



# Exploring Perceptions Of Value

# Introduction

**Over 12 weeks, participants from all walks of life, engaged in a project exploring different perceptions of value including historical, sentimental and aesthetic.**

**Using a range of museum objects we challenged our own commonly held beliefs and themes, and then presented them to groups of our peers through activities and games.**

The Cabinet of Curiosity became fashionable at about the same time as 16<sup>th</sup> Century explorers began discovering the New World. Rich men filled entire rooms in their houses full, of “Marvellous Things” to amaze private visitors and guests. These rooms and the items within became the forerunners of modern museums when the Victorians allowed the public to see them for the first time.

Our ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’ is an evolution of individually created artefacts born out of inspiration from the project. Each exhibit represents a cherished item of personal interest.

What would your ‘**Cabinet of Curiosity**’ contain?



# Initial Responses

Two secure travel cases. One large, one small. Inside of each, objects of meaning. Some obvious – others less so. From a tear drop shaped rock to a gold locket and chain; the aim, to determine value.

The group debated initial impressions of the value of each item. Were the gold items worth most? Views were challenged. What did value truly mean? Was it historical, sentimental, cultural, religious, aesthetical, scientific or rareness. When an objects story was revealed opinions sometimes changed. Items previously viewed as valueless took on images of meaning and worth.

Fifteen otherwise non-descript objects enabled a group of people from various backgrounds to challenge their initial impressions. Fifteen objects demonstrated how everything has value, though not necessarily obviously so.

HISTORICAL  
SENTIMENTAL  
CULTURAL  
RELIGIOUS  
AESTHETICAL  
SCIENTIFIC  
RARITY





Pre-historic Handtool



Ancient Egyptian Funery Figure



Ancient Symbolic Cypriot Figure



Modern Palestinian Wedding Jacket



British Bees Specimens

"I thought the Verge Watch's historical concept of time keeping was the most interesting of the objects, yet the locket has become the most valued to me as it holds an emotional romanticism."



Early English Watch (Front)

"WWI Postcard: because of the traumatic circumstances it was produced in, and the Honey-bee specimen: the immensity of their contribution to ecosystems and human survival."



Modern Elephant Skin Wallet

"Palestinian Wedding Jacket: I was instantly drawn to the bright colours, the intricate patterns, and the shape and design."



Early English Watch (Back)

"I thought the Shabti was the most valuable, after discussing with the group my opinion changed to the hand tool, due to the facts that were presented to me."



Modern Nile Crocodile Skin

"I was immediately drawn to the Olduvian Hand Axe. Without this one item from human history humans wouldn't be who they are today. Therefore to me it is the most valuable object in our history and development."



Edwardian Keepsake Locket

"With a sense of unshakeable fascination I reached out for the Egyptian Shabti which I felt was the greatest in value for its historical position. After discussing all other artefacts I was surprised how my perception changed about certain objects, however the Shabti still convinced me for the sole reason that it survived centuries and the fact that it belonged to a mighty empire of the past."



Old Chinese Money



Old West African Money



First World War Silk Postcard



Victorian Glazed Brick



Modern Tibetan Buddhist Figure



Old Indonesian Money

# Artefact 'Top Trumps'

Participants engaged in a detailed discussion involving each person's subjective view of the artefacts value from first impressions.

Using dictionary definitions the group distilled separate value categories (aesthetic, scientific/nature, sentimental, cultural, religious, rarity, historical). Participants then gave value ratings (/100) for each category and compared their rankings. After challenging each others' reasons for obvious differences in opinion, compromise was achieved via a balancing act in which each artefact scored highest on at least one category. A group table of results was produced.



