



Yorkshire's Favourite Paintings

by **Scott Billings**

The interpretation of collections is a vital element in the public engagement work of most contemporary museums and galleries. Curators, learning departments and exhibition designers all influence how objects are presented and interpreted, often by telling stories, making cross-cultural connections and by providing context and history. Visitors have come to expect this kind of expert contextualisation from museums and, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, from art galleries too.

But like almost every area of communication in the 21st century, museum interpretation is becoming a two-way exchange. The rise of social media and its many channels for multiple, personal voices, means that more and more people expect to share their own stories and contexts and offer their own interpretations. This idea is rippling through the arts and cultural heritage world, demonstrated by last year's Arts Marketing Association conference which focused specifically on shifts from marketing to people towards ways of marketing with people.

This idea of visitor input underpins a project by the Yorkshire Regional Museums Hub to promote the county's oil painting collections. The campaign, designed by Sumo and called Yorkshire's Favourite Paintings, hopes to get people talking about their own favourite pictures from the collections, sharing their thoughts online and commenting on the views of others. 'A lot of people aren't aware of the breadth and depth of the region's painting collections. We often talk about the venues themselves, but the paintings are really much more than the sum of their parts,' explains Eric Hildrew, head of marketing and communications for Museums Sheffield, the Hub's lead partner.

With Renaissance in the Regions funding to digitise a number of paintings, the Yorkshire Hub was looking for a way to cross-promote its venues, which include large art galleries in Leeds, York, Sheffield and Hull, as well as many smaller museums. According to Hildrew, the initial idea had been to run a 'competition' to find Yorkshire's overall favourite painting, but in the end a more open-ended approach emerged. 'Sumo softened the competition, arguing

that finding just one favourite ran counter to the kernel of the idea, which is that everybody has a different favourite and their own reasons for that particular choice', he says.

Instead, the campaign will be built around people's stories and views on their favourite pictures – their own interpretations. Using focus groups comprised of visitors and non-visitors, as well as the venues' curators, a list of 100 oil paintings was chosen for the campaign. These range from 17th-19th century works by painters such as Thomas Gainsborough and John Singer Sargent, through to more modern and abstract work by artists such as Bridget Riley, Paula Rego and Francis Bacon.

A specially built site allows people to search for paintings by artist, period and the venue at which they are held. Users can choose their favourites and leave an explanation of why a particular picture appeals to them. These stories are then displayed to other visitors alongside the paintings online. To encourage dialogue, social media sharing is also built into the site, allowing one-click posting of the artworks to sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

The idea, according to Hildrew, is that everyone has some view about paintings. 'It doesn't have to be based on art history necessarily; a lot of people view art on the basis of whether they would like it in their living room, which is equally valid. We are looking for people's responses to generate a sense of discussion, perhaps around the notions of what is "good" or how we choose a favourite,' he says. 'To aid this, we wanted a website that would show the paintings as well as possible, not just as a load of thumbnails. The site has a strong layout and a nice feel, where users scroll horizontally through the pictures, which is closer to a gallery experience.'

As with any campaign to promote museums, it is important to pitch the material according to the target audience. Hard-to-reach groups are often targeted in order to raise their awareness of museums and galleries, but in this case the Yorkshire Hub is looking to engage a broader audience of people who are probably already 'museum-aware' but who seldom visit.

'There's a mid-ground of people who are interested, fairly museum or art literate and without any real barriers to engagement, but who still don't visit very often,' says Hildrew. 'One of the reasons we liked the Sumo campaign was because it gave us a valuable external view on what we're doing. Our marketing always produces nice materials, but they are usually in the same gallery style. A really strong aspect of Sumo's work is its "pop" feel which, although it may go slightly against the grain of what regular visitors expect, shows that it is doing exactly what we need to reach different people.'

Yorkshire's Favourite Paintings is supported by an outdoor media campaign as well as in-gallery materials, such as thematic trails and voting booths beside featured paintings. And a competition element remains: the most enthusiastic and popular entries on the website will be shortlisted and a winner chosen to receive a high-quality print of their favourite painting.

But more importantly, the campaign highlights how digital channels – in this case a special site and the use of social media – give museums the opportunity to 'host' ongoing public discussions of their collections. In this way, Yorkshire's Favourite Paintings is both a promotional campaign and a platform for visitors' interpretations of art.