GENDERING THE MUSEUM
A TOOLKIT
Introduction

How can museums tell new stories about gender? How can we diversify our gendered representation, integrating more stories of women and LGBTQ+ people? How can we look at our existing collections in new ways to uncover hidden stories of gender? How can we embed new ways of working across the museum to help more of these stories come to light? And how can we share these stories with the public?

These were the questions that lay behind ‘Gendering Interpretations’, an AHRC-funded project that ran from 2018-2019 involving James Daybell, Svante Norrhem, Susan Broomhall, Jacqueline van Gent, Nadine Akkerman, Kit Heyam and Emma Severinsson. Working collaboratively across four countries, these researchers from the Universities of Plymouth, Lund, Leiden and Western Australia worked with museum professionals from the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), and Vasa Museum (Stockholm) to find new ways of uncovering and communicating the gendered histories of everyday objects. From women’s invisible labour to ‘abominable’ gender nonconformity, the stories we found were fascinating, and the process of discovering and sharing them deeply rewarding. In this toolkit, we share our experiences in the hope of inspiring fellow researchers and museum professionals. If you work in, or with, a museum – whether as a curator, an exhibition designer, a tour guide or event planner – we hope you’ll find something in here to spark your interest and shine a new light on your collections.

We hope, too, that the tools we share here are applicable to diversifying museum representation in other ways. Gender doesn’t exist in a vacuum, and the techniques we’ve developed could be used alongside other work being done to change the representation of other marginalized groups in museums. The racist and colonialist ideologies that have shaped many museum collections, for example, also had (and have) gendered dimensions – so gendering collections can help us to take an intersectional approach to addressing these issues. By thinking more widely about our objects in multiple ways, we can move towards creating museum spaces that represent everyone.

If this toolkit has inspired you, or changed the way you think or act– or if you have any other feedback – we’d love to hear about it: please do get in touch via james.daybell@plymouth.ac.uk

Kit Heyam & James Daybell
The ‘Gendering Interpretations’ team
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The Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project ‘Gendering Interpretations’ developed from a previous two-year AHRC-funded research network project, ‘Gender, Power and Materiality in Early Modern Europe, 1400-1800’. This first project developed an interpretative methodology for understanding objects, exhibitions and the past through the lens of gender, power and materiality, as important factors that have shaped the design, form and function of objects – focusing on a single object, the early modern glove (Daybell et al, 2022). It also raised awareness of gender (defined broadly as encompassing gender identity, gender expression and sexuality) as an important interpretative category within the museum environment, and of the significant role this can play in generating diverse narratives – which can, when disseminated through curatorial practice, educational and public programming, have a wider societal impact.

The ‘Gender, Power and Materiality’ project brought together gender historians and literary critics specializing on early modern Europe to generate a valuable dialogue between the four universities involved (University of Plymouth, Lund University, Leiden University, and University of Western Australia); curators and researchers at the V&A; and museum professionals at Skarhult Castle in Sweden, The Museum of London, The Worshipful Company of Glovers, Powderham Castle, Catherijne Convent Utrecht and Cultural Heritage Leiden.

As a result of these dialogues, we identified a series of follow-on activities that had potential for significant wider impact, and were awarded a further tranche of follow-on funding from the AHRC.

The new project, ‘Gendering Interpretations’, enhanced the partnership between these four international universities, the V&A, and the Vasa Museum in Stockholm. For the museums, it coincided with a time when they were actively considering how to rethink and represent gender in relation to their collections and museological practices. It also aligned strongly with the work of the V&A LGBTQ Working Group, which has now been working for over a decade to surface under-represented LGBTQ histories in the V&A’s collections and programming.

Over the course of the year-long project, our work took place in three phases:

1. **Identifying the objects.** We identified 10-15 late medieval and early modern objects at the V&A and Vasa which had the potential to articulate a diverse range of gendered stories.

2. **Researching the objects.** We used the gendered interpretative methodology developed during the first phase of the project to analyse each object, studying its gendered history across its lifecycle from commission and manufacture to consumption and display in a museum setting.

3. **Presenting the Objects.** We presented our research on these objects at the V&A and Vasa through a range of interpretative pathways: public events, talks, guided tours and interactive workshops.

4. **Reflection on collaborative practice.** Over the course of the project we organised two workshops at the Vasa (in May 2019) and the V&A (September 2019) which brought together the project team of international collaborators in order to work on our gendered interpretative pathways and share best practice.
WHY?
REASONS TO GENDER THE MUSEUM

We found that ‘gendering’ museum objects – taking a new look at every aspect of their life story through a gendered lens – had two key positive impacts:

Revealing new stories

• At its core, a gendered perspective is about finding fascinating new stories of real people – especially women and LGBTQ+ people – who have often been invisible in museum interpretation.
• Taking a fresh gendered perspective can allow us to do new things, and tell new stories, with existing collections.
• Providing something new can encourage return visits from previous visitors.

Diversifying the museum

• Representing more people can help us to reach a broader public – especially marginalised groups who often don’t see themselves represented in museums.
• National museums, like the V&A who we worked with on this project, hold their collections in trust for the public, and have a responsibility to represent and include that public as fully as possible.
• Diverse, positive representations of gendered history can have an important social impact – particularly for LGBTQ+ people, whose history is often denied or erased.
• Gender is relevant to everyone: even those who don’t have a gender still inhabit a gendered world.
HOW?
TIPS FOR GENDERING YOUR MUSEUM

CASE STUDIES

The case studies on the following pages show how we uncovered new gendered stories behind three objects at the V&A. We deliberately chose three everyday objects which might be found in many museums, and which might not appear at first glance to have anything particularly interesting to say about gender. What we found is that:

• **Any object has a gendered story to tell.** Some objects – like clothing, or paintings of people – might appear to be more relevant to gender than others. But we discovered that no matter what object we researched, something interesting came to light – whether about its material, its manufacture or its use. As well as the three case studies given here, the objects researched at the V&A and Vasa included cannon balls, dishes, a board game, an embroidered panel, a theatrical mask and a portrait of a mapmaker – and every one turned out to have interesting things to say about the histories of gender.

