

Many of us want to know more about the objects that we own, perhaps a vase or a painting handed down by a relative, or something that we bid for on eBay or found in a charity shop. We might like to know the story of how it was made, where

and by whom and, just like the punchline in 'Antiques Roadshow', we particularly like to know about value, both monetary value but also the status of the object measured in other ways such as rarity.

People have brought their possessions to the museum for decades, in order to find out more about them from the curators. When artists Tracey Rowledge and David Clarke arrived at Tunbridge Wells Museum & Art Gallery to start their residency, they came across boxes of "Unclaimed Enquiries"

in the museum archive. These were artefacts that had lain packed up for years, brought in for identification by members of the public but never reclaimed by them. Here were objects existing in a kind of limbo, not part of the museum collection but unable to be legally disposed of.¹ The discovery affected Clarke and Rowledge powerfully. Abandoned like the pets at a dogs and cats home, these objects were waiting for a new life.

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Tracey Rowledge and David Clarke have been working together since 2008, but this is their first residency. Commissioned as part of a major redevelopment of the buildings and services which will form a new, integrated Cultural & Learning Hub

in Tunbridge Wells, Clarke and Rowledge came to the town regularly over a year, to talk to local people and to work with the public who use the services and with the architects responsible for the design of the buildings. Artists are particularly well-placed to undertake developmental residencies such as this, because they can step back and look curiously at histories and objects from an outsider position, in a non-threatening way. They are interested to delve in the

sometimes hidden, unspoken parts. Such mysteries provide stimulating material. This residency has resulted in several important outcomes, from changes to the design of the buildings, ensuring that the needs of people living locally were considered, to a number of amazing creative workshops and a major exhibition and series of new works by Clarke and Rowledge which are displayed throughout the Museum, the Library and Adult Education Centre as well as outside the cultural buildings, in a charity shop opposite.



In their wider artistic practice, David Clarke and Tracey Rowledge are fascinated by the role objects play in our lives, how familiar objects can become strange and the strange become familiar. The trust that they have in each other from many previous collaborations enables them to push and challenge each other. As Tracey says "We unsettle each other mutually about an object or an idea and then we can shift it together to a place of understanding". They are interested in how the passage of time affects the way we relate to things and also how context can change the way we value objects. For example, a piece displayed in a museum immediately tells us it is of historic value and important; a china figurine on an aunt's mantelpiece is more personal in its association and its value may be more sentimental than financial. But like a familiar perfume or a song, such objects have the ability to transport us back in time to a place, to that aunt's house, to the age we were when we were last there. It is this magic experience that Clarke and Rowledge aim to tap into.



For this project, Clarke and Rowledge's starting point was the notion of things being 'shelved'. In their original proposal they asked, "Who are the 'shelved' ones in Tunbridge Wells? Are they the elderly, custodians of history; the displaced through migration, needing a sense of place; and/or the disadvantaged; all deserving of time and recognition." While Tunbridge Wells has a reputation as a well-off, middle-class, middle-England town, it has its own problems of poverty and social exclusion. So "creating conversations about the collections that would otherwise not be heard" was an important part of the project.

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Starting with some hard-to-love bric-a-brac collected in the local charity shops, they began their efforts to give these 'drifters' new identities. How could Clarke and Rowledge shift their appeal by remodelling, combining and altering them? How far did they need to go? They interrogated the objects, asking what does this offer, what is the game, how can we make this object or series of objects engaging? The resulting works form nine groups of related objects: **Landed Gentry, Limbo, Lost Souls, Vacant, Housed, Still Life, Shelved, Zoo and Greetings From Tunbridge Wells**.



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Clarke and Rowledge acknowledge that this exhibition is a lot about revealing and testing hierarchies. Their first visit revealed the hierarchies involved in the Museum collection, including a large number of aristocratic portraits. Seeing Tunbridge Wells as a wealthy town, Clarke and Rowledge expected to find shop windows packed with silverware, but their arrival coincided with the closure of Payne's, the oldest jewellery makers in the town. The signage of the silversmith's shop and its till were at that time the most recent, poignant acquisitions to the Museum collection. Focussing instead on what local people are discarding in the charity shops, they found an abundance of ceramic figurines. So, in the **Landed Gentry** series, Clarke uses the hollow interior of second-hand ceramic figurines as moulds to cast new figurines in molten pewter, pewter being traditionally seen as 'poor man's silver'. Once the metal has cooled and the ceramic original has been broken off, the resulting 'copy' figures have less clarity of form with limbs that are distorted or dwindled, and the surfaces may be shiny or rough, coloured or metallic. This vagueness of form provides a jumping off point for our imaginations.

