

Programming beyond the Heteronormative

Welcoming the LGBTQ+ Community

Kim Gough and Chris O'Connor

Museums are powerful places. They have influence; they are not neutral. Museums have a responsibility to do better: they must be inclusive, and they must be a venue for diverse voices.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that stories of LGBTQ+* communities are painfully under-represented in museums. Organizations such as the LGBTQ Alliance and the Queering the Museum Project have been working to develop strategies on how to make a more inclusive museum experience, but their work has been slow to catch on. In the Learning Department at the Royal BC Museum, we strive to amplify the voices of historically marginalized communities—and to do so responsibly and in collaboration with these communities. Our most recent homegrown exhibition gave us opportunities to do just that.

In the summer of 2017, the Royal BC Museum opened a feature exhibition called *Family: Bonds and*



Belonging. During the public consultation phase of the exhibition planning, LGBTQ+ community members were invited to take part in a multistage focus group. The focus group engaged in facilitated discussions early in the planning process, and later reviewed proposed text and story inclusions. As a result, meaningful stories and objects that otherwise might not have been included were integrated into the feature exhibition. This helped to create a more inclusive and full-some definition of family.

Our aim was to create a space where all participants felt their voices were heard and valued, and where people were given permission to hear and absorb multiple perspectives.

Above: Looking for representation in the *Family: Bonds and Belonging* feature exhibition. Photo credit: Royal BC Museum

In July 2017, during the run of the exhibition, we marked *Queer Museum Day* and local Pride celebrations by hosting two events in collaboration with the LGBTQ+ community. The first was a discussion in our *It's Complicated* series, which is free and open to the public, on gender; the other was a ticketed *Museum Happy Hour* event called *Pride*.

It's Complicated began as a monthly participatory discussion series, created to accompany the Family exhibition. Each month, we tackled a new theme with significance to families—we chose complex issues that deserve some collective unpacking. By far the most popular discussion was the one on gender. We had more than 60 people show up, both youth and adults—many from the trans community but also many who were just curious about the changing landscape of gender. Four invited guests provided their own perspectives, representing no one but themselves. After each guest's perspective, small groups met to consider the ideas presented. It was a powerful and dynamic discussion. Our aim was to create a space where all participants felt their voices were heard and valued, and where people were given permission to hear and absorb multiple perspectives. One participant shared the following after the event:

Thank you for an amazing evening. I appreciated the thought and sensitivity that went into the planning and

the courage of the presenters and speakers throughout the evening. I've been struggling with family and my own journey continues to unfurl. It's like a breath of fresh air to sit with community and hear other perspectives and personal journeys.

Open, participatory discussion events like this one allow the museum to extend beyond its physical space—to become more than just a place for display, and to transform into a container for safe exchange of ideas.

In addition to inviting participants to update the list, we hosted some playful debates around the changing landscape of how the LGBTQ+ community finds connection now.

Museum Happy Hour is a ticketed evening event for adults. Each night is themed and hosted in a particular space within the museum galleries. Planning for the Pride-themed event started by looking through our *Becoming BC* history gallery for stories of the LGBTQ+ community. The only explicit inclusion found in our core gallery was a single photograph and sentence about Gay Pride in Vancouver in the 1990s. Our colleague Genevieve Weber, an

Archivist at the BC Archives, helped us locate some interesting documents including a pamphlet from 1970 titled *A Gay Guide* from 1970 and a 1980 radio feature by Saralee James on the Coronation Ball by Saralee James and Don Mowatt (BC Archives T4303:0261) about drag culture in Vancouver in the 1980s.

A Gay Guide was written by an anonymous gay man living in BC who wanted to help other homosexuals "... who know nothing about how to find other homosexual people." For the event, we enlarged a few pages of the document, printed them and hung them on the wall during the event for visitors to look at more closely. One page that received a lot of interest was a list of cruising places from around BC. In addition to inviting participants to update the list, we hosted some playful debates around the changing landscape of how the LGBTQ+ community finds connection now.