• **It’s okay if you meet a dead end.** We always started with an open mind, aiming to research everything from the material an object was made from to how it had been displayed by museums (see our list of suggested research questions on page X). But inevitably, some of our lines of enquiry were more fruitful than others. As you’ll see from the case studies, we’ve made sure to note whenever we gave up on finding an interesting answer to a particular question!

• **Think beyond this specific object.** Often, we couldn’t identify details about how (for example) the specific cap owned by the V&A was manufactured or used – but we could find plenty about the history of caps like this in general. It helped us to think of our task not as writing a ‘biography’ of one specific object, but as researching other objects like it in order to fill in the blanks in its life story (a life-writing technique called ‘prosopography’).

• **Possibilities are important.** The histories of women and LGBTQ+ people are (as is well known) often less easy to find, owing to the people and ideologies that have shaped the mainstream historical record. This means that we might not find direct evidence of how they’ve interacted with our objects – but we might find evidence of what their experience would have been like if they did. (If you read the ‘cap’ case study, you’ll see what we mean.) Because cisgender, heterosexual men are still seen as the ‘default’ person in many contemporary societies, more diverse gendered possibilities may not naturally occur to all visitors – so it’s important that we spell them out explicitly.

This was a small project, and these are just three test cases – and it’s important to say that we weren’t aiming to provide comprehensive new accounts of each object, but to focus in tightly on gender alone and see what new perspectives this could provide. We hope you might find these case studies inspiring nonetheless.
CASE STUDY: CAP

Object details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of origin:</th>
<th>England (made)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>16th century (made)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist/Maker:</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials and Techniques:</td>
<td>Knitted and felted wool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V&amp;A Museum number:</td>
<td>1562&amp;A-1901</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before: what we started with

Gallery context: This cap is on display in the Medieval & Renaissance gallery, as part of a group of clothing and fashion items.

Group label on display case: Cloth, both in its type and colour, was a mark of status. Wool, linen and leather were worn by rich and poor alike, but only the wealthy could afford silk, lace and the brilliant colours that came from expensive dyes.

To preserve the social hierarchy, the authorities introduced sumptuary laws that dictated the type of jewels and clothing that could be worn. However, these laws were routinely broken. In 1515, Cardinal Wolsey, Chancellor of England, snatched an ‘old jacket of crimson velvet and diverse brooches’ from an old man who should not have been wearing them.

Jewellery was believed to protect as well as adorn. Certain natural materials, such as turquoise and coral, shielded the wearer from illness or even death. Rings and necklaces were often given as gifts to mark important occasions such as betrothal and marriage.

Additional information in gallery booklet: The hats shown here were knitted and felted for warmth and waterproofing. In the 1530s there was a fashion for small hats worn on the side of the head, so the smallish red hat may have belonged to either a child or a man.

In later years, wearing hats and caps fell out of fashion. To promote the hat industry, the ‘Cappers Act’ of 1571 stated that on Sundays and holidays every commoner above the age of six had to wear a woollen cap made in England.
Object choice

Potential for collaboration: As part of the collaborative ‘Gendering Interpretations’ project, we wanted to investigate two similar objects at the V&A and Vasa Museum. The Vasa selected a wide-brimmed hat found on the ship, so we searched for a suitable hat to research at the V&A.

Search techniques: We searched for “cap” in the object name/title field of the V&A collections database. We selected this cap because the object description noted that:

By the Cappers’ Act of 1571 it was laid down that everyone over the age of six (excepting ‘maids, ladies, gentlewomen, noble personages, and every Lord, Knight, and gentleman of twenty marks land’) should wear on Sundays and holidays ‘a cap of wool, thicked and dressed in England, made within this realm, and only dressed and finished by some of the trade of cappers, upon pain to forfeit for every day of not wearing 3s 4d.’

We thought this presented an interesting opportunity to research gendered laws around dress. The phrasing of the Cappers’ Act was also interesting in that it specified ‘everyone except (women and aristocratic men)’, rather than ‘men’, demonstrating that men were understood to be the ‘default’. We also found it interesting that the label assumed a smaller hat must belong to a child, rather than possibly belonging to a woman.

During: the research process

Research questions

Using our list of suggested research questions as a base, we drew up a list of key questions we wanted to answer, as follows:

- What would it have meant for a woman to wear this hat?
- What kind of man wore this hat?
- Who made this hat and what was their gender?
- Did women keep sheep and/or work in the wool industry?
- Where did the wool for the hat come from?
- What is the precise wording of the Cappers’ Act? And its motivation?
- Can we find out anything about the history of Worship Street (where this cap was found) and the kind of people who lived there?
Research methods

• We used the existing bibliography on the V&A object record alongside discussions with V&A curators.
• We used the “book and article search” tool on our university library catalogue. Our searches included the following terms:
  - “early modern” hats women / gender
  - Cappers Act 1571
  - “early modern” women wool / spinning / sheep
• We used the footnotes and bibliographies of the books and articles we read to draw up a further reading list.
• We used the database Early English Books Online (now mostly open access) to find early modern texts about the early modern connotations of the term ‘flat-cap’.
• To access books, we used a university library and the British Library. One book which proved particularly useful is out of copyright and now available open-access through archive.org: Alice Clark, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (London: George Routledge & Sons; New York: F.P. Dutton & Co., 1919)

The research process took approximately 2.5 days (18 hours), with a further 1 day to write up the outputs (see below). ¹

Reflection

The example of the cap is one in which interesting gendered interpretations are – unusually – available at every stage of the object’s history, from production through use and interpretation. Because women have historically played a significant role in the textile industry in Europe, and because most societies instinctively gender items of clothing, this is more likely to be the case with clothing than with other objects. However, it’s important to say that not every angle of investigation had equally good results – for example, we realised that researching the inhabitants of Worship Street would be possible, but would require time-consuming visits to local archives, so abandoned that line of enquiry.

