

Artist Brief

Manchester Museum Hermit Project

Summary

The Manchester Museum, part of the University of Manchester, wishes to engage an artist in residence who will inhabit a hermitage in the tower of its splendid Victorian Gothic Building for a period of up to eight weeks between May and July 2009.

This is a fascinating and unique opportunity to explore a tradition, with a long history and extending across many cultures, of men and women who made the decision to flee the company of their fellow humans to dwell alone in retirement and total solitude, often living on islands, in caves, or in the desert. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it became a tradition at the grand houses of England to house a 'hermit' in a Romantic folly or hermitage somewhere in the grounds as a curiosity for guests. The Manchester Museum now offers an artist a wonderful opportunity to seal him or herself off from modern day hassles and live within a closed and magical space inside one of the finest Museums in the world, with a large and important collection of natural history, archaeology, Egyptology, anthropology and other specialist subjects including numismatics and archery, reflecting, with a contemporary eye, on this evocative and secretive way of life. They will also be expected to communicate this experience with the outside world during their period of isolation, which coincides in part with the Manchester International Festival.

The artist will be expected to reside permanently in the tower for up to two months, having previously had access to all of the Museum's permanent exhibits and collections, both public and hidden, and to the expertise of Museum and University staff. This open brief offers the hermit the freedom to respond to the process of residing within and among the Museum's collection of four and a half million objects, reflecting on issues concerning biodiversity, climate change, extinctions and the future of the planet.

The opportunity is open to artists working within every artform or practice. You might be a performance artist, a writer or poet, a visual artist, sculptor or musician...



The Residency

This will be a unique project for an artist to engage with collections in one of the country's great, iconic Museums. The residency will be housed in a Gothic tower that stands majestically atop the Victorian building; arguably a modern-day 'Ivory Tower' in a world-class university, presiding over a city rich in heritage and history.

The artist will reside in a set of rooms accessed by a spiral stone staircase, rooms which are not normally accessible to the public. Our aim is to give the artist as much freedom as possible, initially to engage with the Museum, its people and its work, and then to inhabit this unique, atmospheric space, and to respond to the collections, the place, and the Museum's visitors. It is important to understand that after the familiarisation period, the commissioned artist will be confined to the hermitage within the Museum's tower 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the duration of the residency. He or she will live in the tower, and will be unable to venture into the rest of the city, or indeed into the rest of the Museum, during this time. The tower, however, can be seen as a beacon for the Museum; a symbol of permanence and history within a rapidly changing landscape, and is one of several such towers across Manchester, and very much part of the visual geography of the city.



Whilst there are no specific themes, as such, to the residency, the Museum is particularly focusing at the present time on ideas of biodiversity, climate change, sustainability, the future of the planet, all within the context of Manchester's place in the world.

Although living in solitude, the artist will have unparalleled access to the Museum's staff, should he or she so wish, and will also be strongly encouraged to engage with the public, either through direct contact, or via digital, film or audio media. There is unique potential for the artist, despite being effectively cut off from the outside world, to nonetheless act as an oracle for the city, communicating with it, and its people, potentially via podcasts, semaphore, the BBC Big Screen and through digital media.

There are no specific conditions as to the type of artwork or outcomes that might be proposed by artists. However, it is anticipated that there should be some sort of tangible legacy that makes an arresting, challenging and pertinent statement sympathetic to the high ambitions of the Museum and its stakeholders. The outcomes of the residency should be innovative in a contemporary way, yet resonant of the site's historical, social and economic influences. They should recognize and accommodate the diversity of the Museum's audiences, bringing it to the attention of those for whom the Museum will be a completely new experience, whilst at the same time offering a new and very different take on the Museum and its collections to those who have been visiting for many years and for whom the place is both familiar and something of an old friend.



We envisage that the form of the residency will be very much informed by the artist's response to the Museum, the space, and the collections, and therefore an essential part of the work is an R & D phase, involving consultation with the Museum's staff and university academics, which would take place before the start of the residency proper.

This residency builds on The Manchester Museum's excellent track record of working with artists over the past few years, in particular through its Alchemy project. The Alchemy scheme, funded by Arts Council England, has awarded

fellowships to artists including Spring Hurlbut, Jordan Baseman, Mark Dion, Ilana Halperin and Jamie Shovlin, as well as curating artists' interventions in the permanent galleries and facilitating artists' research and the loan of The Manchester Museum's collections for contemporary art projects. The Hermitage Project, however, will move the Museum's work with artists onto a wholly different level, as it represents the first time the Museum has engaged an artist to work in permanent residence in such an all-embracing way.