	Age/History	Sentimental	Cultural	Religious	Aesthetic	Science/ Nature	Rarity
Modern Tibetan Buddhist Figure	20	60	70	85	60	5	20
British Bees Specimens	95	40	30	5	40	95	0
Ancient Egyptian Funery Figure	90	45	90	95	40	7	40
Edwardian Keepsake Locket	20	100	25	35	30	10	5
Old Indonesian Money	25	20	40	0	10	20	10
Modern Elephant Skin Wallet	15	15	25	0	10	40	45
Ancient Symbolic Cypriot Figure	80	45	70	90	35	0	70
Victorian Glazed Brick	30	10	35	0	15	25	50
Pre-historic Handtool	95	25	100	30	0	95	5
Old West African Money	75	45	80	95	5	0	60
Old Chinese Money	40	40	75	0	25	20	30
Modern Nile Crocodile Skin	5	0	20	0	30	45	45
First World War Silk Postcard	35	100	50	20	80	0	5
Modern Palestinian Wedding Jacket	15	90	75	50	90	20	10
Early English Watch	50	60	60	0	80	80	35

From these value ratings the concept of Artefact 'Top Trumps' was devised on similar lines to other Top Trumps card games.



## Rules

- Players each have a hand of cards. They can only look at their top card. The first person to go chooses a category in which they think they can trump their opponents, (e.g. Sentimental 95/100).
- Other players then read out the same category.
- The one with the highest value wins and places all the top cards from opponents on the bottom of their pile. It is then their turn to choose a category from the next card.
- If 2 or more cards share the same score, those cards are placed in the middle and the same player chooses again.
- The next winner also gets to add these cards to their pile.

The Top Trump cards were designed and created by the Business Administration room within the education department.



**Winner = Player who holds all the cards.**

# Handling Sessions

Within the confines of a moderately sized art class, 7 of us were fishing for ideas towards a well anticipated handling session. The spiralling thoughts were put to the pen, consequently giving us a compendium of knowledge on paper. The general consensus made object championing the clear victor by a landslide.

Over a 2 day period, approximately 40 college students of diverse learning abilities were invited to sit before a group of individual artefact representatives who each championed their chosen item.

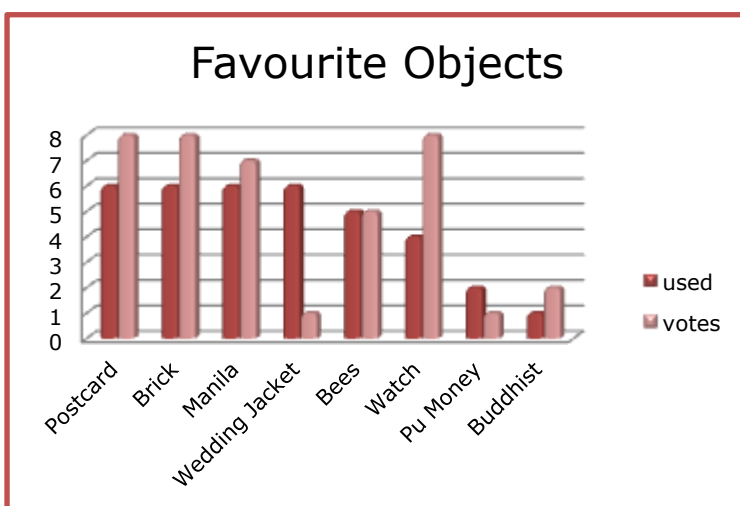
A 2 minute pitch was the allotted time to convince the audience of each objects value. Our aim was to discover whether we can challenge people's perceptions by presenting them with unexpected facts about the objects. Our goal was successfully achieved as we found people perceived and valued items differently when they knew more about them. Some key values that struck a chord were cultural, sentimental and historical.

## Analysis

The results were astonishing in some cases. Take the Victorian Brick as an example, we completely underestimated it, but to our surprise it generated an impressive 8 votes, which truly made it a dark

horse. Another interesting find was the Palestinian Jacket which gained only 1 vote, this come from a young Jewish man who was reminded of his motherland. The manila gained a healthy 7 votes that come from participants that could link their descendants to Africa.

The watch was only used 4 times yet it achieved a quick fire 8 votes in only 4 sessions mainly for its intricate design which made it a popular choice.