Our research introduced us to the idea that headwear in early modern England was a focus of concern about gender conformity and nonconformity: women and people assigned female at birth who wore hats designed for men were condemned by early seventeenth-century writers and authorities for their masculine gender expression. The number of primary texts written about these people indicated that they must have existed in significant numbers. This led us to question how they could be represented without homogenising their experience: what happens when we know that a large group of people engaged in gender nonconformity, but their motivations and gendered subjectivity are impossible to establish? Among others, these motivations are likely to have included desire for economic advantage, which was more easily available to men than to women; interest in fashion; desire to appear sexually available, which was associated with the idea of ‘women in men’s clothes’ since men’s clothes were generally tighter and more revealing; desire to pursue relationships with women; and desire to be read as male because this felt more comfortable and in line with their own gendered subjectivity. In other words, the history of women/people assigned female at birth wearing men’s hats includes disguised women alongside people who would now be called lesbians and people who would now be described as trans. In order to avoid erasing minority experiences, and erasing the individuality of an already marginalised group of people, we felt it was important to name these possibilities.

¹This will, of course, differ between individual researchers depending on both the time and funding they have, and their familiarity with the context and the research process. Because our project was funded for just 1 year, and because not all the researchers on the project were funded to work full-time, this was the most time we could reasonably spend on research.
This knowledge also helped to shed light on a story we were aware of from early seventeenth-century Virginia, in which Thomas(ine) Hall in Virginia in 1623, who described themself as ‘both man and woman’, was commanded by a court to make this visible by wearing men’s clothing with women’s accessories: a coif, cross-cloth (triangular forehead cloth) and apron. If headwear was a focus for how gender was expressed and interpreted, the court’s focus on Hall’s headwear makes sense. This meant that a gendered interpretation of this cap also offered an opportunity to make a link to Hall’s story, and to share a uniquely early example of a person whose self-defined gender was not male or female, and who today would be described as intersex and/or non-binary.

After: the gendered interpretation

This text is now publicly accessible through the V&A’s Explore the Collections database.

This cap was one of 13 objects investigated in 2019 as part of ‘Gendering Interpretations’: a collaborative project between the V&A, University of Plymouth, Vasa Museum (Stockholm), Lund University, Leiden University and the University of Western Australia.

Labour in the wool industry was significantly affected by gender. Men and women kept sheep and worked as sheep-shearers, but men were paid around 16% more than women for the same work. Wool-spinning in early modern England was predominantly performed by women and children, and enabled women to earn a meagre living wage. Spinning was also ideologically gendered: all women were encouraged to spin in order to keep their hands and minds busy at a chaste, productive task.

The 1571 Cappers’ Act mandated the wearing of these caps for ‘Every Person above the Age of seven Years... Except Maids, Ladies, Gentlewomen, Noble Personages (and other aristocratic men and clerics)’. Hats signalled social status, and headwear was also a focus of gender conformity and nonconformity. Clergyman Thomas Stoughton referred to men with long hair, and women with short hair and hats, as having ‘changed their sexe’; while the ‘man-woman’ in the 1620 pamphlet Hic Mulier is condemned for their “cloudy Ruffianly broad-brim’d Hatte, and wanton Feather”. The coif or headdress was considered more appropriate for women than the hat: its capacity to metonymically signal female dress is demonstrated by the sentence passed against Thomas(ine) Hall in Virginia in 1623, which forced Hall to make visible their self-proclaimed status as ‘both man and woman’ by wearing men’s clothing with a coif, cross-cloth (triangular forehead cloth) and apron. This meant that, for women or other people assigned female at birth who wanted to express masculinity, hats were a particularly powerful signifier: this type of cap, which was legally circumscribed as male, was arguably even more so.

Key references
CASE STUDY: COMB

Object details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of origin:</th>
<th>France (made)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>1500-1600 (made)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist/Maker:</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials and Techniques:</td>
<td>Carved boxwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit line:</td>
<td>Alfred Williams Hearn Gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum number:</td>
<td>CIRC.478-1923</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before: what we started with

**Gallery context:** This comb is on display in the Medieval & Renaissance gallery, alongside several other combs and other items relating to health.

**Group label on display case:** Physicians continued to treat their patients in line with theories developed 1600 years earlier in ancient Greece. Arab doctors played a key role in transmitting these ideas to the West. Underpinning everything was the belief that disease was caused by an imbalance of certain qualities within the body. Patients were classified as hot, cool, moist or dry; drugs were similarly classified and administered accordingly.

Medicines were prepared at home or in a pharmacy and stored in ceramic jars. Shops and hospitals commissioned matching sets, with institutional emblems and labels identifying the contents.

Health and appearance were also linked to spiritual wellbeing. An ugly face signalled moral corruption, and women were advised to use mirrors to seek out signs of sin on their features. Physical imperfections could, of course, be disguised by dyes and make-up, available in an apothecary’s shop.

**Additional information in gallery booklet:** People often cleaned their hair with a comb rather than by washing, which was thought to expose the head to dangerous changes in temperature. The comb in the middle once included two small mirrors, protected by the sliding panel. Like the comb below, it bears words of love so may have been a courtship gift.
Object choice

Existing knowledge: From previous study, we were aware that early modern men who showed an interest in fashion were criticised for ‘effeminacy’. The adjective ‘effeminate’ in early modern culture did not (as it does now) suggest a man who desires other men; instead, it suggested that a man was excessively or uncontrollably attracted to women, leading him to take an excessive interest in his appearance (to make himself appear attractive) instead of in scholarship, politics or religion. Uncontrollable lust was itself also seen as a feminine trait. Consequently, we were keen to include an object relating to men’s fashion in the project, as it would enable us to point out how understandings of gendered words and phrases have shifted over time.