This project is the first at the Manchester Museum of a series of initiatives across the North West, funded by the North West Regional Development Agency, to help realise the international ambitions of museums and galleries in Manchester and the rest of the region. It is likely that there will be strong media interest in the hermit project and the selected artist should be prepared to engage with this.

Background information on The Manchester Museum and its collection

The Manchester Museum collection numbers almost 4.5 million specimens and objects, only a tiny percentage of which is on display to the public at any time.



The Museum has its roots in Enlightenment collecting and in Victorian civic culture. First opened in its present building in 1888, the Museum has been at the heart of the University of Manchester for over a century. Its origins lie in the collection of the Manchester manufacturer and collector John Leigh Philips (1761-1814). After his death, a small group of wealthy men banded together to buy his 'cabinet', and in 1821 they set up the Manchester Natural History Society.

Housed from 1835 in grand premises on Peter Street, Manchester, the collection continued to grow as members and others donated objects from around the world. In 1850 the Museum absorbed the collections of the Manchester Geological and Mining Society. The Society fell on hard times and in 1867 transferred the to Owens College, which later became the University of Manchester. The well-known architect Alfred Waterhouse was invited to design and build a Museum building, which became known as The Manchester Museum.

Over the twentieth century, the collection grew some 4.5 million items, and the staff expanded to over 70 Museum professionals. Many of these were world-class scholars, and the Museum was the site for cutting-edge research in the natural sciences and humanities, as well as supporting the research of others across the globe.

The growth of, and the work on, the stored collections has always been matched by a corresponding emphasis on public exhibitions. From the 1950s, the Museum staged a variety of temporary exhibitions in a special gallery. The Museum continued to expand and in 1997 was awarded a £12.5 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and this, together with money from the European Regional Development Fund, the University of Manchester, the Wellcome Trust, The Wolfson Foundation and other sponsors has enabled the Museum to undertake the refurbishment and extend the present building which opened in 2003. It is now a modern university Museum with a strong engagement from the local community, attracting up to 250,000 visitors a year.

Fees, Budget and other support

A fee of between £8,000 - £12,000 will be available (dependent on the duration of the project). This should cover initial research and development, and post-residency time to prepare any legacy publications or other outcomes. A materials budget is also available which will be agreed with the artist on awarding the commission.

The space where the residency takes place is split between a work area at the top of the tower and a living area located two floors below accessed via a spiral stair case.

Power, heating, lighting and internet access will be available in both areas. The Living area will include a bedroom with shower / toilet and a lounge with a small kitchen for food preparation.



Criteria for Selection

This project involves a two-stage open competition process. Short listing of preliminary proposals will be made by an approved Selection Panel and taken forward to a second stage when artists will be invited to Manchester for interview.

Expressions of Interest should be delivered as a hard copy along with an electronic copy. It would be preferable if the electronic version could be submitted via CD Rom, although email applications can be acceptable for this first stage. Your proposal should include the following information:

- Covering letter with full address and contact details
- Recent CV
- Details of 2 referees who we can contact about your work
- Up to 6 printed or digital images of recent work that are relevant to this commission
- A written expression of interest (maximum of 1000 words). To include a description and outline approach which should cover:

Your initial thoughts on the hermit project including a description of your areas of artistic interest or working methods that are specific to this proposal, ideas about how you might develop the residency, how you might collaborate with the Museum staff and the wider public, your interest in the Museum in this context and its collections and your experience of public engagement in your work.

You will need to confirm your availability for the duration of the residency (approximately 8 weeks from end May 2009, but to be confirmed)

Because of the nature of this project, you will need to be comfortable working alone and spending lengthy, sustained amounts of time in solitude. A condition of the residency is compliance with the Health & Safety Risk Assessment. A copy of the draft assessment will be supplied to interested parties at the shortlisting stage.

The panel will select a short list of 3 - 6 artists to be invited to interview. This brief is open to artists from both the UK and overseas.

Timetable

Artist Brief Circulated via networks / advertising - 15 December

Closing Date for submissions - 19 January 2009

Interviews with shortlisted artists - 5 February

Artist appointed - 5 February

Initial meeting with Museum team - 16 February

PR plans developed for long leads/PR launch- 13 February

R & D (extent tbc) consultation for project and preparation of Hermitage Tower - Feb - April (number of days tbc)

Residency begins c w/c 25 May 2009

Residency ends c. 26 July 2009.

Further information

For further information about the project, contact the project co-ordinator, David Gelsthorpe on david.gelsthorpe@manchester.ac.uk, (0161) 3061601