**Brick - "Mainly because of the story connected to it regarding the bringing of Braille to this country."**

**Verge Watch - "The craftsmanship used on such a small item and the importance it played in history."**

**Postcard - "The intricate needlework was amazing."**

**Manila - "Because I'm from an African desendent, I feel connected."**

**Palestinian Jacket - "This comes from the area near where I used to live."**

**Bees - "I liked the bees because without them certain things we take for granted would not exist!"**

**Pu Money - "I loved how emperor Wang Mang tried to improve the lives of the ordinary people."**



# Museum of My Life

**The group were posed the task of choosing five cherished things that could represent them as an individual in a**

**museum. Choices included various objects, books, places, clothing, photos, songs and toys.**



"My older brother gave me my 1<sup>st</sup> Marvel Comic as a child, I then used to save my pocket money & go to the comic shop every Saturday with my ma. This is a great childhood memory."

"On childhood holidays my parents took us to see the country's history & culture, one year we visited Empúries in Spain. I was stunned as an eleven year old just how much we can tell about who we are now by who we once were in history."



**By placing memories, feelings, and attitudes onto objects we told stories that represented some of the most valued parts of our histories, beliefs and**

**ultimately, ourselves. Or, in the words of one participant, "I picked up a leaf from memory lane and pressed it into a story."**



"This was my first computer in the early 1980's. For me, the age of technology had arrived!"

"The most simple yet beautiful gift that came into my possession was in the form of a black and white Palestinian scarf. A friend gave it to me on condition that I will take care of it and cherish it for a long time."



**Being held away from their usual context, prisoners and museum artefacts have things in common. Both still hold value and worth despite such displacement. It is easy to lose touch with one's own identity via the routines and institutions of prison life. This task aimed to strengthen identity through associations with our five cherished things.**

"I experienced a sense of awe as I observed Nebulae and galaxies as a boy. This led to a lifelong love of physics, cosmology and piercing the mysteries of the universe."



"I chose art books because I believe in the spiritual journey that the application of colour can bring in an otherwise monochrome world."

# Personal Projects

Following the exploration of the museum artefacts, preparatory ideas for personal projects were discussed. Overall it was a subjective undertaking as the diversity of social background and personalities spanned age, culture and conceptual identities. Participants displayed a wide range of creative skills from the written word and fine calligraphy to painting and crafted model work. All the projects served to present and elevate the sensitivity of the groups essential strength and humanity. It is indeed a curious case of personal value and vision.



## Matchstick Models

"Reflecting my love of matchstick modelling, love of Gaelic music and my Irish culture."



## Book Art

"Inspired by the 19<sup>th</sup> century impressionist as in the portrait of Virginia Woolf, many of who had difficult lives."



## Street Cred

"Once seen as a representation of social degradation, graffiti art is now sought by the rich and famous, demonstrating (how there is value in everything) changing perceptions of value."





## Apocalypse

"Due to my love of Marvel comics, I decided to do many pieces on the character Apocalypse as he's my fave."

## Arabic Calligraphy

"Arabic calligraphy is a supreme art form that needs little introduction and for me falls little short of fascinating."

## Poem

"The poem talked about the attributes of a believer and his struggle in this difficult life."

## Honey Bee

"Music and lyric inspired by honey-bee specimens, tying together ideas of value with music composition course."

## Palestinian Design

"The textures and colours of the Palestinian wedding jacket inspired this painting that shows the patterns used in the design of traditional Palestinian embroidery."

## Journal

"A fictional journal depicting the author's recovery from a breakdown. It is inspired by, and incorporates, my own 'Museum of my Life' artefacts."

## Painted Glasses

"Inspired by the 1930 & 40's dance musicals and the work of Calder & Vettriano."



# Collaborations

Collaboration is important, valuable, often essential and always rewarding. Born from a shared vision; what makes a good collaboration work? When two sides meet they need to have a clear goal, a genuine sense of purpose and a commitment to 'making it happen'. By linking up with existing groups in the prison we

were able to utilize their skills in order to showcase creativity in a variety of ways, including:

- **The Sign Post: Prisoner magazine.**
- **Braille: Workshop** transcribing written and diagrammatic materials for the blind.
- **Improvement Through Music: Group** developing performance and composition skills.