Search techniques: Having already researched an item of clothing, we chose a comb as another item related to personal appearance. We chose to research a boxwood comb because the V&A has a large collection of them, meaning our research would be widely applicable; and because these combs already had several paragraphs of curatorial research available, which provided a useful starting point for our own research.

During: the research process

Research questions
Using our list of suggested research questions as a base, we drew up a list of key questions we wanted to answer, as follows:

- Who made the combs?
- Where does boxwood grow? Who cut it down?
- Who used the combs?
- Who gave them as gifts – men to women, or women to men? Or both?
- Was it unusual to have gender-neutral dressing objects in early modern Europe, as it is today?
- What were attitudes towards comb-use in men and women? Was it more socially acceptable for women than men to carry combs? Or were both equally subject to (e.g.) being condemned for frivolity/vanity?
Research methods

- We started our research using the books and articles listed as references on the V&A collections database entry for this object.
- We used the “book and article search” tool on a university library catalogue. Our searches included the following terms:
  - “boxwood comb”
  - “early modern” comb making
  - “early modern” forestry
  - “early modern” comb love gift
  - “early modern” men combing hair
- We used the footnotes and bibliographies of the books and articles we read to draw up a further reading list.
- Since this comb is French, we used the Bibliothèque Nationale de France database Gallica, which gives free access to facsimiles of out-of-copyright French books, to research the statutes of the French comb-makers’ guild.
- We used the database Early English Books Online (now mostly open access) to research early modern attitudes towards men and women combing hair in public through keyword searches for “combing his hair” and “combing her hair”
- To access books, we used a university library and the British Library.

The research process took approximately 2.5 days (18 hours), with a further 1 day to write up the outputs (see below).

Reflection

It proved difficult to research the involvement of specific individuals in boxwood forestry. However, our research revealed general information about wood shortages in early modern Europe and the use of wood as a domestic fuel, meaning that many wooden objects (especially those made from locally grown wood) can in a sense be connected to the role of women in food production and fuel gathering. This illustrates the importance of thinking widely when constructing gendered interpretations, asking if there is any possible link to gender roles or gendered experiences as well as looking for women and queer people.

Early English Books Online was particularly useful in this research process for revealing the tone and context in which a man “combing his hair” or a woman “combing her hair” were typically referred to in early modern culture. This would also be useful for revealing attitudes towards other early modern objects and their use.

Our research revealed that widows of male comb-makers were explicitly admitted to the French comb-makers’ guild. This acceptance of widows appears to be typical for trade guilds - and more broadly, widows often inherited their husband’s business and/or remarried within the trade to continue their work. Pointing this out is a useful, easy way to make women’s roles in object production more visible.
After: the gendered interpretation

This text is now publicly accessible through the V&A’s Explore the Collections database.

This comb was one of 13 objects investigated in 2019 as part of ‘Gendering Interpretations’: a collaborative project between the V&A, University of Plymouth, Vasa Museum (Stockholm), Lund University, Leiden University and the University of Western Australia.

Comb-making in France was regulated by the guild of comb-makers (peigniers), which admitted women if they were widows taking over their husband’s trade. Since comb-making could take place within the household, the wives and daughters of comb-makers are likely to have also assisted their husbands and fathers administratively, and probably also helped out in the workshop itself. Elsewhere in Europe, notably Venice, women could be full members of comb-makers’ guilds.

Combs like this were intended for use by all genders. As long hair and beards became more fashionable during the mid- and late-seventeenth century, it became more common for men, and sometimes women to use combs like this in public. Religious commentators condemned this practice as immodest on the part of women, and as evidence of frivolity and vanity on the part of everyone. Men in particular were criticised for letting hair-styling distract them from more important matters such as war, politics and religion.

In the early modern period, to accuse a man of frivolity, vanity and excessive concern for his appearance was to implicitly feminise him. Accusations of ‘effeminacy’ in this period did not carry connotations of same-sex attraction as they do today; instead, they indicated excessive attraction to women. A man who was ‘effeminate’ was unable to exert ‘masculine’ rational control over his sexual and emotional attraction to women, and had likely spent too much time around women – both of which might result in him spending too much time combing or styling his hair, either because he was influenced by women or because he wanted to attract them.

Key references
• Anon, Haec-vir: or, The womanish-man: being an answere to a late booke intituled Hic-muller (London: Eliot’s Court Press, 1620)
• René de Lespinasse, Les métiers et corporations de la ville de Paris: XIVe-XVIIIe siècles. Tissus, étoffes, vêtements, cuirs et peaux, métiers divers (1886-97), volume 3, Gallica
• Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon’, Feminist Studies, 8:1 (Spring, 1982), 46-80
CASE STUDY: ANTIMONY CUP

Object details

Name: Cup  
Place of origin: England (made)  
Date: ca. 1720 (made)  
Artist/Maker: Unknown  
Materials and Techniques: Cast antimony  
V&A Museum number: 1370 -1900

Before: what we started with

Gallery context: This cup is on display in the British Galleries, alongside other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century objects with protective or decorative cases.

Antimony was used to treat digestive disorders. Cups like this were filled with wine. The metal would then react with the wine. Patients would drink small amounts of the liquid to induce vomiting. The cup needed protection, as antimony was expensive and also toxic in concentrated amounts.

