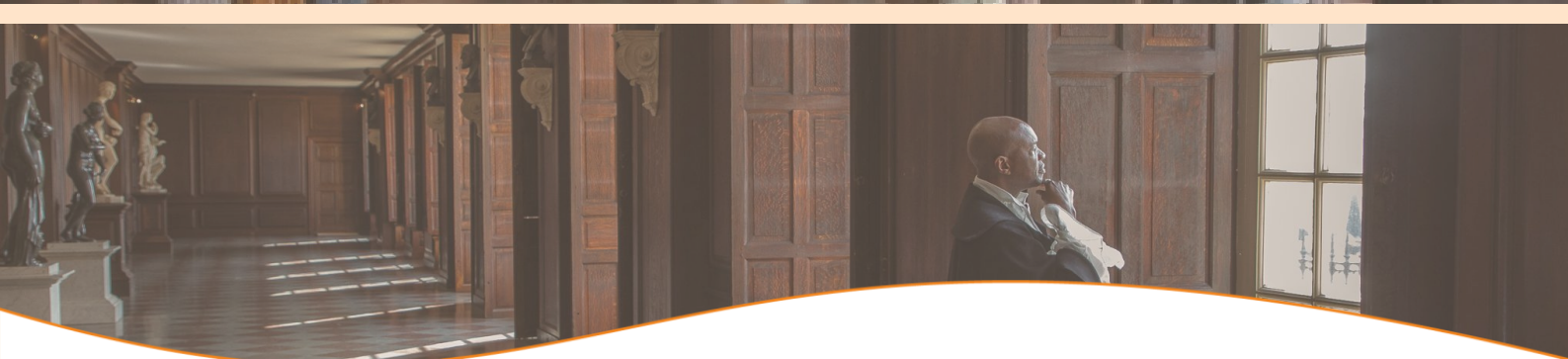
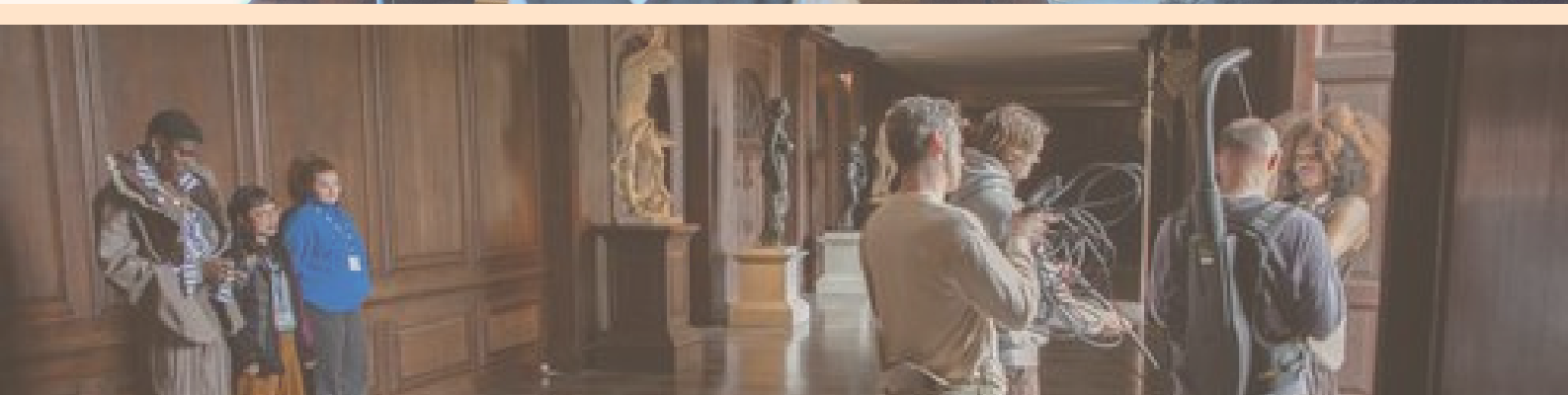
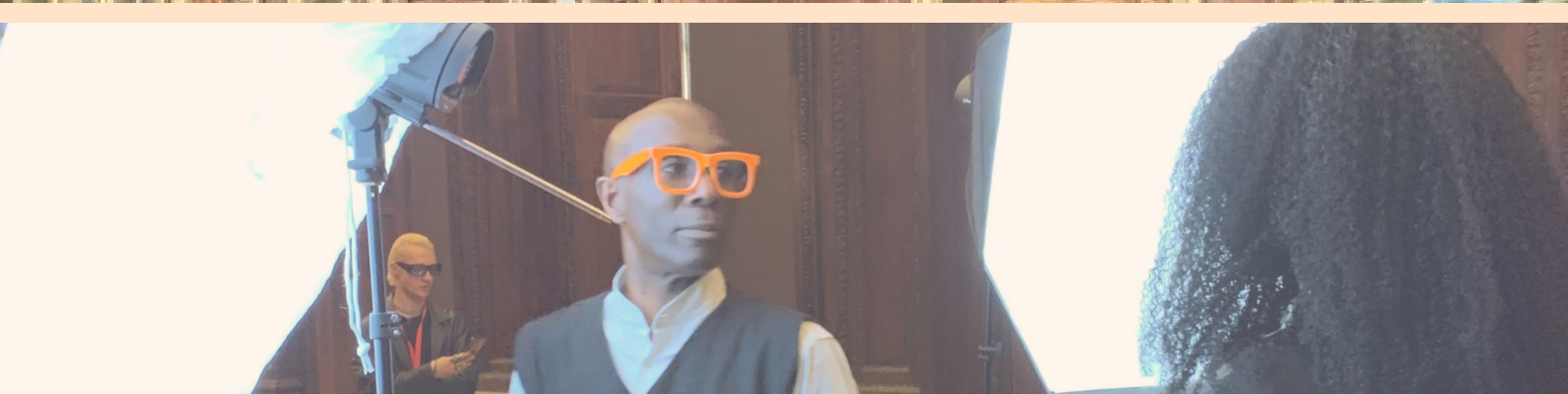
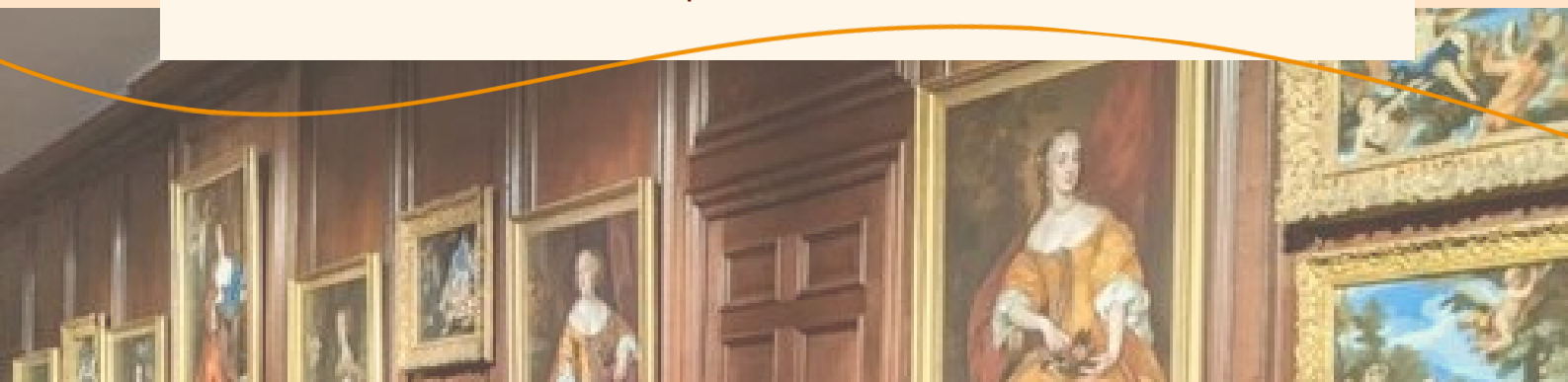


