. Kirsty Ryder, and Dr. Peter Hewitt (Folklore Museums Network), held a 'wrap event' at Treadwell's bookshop. Here and with a network with an invited audience, the participants presented their creative outcomes and reflections including poetry, showing of a short film made by Acapmedia (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aHMc2gFu4A) and the display of a photographic collage using items from the collections and objects invested with personal spiritual significance. Subsequent outputs have included blogs which include the evaluation report and poetry (https://www.mola.org.uk/get-involved/iaa-grants/partnerships-grants/amulets-charms-and-witch-bottles), and written pieces for the Folklore Society, Museums Journal and the Social History Curators Group newsletter (2024, Issue 92, 24–5).

'Amulets, charms, and witch bottles: Thinking about 'magical' objects in museum collections through collaborative interaction between academics and curators with Pagans, witchcraft practitioners and other communities with spiritual investment' is a MOLA Impact Acceleration Account project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/X003523/1). https://www.mola.org.uk/

get-involved/iaa-grants/partnerships-grants/amulets-charms-and-witch-bottles

Joint authorship of project partners: T. Crowley, S.J. Harknett, P. Hewitt, N. Jeffries, C. Oakley Harrington and K. Ryder.

Nigel Jeffries MCIfA & FSA,
Team Leader Ceramics, MOLA

From Trolls to Treats: The Cultural Evolution of Iceland's Yule Lads – Childhood Discipline, Festive Practice, and Shifting Identity in Icelandic Folklore

Image: Source, The Yule Lads-Artist Unknown - Widowcranky

A 19th century Christmas card showing the Yule Lads

Christmas is upon us once again, peak season for all those mythical creatures that have been waiting in the shadows since last year's festivities. The Icelandic Yule Lads ('*Jólasveinar'*), first mentioned by name in the 17th-century *'Poems of Grýla'*, are a treasured part of Icelandic Christmas folklore. Unlike the single figure of Father Christmas in other cultures, Iceland has no fewer than thirteen Yule Lads who take turns sneaking into your house at night during the Advent season.

Origins and Evolution

In their earliest descriptions, they bore no resemblance to the playful gift-bringers of today. The Icelandic folklorist Jón Árnason depicted them as evil ogres with a penchant for snatching sleeping children and wrote cautionary tales to promote good behaviour during a season when family survival relied on discipline and cooperation.

According to tradition, the Yule Lads are part of a fearsome mountain-dwelling family that includes the dreaded giantess Grýla (first mentioned in the 13th-century *'Íslendinga saga'*), who searches for disobedient children to cook, and her lazy husband Leppalúði. Their pet, the Yule Cat ('*Jólakötturinn*'), roams the countryside looking for anyone who has failed to get new clothes before Christmas Eve to eat.

Icelandic children spent generations hiding beneath their blankets in fear of these visitors, even though the authorities attempted to curb the terror. In 1746, parents were officially forbidden from using the Yule Lads as threats to frighten children into behaving, but the ban had no effect.

As the country modernised at the start of the twentieth century, the Yule Lads transformed from threats to comical figures. Their rough edges were softened through modern children's stories, festive songs, and the joyful cheer of Christmas marketing. Whilst they once frightened children into obedience they now bring small presents in shoes showing that even mountain monsters can undergo a warm seasonal change.

Who Are the Lads?

Each Yule Lad arrives one at a time, each on their allocated night starting from December 12th until Christmas Eve. Here's a brief overview of their qualities and tasks, in case you wonder which one might have caused mischief in your home.

'*Stekkjastaur*' (Sheep-Cote Clod) – Taunts sheep but is unable to do any physical harm due to stiffness in his legs.

'*Giljagaur*' (Gully Gawk) – Steals milk from the cows on the farms.

'*Stúfur*' (Stubby) – Steals pans with leftovers in them.

'*Þvörusleikir*' (Spoon-Licker) – Licks spoons, and does not get enough food and is therefore very skinny.

'*Pottaskefill*' (Pot-Scraper) – Eats the crusts from dirty pots.

'*Askasleikir*' (Bowl-Licker) – Hides under the beds and licks people's empty food bowls.

'*Hurðaskellir*' (Door-Slammer) – Wakes people up at night by slamming doors.

'*Skyrgámur*' (Skyr-Gobbler) – Obsessed with eating skyr (a traditional cultured dairy product).

'*Bjúgnakrækir*' (Sausage-Swiper) – He steals sausages.

'*Gluggagægir*' (Window-Peeper) – Peeks through windows.

'*Gáttaþefur*' (Doorway-Sniffer) – Has a huge nose and sniffs out bread.

'*Ketkrókur*' (Meat-Hook) – Uses a hook to steal meat.

'*Kertasníkir*' (Candle-Stealer) – Follows children to steal their candles.

Modern Celebrations

So today, Icelandic children put a shoe on their windowsill every night from December 12th. If they have behaved well, each night the nominated Yule Lad will leave a treat in the shoe. If not, they will find a rotten potato.

The Yule Lads have become cultural icons in Iceland. They feature in decorations, children's books, and public events. Public celebrations always depict the brothers in bright colours, and their once fearsome mother, Grýla, is now more likely to appear at a Christmas market than in your doorway with a sack full of screaming child victims.

However, some aspects of their dark origins remain: their attachment to food, barns, and kitchens connects them to a past in which survival depended on rationing and well-stocked stores. Their place within Icelandic culture exemplifies how folklore constantly evolves and how mythical beings can assume new roles. The Yule Lads continue to straddle the line between fear and delight, carrying with them a glimpse of the lessons of Christmas past.