Object choice

Existing knowledge: From previous study, we were aware that early modern understandings of gender differences were underpinned by ‘humoral theory’. Early modern people believed that illnesses and emotions were caused by an imbalance of humours (bodily fluids); that ‘male’ and ‘female’ characteristics were also determined by these humours; and that men were better at controlling their humoral imbalances than women were, hence would be less likely to cry, experience uncontrollable desires, etc.

Consequently, we were keen to include an object relating to humoral theory in the project, as it would enable us to tell this story: a fundamental aspect of how gender was understood in the early modern period, and one whose effects persist in the gender stereotypes (“boys don’t cry”) that continue to harm people of all genders today.

Search techniques: We searched for “humours” in the free-text field of the V&A collections database. This produced three pages of results. We selected the cup as the object with the clearest link to humoral theory, since that theory was the reason it was believed to be effective: drinking wine that had been steeped overnight in cups made from the poisonous metal antimony— which would cause vomiting and diarrhoea — was seen as an effective medicine because it would purge the body of imbalanced humours.
During: the research process

Research questions
Using our list of suggested research questions (see page X) as a base, we drew up a list of key questions we wanted to answer, as follows:

- Use of antimony cups in purging:
  - Can we find any specific examples of antimony cups being used? Who used them?
  - Can we find any examples of people advocating that antimony cups be used for purging?
- What evidence can we find about the gendered implications of humoral theory?
- Who was Harry Legg (named in the V&A collections database as the seller of the cup)?
- Who made antimony cups?

Research methods
- We used Wikipedia for a brief grounding in subjects we were unfamiliar with (such as the metal antimony).
- We used the “book and article search” tool on a university library catalogue. Our searches included the following terms:
  - “antimony cup”
  - “antimonial cup” (after reading several references to the cups by this variant name)
  - antimony banned France
  - women purging “early modern”
  - gender humours “early modern”
- We used the footnotes and bibliographies of the books and articles we read to draw up a further reading list.
- We used the database Early English Books Online (now mostly open access) to find early modern texts about antimony cups, using the search terms “antimony cup” and “antimonial cup”.
- To access books, we used a university library and the British Library.
- When we discovered from one article that the V&A cup was accompanied by a letter to ‘Mrs Ann Shaw, Goodwood, Sussex’, we contacted a V&A curator to ask for access to (or a transcript of) the letter.
- We used the V&A archive to view V&A Nominal File ‘Legg, Mr. H., Croydon’ – MA/1/L873.

The research process took approximately 2 days (14 hours), with a further 1 day to write up the outputs (see below).

Reflection
Since antimony cups are quite rare, the number of articles written about them is manageable: this is an advantage over choosing more common objects.
As we’d suspected, the most interesting gendered aspect of the antimony cup was its link to humoral theory. Given the time constraints, we didn’t spend a long time researching gendered interpretations of every aspect of the cup: if, after skim-reading around two articles on a given aspect (e.g. manufacture), no interesting gendered interpretation emerged, we abandoned that line of investigation and only returned to it if no other lines of investigation were fruitful either.

After: the gendered interpretation

This text is now publicly accessible through the V&A’s Explore the Collections database.

This cup was one of 13 objects investigated in 2019 as part of ‘Gendering Interpretations’: a collaborative project between the V&A, University of Plymouth, Vasa Museum (Stockholm), Lund University, Leiden University and the University of Western Australia.

In England, the popularity of cups made from antimony was initiated by John Evans, who manufactured the cups and published a book, The universal medicine: or The antimoniall cup, in 1634. The theory that underpinned belief in the effectiveness of antimony cups is the same theory that underpinned early modern misogynistic discourse: particularly the idea that women were emotional and inconstant, and crying unmasculine.

Early modern people believed that illnesses and emotions were caused by an imbalance of humours (bodily fluids). The balance of cold, wet, hot and dry in the human body was controlled by the balance of blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile; if these became unbalanced, a person would feel the physiological effects. Emotions were understood to have a physiological cause, just like physical illnesses.

Consequently, drinking wine that had been steeped overnight in poisonous antimony cups – which would cause vomiting and diarrhoea – was seen as an effective medicine because it would purge the body of imbalanced humours. As Evans wrote, the antimony cup ‘purgeth and purifieth the Body from all superfluous and praeternaturall Blood, Phlegme, Choler, and Melancholy’ – that is, from the four humours believed to regulate physical and emotional health – ‘and maketh the body vigorous, strong, and lusty.’

This humoral theory also held that men were naturally hotter and drier than women, and that this determined ‘male’ and ‘female’ characteristics. Men were seen as stronger, more active, more constant and more rational. Men were also perceived to be better than women at controlling their humours, and therefore at controlling their emotions and bodily impulses.

Key references
- John Evans, The Universall Medicine: or The Vertues of the Antimoniall Cup (London: Printed by John Haviland, 1634)
HOW?
TIPS FOR GENDERING YOUR MUSEUM

RESEARCHING

How to pick your objects?

Start small! You can apply this to any object, but don’t let that feel overwhelming: even if you just decide to research one object, you’ll still uncover new stories to share.

If you’re not sure where to start, why not think about:
• Your favourite object
• An object that intrigues you
• An object with a local connection
• An object that attracts particular public interest (if you don’t work directly with visitors, speak to your colleagues who do)
• An object that engages with a central theme of a particular gallery
• An object from a time period where you feel women/LGBTQ+ people are underrepresented in your museum

How to do the research

If you have the resources, it’s great if you can dedicate staff time to this process, or pay casual staff to do it. But if that’s not something your museum can do, it’s also something you can do in spare moments of time: it doesn’t matter how long it takes, you don’t have to do it all at once.