"The rewards felt by the signpost magazine have just been that: an exciting collaboration and effort between writers, team members, readers and managers. Despite the testing, and often difficult challenges that are undertaken, to collaborate means to support and encourage one another and find suitable and mutual solutions. Collective efforts must always be open and honest. When collaborating well, the ethos and direction will mirror the strength of all parties enriching one another along the way.

That is the core aim of the Signpost magazine. Without such an approach, the magazine would unlikely neither be on its current issue nor exist for such a healthy two and a half year period. We look forward to pushing on and working with others and wish the current 'Value Inside' project the best of collaboration!."

(Harry Palmer, Writer in Residence.)



# Braille



The Braille workshop (Workshop 5) produces Braille for the blind throughout the world. Every Brailleist is fully trained and has passed an RNIB credited course. The workers within the shop are engaged in all aspects of Braille production and subjects, ranging from foreign languages to the sciences. Here in Wakefield we have the distinction of being the only Braille shop within the prison system that produces diagrams either using Tactile Graphics or specialist paper called Zychem. We were asked to produce copies of selected articles that would be appreciated by the blind and give them some idea about what the display is about.

## Improvement Through Music

This is a 30 week course accredited by Rock School. It gives five students the chance to take units in music performance and composition, leading to qualifications and a final performance to staff and peers. James Dey, who facilitates the course, is a musician and songwriter who, for the last few years has worked in prisons teaching music. The course is funded by Activities, Learning and Skills.



Collaboration with other prison activities , such as 'Value Inside', brings the creativity and inspiration from disciplines together with the composition unit. This led to song-writing that specifically included elements of both projects.



"I hope the students find the course enjoyable, and pick up new skills, including the wider skills music brings, such as teamwork and good communication."  
(James Dey, I.T.M.)

# Cabinet of Curiosity



**This project was linked to other departments on site. In the woodwork shop we were lucky to have a skilled carpenter with furniture making experience who was given free rein to design and construct the cabinet.**



He thought about the objects being displayed and tried to capture the look of antiquity. Part of this was achieved by using some traditional methods like Mortice & Tenon and scribe joints. The cabinet took two men around 60 man hours to complete which included the design and manufacture of a tool needed to create some traditional looking detail.



This type of cabinet would usually be made from English Oak or Spanish Mahogany. As this was not available, Scandinavian red wood pine was used and treated with water based antique pre stain to darken the wood. The cabinet was hand finished with matt wax.



The windows ideally should be leaded glass but because of the surroundings and constraints here Perspex had to be used. The drawer runners are a modern design/possibly hinges but where possible stuck to authentic "look". After the exhibition the cabinet will be displayed in Leeds Museum and the plaque added to commemorate the project.





# Curating the Exhibition

The prospect of having our works displayed in a museum sent a wave of excitement throughout our small unit. A satisfactory conclusion was reached when we placed all the objects in their agreed locations within the cabinet for them to be displayed alongside the accompanying text panels and catalogue also produced.



We acknowledged six spaces would be available inside the cabinet which meant a discussion about the positioning of each piece of work was needed. In addition to our own work, 3 other prisoners had submitted work for inclusion in the cabinet. An initial plan for the final outlook was agreed upon and sketched out on paper. A two week long anxious wait for the finished cabinet left us momentarily in the dark but finally a sense of relief came when we delivered the cabinet just a week before our deadline.



Each participant was required to write a museum label for their pieces of work – a task which we soon realised was not as easy as it first seemed.

How these labels were to be presented with the cabinet was the next challenge for the group. We agreed that due to the limited space in the cabinet it made more sense to have a label panel outside of the cabinet.



The final challenge for the group was to design this catalogue in order to provide a record of the journey travelled through the course of the project.

It was suggested that each group member have the opportunity to design a page each to ensure all the group members voices could be heard.

The final catalogue was produced within the business administration class as part of a level 3 qualification.

# Acknowledgments



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(Rachel Forster, PhD student, University of Leeds)



**Leeds Museum**  
Discovery Centre



**Arts & Humanities**  
Research Council



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**