If you would like to know more about the Icelandic Yule Lads, scan this QR code and enjoy!

Source: Extra History, YouTube: @extrahistory; https://www.youtube.com/@extrahistory/videos, retrieved October 28th, 2025.

Lena Schattenherz Heide-Brennand,
Lecturer, Østfold University, Norway

Pitt Rivers Museum Winter 2025

INFORMATION SHEET

The Members' Magazine is published three times a year

INFORMATION

Members

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/members
General Information: Callum Collett membership@prm.ox.ac.uk
Programme: membership@prm.ox.ac.uk
President of Members of Pitt Rivers: Professor Chris Gosden
Patrons of Members of Pitt Rivers: Alexander Armstrong, Danby Bloch, Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe, Dame Penelope Lively, Layla Moran MP, Sir Michael Palin, Sir Philip Pullman.

Museum

Pitt Rivers Museum, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PP
01865 613000
www.prm.ox.ac.uk/members
Email: prm@prm.ox.ac.uk
Open: Tuesday-Sunday 10.00 - 17.00
Monday 12.00- 17.00
Admission FREE.
For details of all current & forthcoming events & exhibitions, see www.prm.ox.ac.uk/events
Refreshments. The Horsebox Coffee Company on the lawn is open from 9.00 - 17.00 daily, serving hot and cold drinks and homemade cakes. With delicious locally roasted coffee, scrumptious brownies, flapjacks and cookies, the Horsebox Café is the perfect place for a coffee break!
All museum events: **www.prm.ox.ac.uk/events**

Magazine

Editor: Dawn Osborne
dawnosborne@btopenworld.com
Design: Juliet Eccles
Printer: Parchments
Kingston Business Park, H4&H5, Kingston Bagpuize, Abingdon OX13 5FB
www.parchmentuk.com
The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Museum. All contributors to the Magazine are Members unless otherwise stated.

Membership

Membership: 01865 613000 membership@prm.ox.ac.uk
Annual Subscription: £36 (Joint: £50); Student: £20 (18-25, in full time education). Life £500 (Joint £750) Benefits: Priority booking for Museum events and courses, Private views, Behind the scenes visits. Members only: Shop 10% discounts, Members' Magazine posted to you three times a year, Members' lecture series.

MUSEUM DIARY DATES

We look forward to welcoming you to the galleries, exhibitions and events.

Exhibitions and case displays

Photographic display on the Upper gallery till 25 January 2026
'Suturing Wounds'

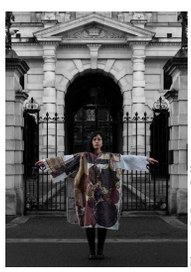


Photo: © Sara Sallam

Sara Sallam

In *'Suturing Wounds'*, Egyptian artist Sara Sallam transforms fragmented histories into a tactile encounter. Presented as a photographic installation at the Pitt Rivers Museum during *'Photo Oxford'*, the work features a series of self-portraits in which Sallam wears a tunic made from facsimiles of late antique Egyptian textile fragments.

New Gallery Trail:
'With These Hands: Crafting a Shared Humanity'

Through the objects chosen and the stories told, you are invited to learn more about the way we craft and make in different cultures. Objects and storytelling enabling us to engage in shared experiences, emotions and ideas.


Photo: © PRM

Marriage cap with lira coins, 20th Century, Palestine. Accession number: 1952.5.86

Lower Gallery
The Kingdom of Benin


Photo: © PRM

Illustrations based on historical sources by Uwagbale Edward-Ekpu and Onaolapo Rilwan Ayomide.

The Benin kingdom, also known as Edo, was founded around 900 CE. It was one of the most important kingdoms in West Africa, located in present-day Edo State, Nigeria. Its densely populated capital, Benin City, was located at the heart of an extensive trade network for cloth, pepper, ivory, and salt which moved across West and Central Africa and the Atlantic Ocean.

MEMBERS' DIARY DATES

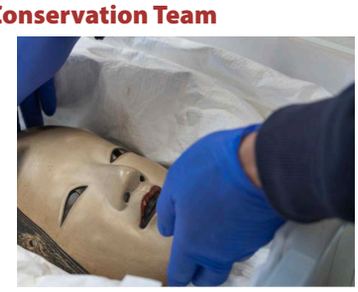
2026

Saturday 31 January 10.00 - 16.30
Passementerie: Tassel Making Workshop

Examples of Tassels

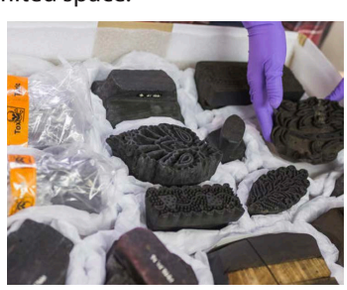
Step into the world of Elizabeth Ashdown, one the UK's last remaining Passementerie makers. Officially classified as an 'endangered' craft in the UK, making this an extraordinary opportunity. Working with traditional hand-making techniques, learn how to make these wonderful tassels and adornments for your home.

Thursday 12 February
10.00 - 11.00 & 11.30 - 12.30
Behind the Scenes with the Conservation Team



A mask with the conservation team

Come behind the scenes and meet the Conservation team at the Pitt Rivers Museum!
In this session you will be invited into the Museum's Conservation Laboratory to see what the team are currently working on. See objects up close and hear how our conservators use a variety of techniques to stabilise, preserve and slow down the deterioration of ethnographic objects. Exclusive Members' event. Free but booking required due to limited space.



Wooden printing blocks

Photos: © PRM