We’ve put together a list of questions you can ask about your object. It’s important to say that this is a list of suggestions, not a checklist: you can choose whichever questions seem most interesting and/or feasible to you. Likewise, don’t feel like you have to construct a complete ‘biography’ of your object: when we used this method, we found it was never possible to answer every single question for any given object. Ultimately, it’s a method that helps to uncover more information about an object than you had before – which means that anything you uncover is a bonus.
• Materials:
  - What is this object made of?
  - What can we discover about who sourced those materials? Were there rules or conventions about which gender(s) did this? Are there any examples of people breaching those conventions? If so, how did they manage it, and what were the consequences?
  - What difference did the sourcing of those materials make to the gender dynamics of the society they came from? For example, if an instrument is wooden, did the fact that men had to go out into the forests to source wood mean women spent more time alone with each other/with their children? If an instrument is inlaid with tortoiseshell, did colonisation of the areas where tortoiseshell came from involve the imposition of European gender norms? Etc.
• Production:
  - Who made this object? Were there rules or conventions about which gender(s) did this (e.g. rules about membership in particular craft guilds)? Are there any examples of people breaching those conventions? If so, how did they manage it, and what were the consequences?
• Use:
  - Who is this object made for – men, women, all genders, a specific person?
  - Are there characteristics of this object that make it obvious it was designed for use by a particular gender?
  - Were different genders perceived differently when they used this object?
• Design:
  - Does this object have any design depicting people/objects? If so, how are those design elements gendered? If they depict a story (e.g. a myth), what role do different genders play in that story?
• Interpretation:
  - What gendered assumptions have people made about this object after it stopped being used? E.g. have people assumed it was made for/used by a particular gender? Are those assumptions true? What kind of underlying politics shaped those assumptions?
  - If this object is currently on display, what does its label say? Does it mention gender? If not, who is this erasing?

Image: Seventeenth-century woodcut showing a female-presenting wool spinner.
How to find resources

If this isn’t an area you’ve researched before – or if you’d just like to draw on multiple people’s expertise – you might want to think about the following options:

• Ask/apply for resources to pay researchers. Remember, this research will help you diversify your museum’s representation of gender – so look for funding targeted at equality, diversity and inclusion. A good example of a project benefitting from external funding is the HLF-funded Rainbow Connection project run by Plymouth Pride in collaboration with the University of Plymouth.

• Contact local universities and colleges: in particular, history or museum studies students might welcome the experience of researching museum objects. You could also look into specialist research networks, such as the Swedish Network of Women’s & Gender Historians.

• Reach out to local women’s/LGBTQ+ activist groups

• Reach out to large/well-funded museums in your local area to see if they can advise or would like to work together

• Contact local history societies/“friends of” local archives: this kind of research is particularly well suited to citizen humanities groups or museum or heritage site volunteers

• Explore the EDI resources provided by professional bodies such as the Museums Association and ICOM

• Use our recommended reading list (pp 27-33)

• Keep sharing your research as it’s in progress, bringing other people into the conversation: colleagues, local academics, other museums etc.

With both these options, as with any community engagement, it’s important to make sure you’re working together ethically.

Think about:
• How can you co-develop the aims/scope of the project?
• How can you ensure your collaborators get what they need out of the project too?
• Are your collaborators vulnerable? Many younger activists or volunteers, including precariously employed early-career academics, often engage in projects like this because they’re desperately trying to get a job – so make sure they don’t feel pressured to say yes to everything.
How?

Tips for Gendering your Museum Collecting

Since collections feed into research, exhibitions, interpretation and public programming, they’re the starting point for any museum that wants to reflect the diversity and complexity of the populations they represent. Yet one of the main problems that museums face in trying to represent women and LGBTQ+ people is that they are often poorly represented in existing collections. In the past this has been because collecting and acquisition practices have tended to privilege men, meaning other groups have been marginalised; in the most extreme cases, materials have been destroyed or not deemed worthy of preserving. To borrow Sheila Rowbotham’s phrase, these groups have been ‘hidden from history’.

As we’ve shown in our case studies, most collections will contain objects that can be interpreted in a gendered way. But if you want to develop your collection further, making it easier to tell these stories, consider:

- **Proactive collecting**: Prioritise items that fill gaps in collections.
- **Acquisition policies**: Recognise gender and sexuality as important categories when acquiring gifts or bequests.
- **Seek advice**: An advisory board can help you to develop an inclusive collecting framework which takes account of the sensitivity of these stories. Reach out to local LGBTQ+ groups, charities and/or universities.

![Image: Hat researched at the Vasa Museum as part of the ‘Gendering Interpretations’ project. Image credit: Anneli Karlsson, Vasa Museum/SMTM.]
HOW?
TIPS FOR GENDERING YOUR MUSEUM

CATALOGUING

Catalogues shape knowledge. They determine what can be located, seen and told about objects. How they handle gender and sexuality can therefore have far-reaching effects.

Gender and sexuality are rarely searchable terms in catalogue metadata of producers, owners, commissioners and benefactors. Catalogues and cataloguing processes in some instances render women anonymous: there’s often no easy way to search across collections for women as makers, designers or owners. Similarly, an object’s LGBTQ+ significance is often far from obvious, particularly if the object was produced in a context where discussion of LGBTQ+ experience was constrained.

In the short term, consider:
• Finding aids: Go through the existing collection and produce guides that highlight materials relevant to women, gender and sexuality. Short, user-friendly guides are an incredibly helpful way for visitors and staff alike to navigate complex cataloguing systems and collections.

• Tags or categories: This can be one useful way to make objects relating to women and LGBTQ+ people clearly identifiable on collections databases – for example, the V&A use the category tags ‘LGBTQ’ and ‘Gender and Sexuality’. You won’t be able to tag all the relevant objects at once, and that’s okay: start small, or take half an hour a week to tag a few relevant objects, and gradually you’ll increase the visibility of these groups in your collections. As we mentioned in our case studies, it’s also great to make possible gendered resonances visible on catalogues: consider using a different tag or classification so that these dimensions are still easily identifiable.