The replacement of china with metal also challenges the pre-eminence of clay in craft. To raise the **Landed Gentry** up for display, Clarke and Rowledge place them on a series of used paint pots from the Adult Education Centre, which stand as subtle and physical emblems of the creativity of local people. **Vacant** is a group of collected items, mostly oval or round, being photo frames and paperweights, made of a range of appealingly shiny materials, from glass to brass. The original contents, maybe paintings, photos, dried flowers or embroideries, have been removed as have the backs. So, divorced from their stories, they become independently beautiful. In **Limbo**, many carved wooden gazelles, once exotic holiday souvenirs which ended up in the charity shops, are worked together into a graceful, dancing tangle, giving them a collective elegance that they hardly possessed before. It is a unifying act and a frozen moment which questions support, balance, value. With Clarke and Rowledge there is always an artistic and physical intervention. In **Greetings from Tunbridge Wells**, the punching out of multiple ragged holes echoes the Museum 'pin prick pictures' collection but also brings our focus to the surface, making us look harder at the scenes of Tunbridge Wells beyond.

Clarke and Rowledge's goal was not to pimp up the found objects to make them simply more attractive. They are not seeking to make things beautiful in themselves but to make us, as visitors, look again and work harder in our looking. To remain interesting, the objects had to appear slightly off-kilter, on the edge, punk. In **Shelved**, a series of charity shop objects are displayed together, in a line. They have each been worked on in different ways: a wooden vase has been drilled all over with holes; a dumpy little teapot has been overlaid with papier mache. These modifications aim to change the surfaces and form and to transform 'ugly ducklings' maybe not into 'swans' but into art objects. They have something to say about the meaninglessness of consumerism and the limits of collecting.

As Tracey says, "Objects in your home can too easily become background, like wallpaper. We play with objects so they gain resonance, physical and emotional reverberations, so that we need to keep looking." But above and beyond this, Clarke and Rowledge's mission is to amplify the narrative lives of objects. Their motivation is social engagement. They make objects stand as metaphors for people and by working on them and displaying them they are saying "Look at me, really look at me. Spend time on me. Look at me in relation to my neighbour."

One of the invisible hierarchies Clarke and Rowledge challenge is that of museum display, with its code of plinths, perspex stands and mounts. Setting the objects in unusual parts of the cultural buildings, and for **Zoo**, outside them in the Dogs' Trust charity shop, is one way they do this.

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Lifting up objects gives them status, and with a shop-bought trophy comes a pewter base. So, in **Still Life**, one story is that of manufactured metalwork (in this case from A R Wentworth, Sheffield), plinths made for trophies which themselves carry hopes and dreams of glory. Now heavily worked on, altered and patinated, these plinths are free from the role of showing off another object and instead become exhibits in their own right. Rowledge's cross-hatched tooling on the cloth on which they sit

adds depth, shadow and a trompe l'oeil effect which increases their independent importance. Throughout the exhibition is an air of open-mindedness and transformation. Clarke and Rowledge have trawled the streets and multiple charity shops of Tunbridge Wells looking for materials which might reflect the spirit of the town and its residents. Through their thought, time, and craft skills they deliver a kind of radical, artistic up-cycling that makes us ask 'why'. Their attitude and experimentation throw up questions about material value and aesthetic value. Sometimes, there is a divergence of material values which shocks. With apparent references to the art of the 'ready-made', their position is actually not from that 20th century art movement. This is no conceptual trick relocating charity shop objects to the gallery. This is intelligent making which treats the found objects — whether a figurine, a second-hand frame or a cast-off shoe sole — like raw materials which still carry traces of meaning from their former lives. The residency and resulting works for the exhibition have pushed both Rowledge and Clarke outside their usual technical knowledge and have required them to grapple with new ideas, which is, as they both say, "where things get exciting".

Lost Souls is formed of a series of worn out shoe leathers, attached to the wall with handmade, 9ct gold tacks. On their first researches around the town, Clarke and Rowledge met the highly skilled cobbler at Quality Shoe Repairs in Mount Pleasant Road. They saw the quantity of waste leather soles from the repair trade, that had literally paced the streets of Tunbridge Wells, as a new material. A great example of their collaborative process, Rowledge had to work with the worn leather, where she is used to working with virgin leather, and tooled the soles with black typewriting carbon. She says, “the lines amplify the tonal range of the soles and almost look like pathways”. Clarke saw the metal tacks used in shoe repair as the bridge to his own practice and knowledge of metalwork. Elevated by being handmade instead of mass produced, and in gold instead of base metal, his new, gold tacks attach the soles just as in their original function, but not to shoes, to the wall instead. Once again apparent rubbish is being highlighted as something that has innate beauty.