PERMISSIBLE BEAUTY

Partner Evaluation Report on the impact of Permissible Beauty on Historic Royal Palaces

September 2023



A project by:



In collaboration with:



Generously supported by:



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Permissible Beauty was a multi-partner collaboration between the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester) and National Trust, English Heritage and Historic Royal Palaces.

The main/planned output of the project was a short film that was shot on location at Hampton Court Palace, Kenwood House and Petworth House. As the collaboration between the core project team and the Historic Royal Palaces team strengthened and as HRP saw the potential for the project to advance their new cause, the idea for an additional strand in the form of a temporary installation at Hampton Court Palace unfolded. The installation and film launched in January 2023 and the installation – with accompanying community engagement activities – ran until March. The installation brought together the 'Windsor Beauties' and contemporary portraits of six leading figures in the Black Queer British community to examine shifting ideas of beauty.

Throughout the project, the core project team worked most extensively and closely with Historic Royal Palaces team and, for this reason, we focused evaluation on the HRP team.

Following the film and exhibition, we asked the Historic Royal Palaces team a series of questions which explore their experiences of working on Permissible Beauty and the impact the programme has had on their practice. 11 respondents from a range of teams including community partnerships, operations, conservation, curatorial, interpretation and design, live programming, learning and senior management completed an online survey and the results are presented below.

Benefits of participating (What difference did it make?)