• Terminology: It’s important to apply terminology concerning gender and sexuality sensitively and accurately. A good starting point for this is the vocabulary of LGBTQ terms developed by the V&A (see Researching the history of gender).

In the longer term, consider working towards developing cataloguing systems that integrate gender and sexuality into categorisation.

Examples of good practice
• The National Archives in Kew, and the Metropolitan Archives in London have developed online guides to documents relating to LGBT issues, which makes finding them much more straightforward.
• The V&A LGBTQ working group has developed a list of LGBTQ+ terms for use in cataloguing (see Researching).
HOW?
TIPS FOR GENDERING YOUR MUSEUM
DISPLAY/EXHIBITING

When you’re developing displays or interpretation that incorporate a gendered perspective, here are some things to keep in mind:

• Lots of options. There are plenty of ways to integrate a gendered perspective into your interpretation, including:
  ◦ integrate into permanent exhibitions
  ◦ temporary exhibitions
  ◦ a ‘gender trail’ which visitors can follow to find objects whose gendered significance is highlighted (either on their labels or in a separate ‘trail’ leaflet)
  ◦ additional labels highlighting objects’ gendered significance, co-produced with women’s and/or LGBTQ+ community groups
  ◦ events/artistic responses to exhibitions produced by women and/or LGBTQ+ people

Examples of good practice

• Vasa Museum, Stockholm: ‘Vasa’s Women’ permanent exhibition highlights the multiple contributions of women to the history of the Vasa warship
• V&A, London: ‘Gendering Interpretations’ research added to online ‘Explore the Collections’ database
• York Castle Museum: ‘Shaping the Body’ permanent exhibition includes stories from trans and cis people about their relationships with clothing
• Bradford Museums: extra object labels made by West Yorkshire Queer Stories community project highlight objects’ LGBTQ+ significance
• Museums Liverpool and Walker Art Gallery: altered permanent exhibitions to ensure LGBTQ+ relevance of objects/artworks is explicitly mentioned
• Museum of Transology (currently at Bishopsgate Institute, London): travelling exhibition of objects selected by trans people for their personal relevance
HOW?
TIPS FOR GENDERING YOUR MUSEUM

DISPLAY/EXHIBITING

• Language matters. However you choose to express your gendered interpretations, be mindful of the signals your language sends:
  ◦ because most societies today still see male, heterosexual and cisgender as ‘default’, silence isn’t the same as neutrality: it’s important to name different gendered possibilities explicitly.
  ◦ pronouns are important – misgendering in museum displays (referring to a person with the wrong gendered noun or pronoun) has been shown to negatively affect trans visitors. If in doubt, try using neutral they/them pronouns.

• Think interculturally. If an object/artist is from a culture with a different understanding of gender:
  ◦ try to use the terms that exist in that culture/language
  ◦ avoid squeezing non-Western genders into a Western gender binary or trans/cis framework
  ◦ comparisons to Western concepts can make genders from other cultures more comprehensible to Western visitors – but it’s still important to make it clear they’re not equivalents

TOURS

While it’s often impractical and costly to change permanent exhibitions, tours (both guided and self-guided) offer an easy way of providing fresh perspectives on collections and highlighting gendered objects in what might well be long-term displays. You could try:

• Creating a self-guided tour based on particular objects around the museum that present a narrative of gender diversity – this can be as simple as producing a printed page or downloadable PDF, or if you have the funding, a small pamphlet or map.
• Marking key objects with a symbol or badge which invites visitors to discover more information online
• Integrating gendered stories or objects into existing tours
• Offering LGBTQ+ training to tour guides
• Working with interested groups within and/or outside the museum to produce bespoke gender or LGBTQ+ tours – try your local LGBTQ+ groups and/or university students
HOW?
TIPS FOR GENDERING YOUR MUSEUM
EDUCATION/EVENTS

Programming

One way to embed gendered interpretations of objects and collections into the life of the museum is through the programming. You could consider:

• Programming around themed days, weeks and months – e.g. International Women’s Day (8 March), LGBTQ History Month (February), Women’s History Month (March), Trans Day of Visibility (31 March), or your local Pride event.
• Reach out to local universities and history societies to find speakers for themed talks.
• Embed diversity into family programming – design craft activities relating to women’s and LGBTQ+ history, or tell stories featuring a diverse range of figures and families.
• Holding events to launch any resources you produce as part of your research (e.g. trails or guides)

Gendered interpretations in educational programming

At the Vasa Museum, Stockholm, the findings from the ‘Gendering Interpretations’ project feed directly into education programmes. In response to changes in the Swedish curriculum which place more focus on the material aspects of history, the museum hosted an ‘Objects in Focus’ event for teachers, which included sharing research from the ‘Gendering Interpretations’ project – this enabled them to show teachers how gender diversity could be incorporated into teaching with material objects. Findings from the project were also included in a ‘Scientific Friday’ event for schools, where researcher Anna Silwerulv shared her findings about an item of clothing found in the wreck of the Vasa which was initially thought to be trousers, but which painstaking textile science research revealed to be a skirt.

Image credit: Maria Sandström, Vasa Museum/SMTM.
**CASE STUDIES: EVENTS AT THE V&A**

To share the new gendered stories we found as part of our project, we held a series of events throughout the year. In case they inspire you, here’s a selection:

**Embroidery workshop**

We commissioned textile artist Sarah-Joy Ford to run a workshop stimulated by our research into the embroideries of Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, which are known as the ‘Oxburgh Hangings’. Inspired by research showing that early modern women used embroidery as an important form of self-expression and community-building, and by the fact that these small embroidered octagonal panels fit together into a larger wall hanging, Sarah-Joy gave visitors the chance to embroider their name, or the name of a woman who was important to them, on an octagonal panel with a digital print of one of the embroideries from the Oxburgh Hangings. The panels then fit together into a communal panel for a photograph at the end of the workshop.

