Why do Museums Matter?

Thursday 11 April 2019

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The Holburne Museum, Bath, is proud to be bringing together some of the most important figures in the art and museum sector to engage with this fundamental question in an event of national importance.

On 11 April 2019, not one but two national museum directors will come together with one of the UK’s leading artists to consider the future of museums and their place in the community. Maria Balshaw CBE, Director of Tate, artist Sonia Boyce OBE RA, and Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A, will join Holburne director Chris Stephens to discuss the ways in which cultural engagement can enhance, shape and alter people’s lives.

As museums redefine their place in society, and their financial positions become progressively more vulnerable, the question of museums’ place in and commitment to society is all the more urgent and complex.

Chris Stephens, Director of the Holburne notes, “I am delighted to welcome such an illustrious panel to the Holburne. There is a growing recognition of the direct positive impact that art, creativity and museums have on physical and mental wellbeing. At the same time, museums and galleries are caught in a huge and deepening crisis of dwindling funds. I think it is a reflection of the importance of this issue that such senior figures are keen to come together to discuss why museums matter so much.”

Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A, said: “I believe the role of museums is now more valuable than ever. One of the V&A’s founders, Gottfried Semper, described museums as ‘the true teachers of a free people’, and this still rings true today. In an era of ‘fake news’, museums must embody a rigour, transparency and curatorial knowledge which is vital to the education of not only our visitors, but also of society as a whole.”

Maria Balshaw, Director of Tate, said: “The role of the public art museum is increasingly vital in our politically polarised world. I believe that by welcoming and remaining open to divergent experiences of art and culture we can start to positively shape society around us. By listening to and working empathetically with our audiences we can create spaces that truly reflect different views and values. This discussion on ‘Why Museums Matter’ at The Holburne Museum provides an important opportunity for an essential discussion of our time.”

The event forms a key part of a three-year project led by The Holburne, supported by its Bath Museum partners, called Pathways to Wellbeing. This supports local people with lived experience of mental health issues, social isolation and homelessness, to engage with culture and heritage through a range of creative activities.

An exhibition, Why Museums Matter, displayed over two separate galleries is currently (until 22 April) showcasing artwork created during the project. The display also captures voices and themes emerging from a 5-month public consultation in which visitors were invited to complete the statement ‘Museums matter to me because...’ as a way of understanding why people go to museums and how their role is understood in contemporary society.
Why do Museums Matter? will take place 7-8pm on Thursday 11 April, with tickets costing £12.50 each. These can be booked now at www.holburne.org

For more information follow @Holburne on Twitter and like the Holburne Museum Facebook page or visit www.holburne.org

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Maria Balshaw became Director of Tate in 2017. Before that she was Director of The Whitworth at the University of Manchester from 2006, a role which she combined with that of Director of Manchester City Galleries from 2011.

Dr Tristram Hunt became Director of the V&A in February 2017. Since taking up post, Dr Hunt has prioritised support for design education in UK schools, expansion of the photography department, encouraging debate around the history of the museum’s global collections and the transition of the V&A to a multi-site museum. Formerly the Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central, he served as the Labour Party’s Shadow Secretary of State for Education. Dr Hunt has a doctorate in Victorian history from Cambridge University and is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He is the author of several books, most recently Ten Cities That Made an Empire (2014).

Sonia Boyce, Professor in Fine Arts at Middlesex University and Professor of Black Art & Design at University of the Arts, London, made her name during the 1980s as part of a politically-engaged Black Artists Movement. In 2018 she attracted controversy when she appeared to remove 19th century paintings from Manchester Art Gallery as part of her retrospective exhibition there.

The Holburne Museum’s mission statement is ‘Changing Lives through Art’, signalling its commitment to opening up the enjoyment of art to people of all ages and from every walk of life. The Holburne was founded in 1882 with the gift of Sir William Holburne’s collection of 16th and 17th century Italian and Dutch paintings, silver, sculpture, furniture, porcelain and diverse objets d’art of national and international significance. That founding gift has been augmented with a collection of 18th century paintings by such artists as Gainsborough, Lawrence, Ramsay, Stubbs and Zoffany. Set within the historic Sydney Pleasure Gardens, the Museum reopened in May 2011 after ambitious renovations and with a new, award-winning extension by Eric Parry Architects. The Holburne has since secured a national reputation as an outstanding museum which holds critically acclaimed exhibitions. Its programme of exhibitions, commissions and events sets out to bring to Bath great art of all periods and from around the world, seeking to set the art of the past in dialogue with contemporary practice in exciting and dynamic new ways.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES
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