The Coronation Ball radio piece was produced for the CBC in 1980. The story featured interviews with drag queens about drag culture and the role of the Coronation Ball in the queer community in Vancouver and beyond. With permission from the CBC, we played the audio and supplemented it with photographs from Coronation Balls over the years. To present a contemporary view of drag culture, we invited a drag queen and a drag king to come to the event and host a discussion while they got into their drag personas. Henrietta



Right: *The Klezbians playing during Happy Hour Pride*
Photo credit: Royal BC Museum

Below: *Sharing LGBTQ+ histories on the Pride Stage.*
Photo credit: Royal BC Museum



Dubét and Persi Flage, Ms. and Mr. Gay Vancouver Island 2016, shared their stories about how drag culture has changed and how it has affected them personally.

In an effort to provide a platform for as many voices as possible, an open stage was set up for people who wanted to discuss or address an issue. In addition, we had three speakers scheduled throughout the event. Dr. Aaron Devor from the University of Victoria's Transgendered Archive gave an overview of the archive and some of the interesting personalities it represents. University student Barbara Clerihue spoke about researching the history of John Butt, a young town crier in Victoria in the 1860s who was charged with sodomy for which he could have been hanged. The remarkable story of his acquittal was turned into a student musical, *A Queer Trial*. Victoria City Councillor Marianne Alto was scheduled to discuss her experience of the shifting attitudes as an out lesbian in public office, but unfortunately, duty called and she had to cancel.

It wouldn't be a Pride event without music, so the Klezbians, a band of unruly, chutzpah-licious musicians from the Isle of Klezbos (aka Victoria) performed on the streets of Old Town.

Whether looking at *A Gay Guide*, hearing previously untold stories of the transgender community or playfully inserting themselves into

our Century Hall exhibit through dress-up, photographs and stories as part of our "Gay History Hack", participants expressed their delight at seeing themselves represented in the museum. A middle-aged participant sought us out at the end of the night because they wanted to shake our hands and thank us. "I never thought I would see a museum do this in my lifetime," they told us as they left with their partner.

When individuals who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community do not see themselves or their lives reflected in representations of history, it can be hurtful. But heteronormative narratives are also disingenuous: they prevent us from arriving at a more complete understanding of our histories. By making inclusion a priority, museums have the potential to share these histories and uncover a more complex narrative.

** LGBTQ+ is commonly used as shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified individuals. Q stands for both queer and questioning. The + is intended to be inclusive to those that identify beyond defined notions of gender and sexuality.*

To Learn More:

- Museums Next: How Museums Can Build Collaborations with LGBTQ Communities. www.museumnext.com/insight/how-museums-can-build-collaborations-with-lgbtq-communities/
- LGBTQ Alliance: American Alliance

of Museums. www.aam-us.org/resources/professional-networks/lgbtq

- LGBTQ Alliance's Welcoming Guidelines for Museums indd.adobe.com/view/b3e67357-2f62-4809-b757-17813aadeb13
- Museums and LGBTQ: An Analysis of How Museums and Other Exhibitors Can Highlight Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Perspectives -www.kulturradet.se/Documents/Hbtq/MUSEUMS%20AND%20LGBTQ.pdf

Kim Gough has worked in museum education for twenty years and has a Master of Museum Education from the University of British Columbia. Her work for the Royal BC Museum has recently focused on outreach and creating informal learning opportunities for adults. Kim and her wife Heather have lived in Victoria for ten years.



Chris O'Connor is a Program Developer in the Learning Department at the Royal BC Museum, with a focus on on-site learning initiatives. His particular interest is in fostering an active and inclusive environment for visitors to experience the museum exhibits and collections in innovative ways. Chris and his partner Jenny are raising Asa, their 12 year old non-binary kid, in the beautiful city of Victoria.