‘Hidden gendered histories’ tour

Kit (the postdoctoral researcher on the project) led a 45-minute tour of the objects we’d researched, sharing the hidden gendered stories we’d uncovered. The tour also encouraged visitors to think about other objects in the museum from this new perspective – for example, having learned that the early modern English wool and linen trades relied mainly on the labour of poorly paid women, they might look at all woollen or embroidered objects differently.
**Rainbow plaques workshop**

With the help of LGBTQ volunteer tour guides at the V&A, we ran a workshop drawing on the Rainbow Plaques project: a project that uses temporary cardboard ‘rainbow plaques’, a visibly queer version of the iconic blue plaque, to mark places that are significant to LGBTQ+ history. Visitors made their own plaques to mark objects in the museum that they felt had LGBTQ+ significance, as well as commemorating their own LGBTQ+ histories (from Virginia Woolf’s house to ‘the bench where I first held hands with my partner’).

**Cello recital**

Working with Jaclyn Rosenfeld, a Royal College of Music student cellist, we discussed how the idea of ‘hidden stories of gender’ could be applied to a programme of music. Jaclyn used our research to select a programme, which she performed at one of the Royal College of Music’s regular student recitals in the V&A. Her programme included female composers who are more well-known for their male pupils than for their own work; gay composers whose sexuality is often dismissed as irrelevant to their music; and music relating to an object we’d researched, a mask of the Italian commedia dell’arte character Pulcinella.

**Making your events inclusive for all genders**

If you’re running any event – but especially one about gender – consider:

- providing gender-neutral toilets
- addressing groups in a neutral way (try ‘folks’ or ‘everyone’ rather than ‘ladies and gentlemen’)
- giving people the option to share their pronouns on name badges
- if you’re collecting demographic data, make sure your forms are LGBTQ+-inclusive
WHAT'S NEXT?

FURTHER RESOURCES

GENDER AND MUSEUM PRACTICE

Open-access


Books/paywalled articles

• Adair, Joshua G., and Amy K. Levin (eds.), Museums, Sexuality and Gender Activism (London: Routledge, 2020)
• Levin, Amy K. (ed.), Gender, Sexuality and Museums (London: Routledge, 2010)
• Machin, Rebecca, ‘Gender Representation in the Natural History Galleries at the Manchester Museum’ in Gender, Sexuality and Museums, ed. by Amy K. Levin (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 187-200


GENDER AND MUSEUM PRACTICE: RESEARCH/THEORY

Open-access


• Stone, Lois, “There was nothing, and now we have something”: Representation of Trans Narratives in British Museums, 2015-2018 (PhD thesis: University of Manchester, 2019), https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/177284599/FULL_TEXT.PDF

Books/paywalled articles

• Adair, Joshua G., and Amy K. Levin (eds.), Museums, Sexuality and Gender Activism (London: Routledge, 2020)
• Forssberg, Anna Maria and Svante Norrhem, Föremålens Hemliga Liv [The Secret Life of Objects] (Tryck: Elanders, Mölnlycke 2021)
• Levin, Amy K. (ed.), Gender, Sexuality and Museums (London: Routledge, 2010)
• Machin, Rebecca, ‘Gender Representation in the Natural History Galleries at the Manchester Museum’ in Gender, Sexuality and Museums, ed. by Amy K. Levin (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.187-200

RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF GENDER

This is far from a comprehensive list, and is particularly focused on the early modern period (the focus of our project, and a period when representation of women and LGBTQ+ people in museums is often disproportionately low) – but we hope you find it useful as a starting point.

Open-access

• Clark, Alice, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (London: George Routledge & Sons; New York: F.P. Dutton & Co., 1919): useful for finding out how women were involved in the manufacture or use of a huge variety of objects. Available open-access at https://archive.org/details/workinglifeofwom00claruoft.
• Early English Books Online/Text Creation Partnership (https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/): searchable texts of early modern English books, useful for illuminating attitudes towards gender and particular objects in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.


Books/paywalled articles

• Black, Christopher, Early Modern Italy: A Social History (London: Routledge, 2002): useful for researching the context of Italian objects.


• Hafter, Daryl M., Women at Work in Preindustrial France (University Park: Penn State Press, 2010): useful for researching the context of French objects.

• Heyam, Kit, Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender (London: John Murray Press, 2022): a global history of how gender intersects with factors including dress, the body, social role, sexuality, spirituality and theatrical performance.


• Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (https://www.oxforddnb.com/): useful and reliable biographies of influential British individuals. Check if your local library has a subscription.

• Richards, John F., The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): useful for researching the materials objects are made from, where they came from and how gender might be relevant to the process by which they were sourced.

• Rublack, Ulinka, ‘Matter in the Material Renaissance’, Past & Present 219 (2013), 41-85: useful for thinking about how material objects can be implicated in wider ideologies and systems of power.

• Scott, Joan W., Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): a feminist critique of the ghettoization of women’s history and the way gender affects how we research history.
• Shoemaker, Robert and Mary Vincent (eds.), Gender and History in Western Europe (London: Arnold, 1998): a collection of essays along the same lines as the above book, focusing on Europe.
• Stearns, Peter N., Gender in World History, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006): a global history of how intercultural contact has shaped ideas about gender roles.

Trans inclusion

• ACAS, Supporting Trans Employees in the Workplace: https://www.acas.org.uk/supporting-trans-employees-in-the-workplace
• Lester, CN, Trans Like Me: Conversations For All Of Us (London: Virago, 2017)
• Stonewall, The Truth About Trans: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/truth-about-trans
• Stonewall workplace resources: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/best-practice-toolkits-and-resources
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GENDERING
THE MUSEUM
A TOOLKIT

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