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Patron HRH The Princess of Wales

V&A Museum Learning Symposium 2026

Museums, Artists & Communities: Towards Empathetic Creative Practice

V&A Museum, South Kensington, London

9 –10th July 2026

Transportation and accommodation will be provided for invited speakers.

How can empathetic, artist-led approaches support museums, audiences and communities in conditions of precarity?

In a period marked by austerity, precarity and widening inequities, museums are increasingly required to articulate – and demonstrate – their role as civic learning institutions. As creative workers, audiences, and community partners navigate unstable economic and social conditions, museum learning and education teams are uniquely positioned to champion inclusive pedagogies, equitable access, and artist-led approaches to cultural participation.

Empathy is a core element of creative and artistic practice: Artists engage empathetically with materials, histories, collaborators and audiences. Museum educators facilitate empathetic encounters between people, objects and ideas. Collections hold layered human stories – of making, labour, migration, power, care, innovation and resistance. By activating collections as sites of creativity rather than static archives, museums can foster practices of listening, dialogue and shared meaning-making.

Rooted in museum learning practice, this two-day symposium brings together international practitioners to examine how museums can foster empathetic, ethical, and sustainable cultures of learning. Through artist testimonies, case studies, and dialogue-based sessions, we explore how museums can function as safe, generative spaces for creative risk-taking, curiosity, and informal learning – particularly for young people seeking alternative pathways into the creative industries.

Core Questions

- How can collections be activated as tools for dialogue and ethical reflection?
- What does care look like in museum learning environments committed to creative access for all?

- How can museums cultivate pedagogical spaces where artists feel safe to experiment, imagine and take creative risks?
 - How might empathetic engagement with collections reshape institutional practice from within?
 - In precarious times, how should residencies support artists both personally and professionally?
 - How do museums design non-extractive, community-led ecologies of participation?
 - What learning infrastructures help artists and communities thrive, not simply survive?
 - In precarious times, how should residencies support artists both personally and professionally?
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Call for Papers

We invite submissions for either 20-minute presentations or 5–10-minute lightning presentations that examine empathy as a framework for museum learning, artist collaboration and community engagement. We welcome proposals from practitioners, researchers, artists, and organisations working internationally or in the UK.

Proposals might address (but are not limited to) the following themes:

1. Artists in Residence: Empathy in Practice

Case studies or reflections on how residencies and long-term collaborations enable artists to experiment, take creative risks, and engage with young people and communities. How does empathetic practice shape artistic development and institutional learning?

2. Care as an Institutional Practice

Explorations of care as a foundational principle in museum learning. How can institutions embed care into policies, partnerships and pedagogies?

3. Ecologies of Participation

Discussion of frameworks for co-creation and participatory practice that prioritise reciprocity, consent and shared authorship. How can museums avoid extractive models and instead support authentic community-led collaboration?

4. Residencies as Sites of Care and Risk

Research or practice-based insights into how residencies support artistic wellbeing, sustainable practice and meaningful engagement with collections. How can residencies widen access for early-career practitioners?

5. Creative Career Pathways & Equity

Perspectives on how museums can support young people pursuing informal learning routes into the creative industries. How does collections-based learning contribute to equitable access and long-term creative resilience?

6. Building Empathetic Communities of Practice

Reflections on how museums, artists and communities can form ethical, interdependent ecosystems. What shared principles and forms of accountability should guide future museum learning practice?

Submission Details

Please submit:

- A 300-word abstract outlining your proposed presentation, indicating if this is for a 20-minute paper or lightning presentation
- A short biography of the speaker(s)

Send submissions to: j.sambrook@vam.ac.uk

Deadline: 9am, Monday 20th April 2026