In all these works, Clarke and Rowledge truly adopt the sayings “one person’s trash is another person’s treasure” and “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” and by questioning our perceived values they point to the subjectivity of taste. They have challenged their own sense of taste, and ours, in rescuing and re-presenting unfashionable, rejected objects, the things that local people have sent to charity shops. And after all, the people of Tunbridge Wells have a reputation for discerning taste. When Grayson Perry presented a Bafta-winning Channel 4 documentary ‘All in the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry’, he chose Tunbridge Wells as one of three featured towns as he saw it as a place where people select objects for their homes very carefully in order to communicate their middle-class values.



Shelved is an impressive and highly inventive project which will encourage audiences to interact, ask questions and get involved. One of the results of Clarke and Rowledge’s questioning approach which has already happened is that staff have looked afresh at the history of the museum, both hidden and documented, and how it influences the way they may display objects and tell stories for future audiences.

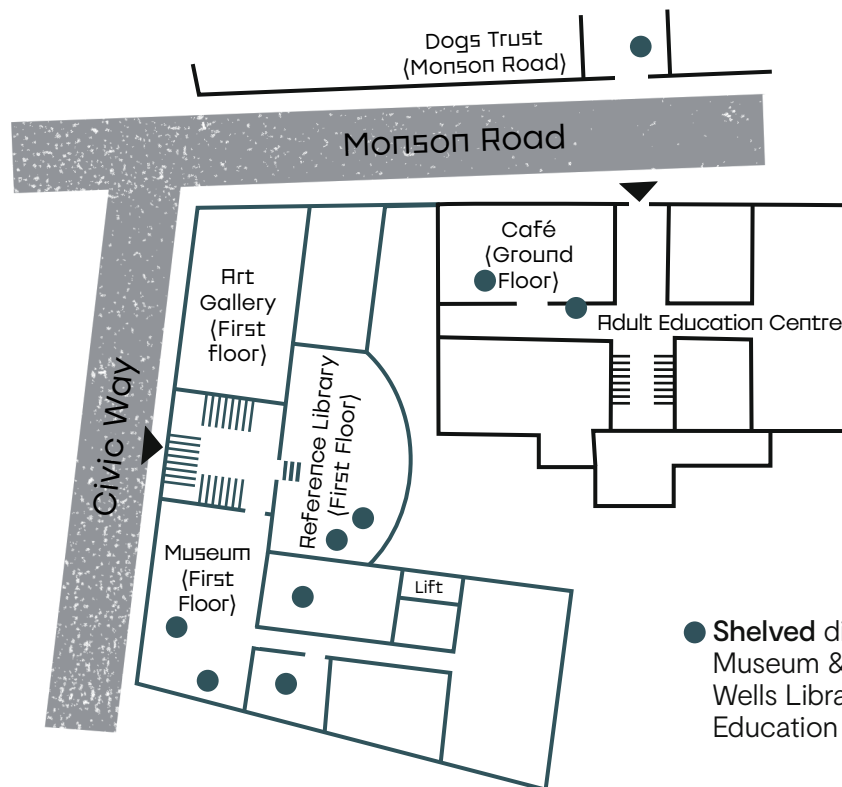
Through their creativity and the urge to make and communicate, Clarke and Rowledge shine a spotlight on overlooked places, spaces, things and people. In so doing they encourage us all to look afresh, to notice and appreciate what might have been right under our noses all along. As a result of this project Clarke and Rowledge would like visitors to think again about the world of objects in our streets, shops, museums and homes. They urge us to relook at our own possessions, renew our connections with them, take them down, dust them off and put them back in a fresh way. Start seeing qualities we didn’t see before, like getting to know a new person.

Louise Taylor, November 2017²

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1. Collecting policies for museums have changed considerably over the last 50 years. In the 1960s and 1970s donations were often brought and left at a museum, with or without donors’ contact details, for its curators to decide whether they would add them to their collections. Current acquisition procedures require donors to provide details of the object, its provenance and their right to its title, for an expert panel to consider whether to accept it according to that museum’s collecting policy. If accepted, legally binding paperwork ensures the terms of donation are ethical and agreed by both parties. Nothing is acquired that would not add cultural value to the collections, as set out in the museum’s collecting policy.

2. All quotations taken from interviews by Louise Taylor with Tracey Rowledge & David Clarke in June and October 2017.



● **Shelved** displays in Tunbridge Wells Museum & Art Gallery, Tunbridge Wells Library, Tunbridge Wells Adult Education Centre & The Dog's Trust.