Respondents shared a range of benefits of participating:

- Permissible Beauty supported Historic Royal Palaces to engage and be more relevant for underrepresented audiences.
- The project proved to be affirming for staff members of colour
- Permissible Beauty offered wide ranging audiences and community groups universal issues to engage with (for example, beauty, self-worth, identity, belonging)
- The project fostered collaboration beyond Hampton Court Palace offering an opportunity to work with independent contemporary artists, as well as a variety of community groups
- The survey also revealed that participation in the project also supported staff efforts beyond Permissible Beauty – for example in fast tracking the approval of Hampton Court Palace's first all-gender toilet facilities



Permissible Beauty has made Historic Royal Palaces/Hampton Court Palace relevant to audiences who may not have viewed it as a "place" for them. As a person of colour, growing up and visiting museums and galleries, I'd often get bored of seeing the same pale/white faces in paintings and felt these places don't represent my version of London/Britain. Permissible Beauty has honestly been a breath of fresh air as it flipped that whole notion and experience I had when I was younger on its head. It made me feel proud to be part of an organisation that so overtly celebrated black queer identities.

We received a lot of interest from community groups and museum peer groups - people we previously either haven't engaged or had the stories to really connect with them on a personal level. Whilst it is easy to see how LGBTQ+ communities could connect with Permissible Beauty, I really loved how so many wider partners/individuals connected with the wider themes of beauty, self worth, identity.

It was a joy to be involved in a project to create something so celebratory, moving, meaningful and beautiful. Working with really great artists, Robert and David, was a privilege and we're delighted to have had the opportunity to build on the original film and work with the PB team to create an experience on site at Hampton Court. It's a project that embodies our intentions to embrace new perspectives, new ways of working and - we hope - to engage new audiences.

Permissible Beauty offered us the chance to see and be involved in something different at Hampton Court Palace. New, emotive, thought provoking stories being told against the historic background was inspiring.

Projects such as Permissible Beauty amplify our values of inclusivity and signify a joyous welcome to communities who may think twice about visiting sites such as Hampton Court, for not seeing themselves acknowledged, represented or celebrated in our visit experience. Permissible Beauty was a great way to do all those things.

Working with such an enthusiastic, creative team has been personally rewarding and the exhibition has been an opportunity to welcome visitors who might not normally recognise themselves in our buildings, stories and collections.

The exhibition allowed all of our visitors to acknowledge the lack of diversity in paintings and works of art on display in the Palace, and within the stories that are most well known about the time period of the Palace. This also shows in our visitor demographic and the PB exhibition has been instrumental in genuinely showing that HCP is a Palace for everyone.

The project aligned with our focus of being an inclusive space and opening up the Palace to new audiences. It allowed us to think about the ways in which our history and stories are relevant to different people. This project had a wider impact than just the exhibition - it started valuable conversations in our Host team through the training we did and had practical benefits, in that it inspired us to open up our first gender neutral bathroom.

I thought it was such a wonderful project to be able to have had a small part to play in. It's very exciting whenever we do have an exhibition at Hampton Court Palace and one that was so modern and not along the lines of what we usually do was great. I think it's great that Historic Royal Palaces are willing to tell diverse stories and hopefully this encouraged a different visitor than we usually have to come and see the palace.

As the Community Partnership Producer based at Hampton Court Palace the Permissible Beauty installation has been an absolute gift for the communities we work with and support. It has enabled us to explore new stories, discuss ideas, learn from our community partners as well as simply the opportunity to share and enjoy some beautiful new art at the palace. It has highlighted our wide Historic Royal Palaces ambition to explore the lesser known stories of our sites and has encouraged us on the community team to develop, deepen and expand our partnerships with groups from the LGBTQ+ community and to look at new ways in which we can support our community partners to discover and engage with the themes and content of Permissible Beauty beyond the run of the installation.

I've facilitated this exhibition space and themes with groups living well with dementia. One noted outcome was the deep well of empathy and emotion that was shared. Robert's images in particular brought out deep sharing based on the tenderness of the facial expressions / sensory connection. Many in the groups (both cares and clients) expressed an identification with 'other' - lacking the voice to speak for themselves and exclusion based on privilege (here seen in ableism and ageism for example). To not fit in, to be outsider, to have your autonomy / dignity removed were repeat themes in the engagement that our groups connected with deeply. Some were joyous, others emotional. Some didn't want to leave the space during our tour requesting longer or a return to the space later. The exhibition effect was profound and emotional for me, feeling this space as a gay man and then through their new lived experience overlaid.



Impact on working practices

- Permissible Beauty provided tools that staff members will keep on using in future work, such as the Permissible Beauty ethical framework – a series of coordinates that outline the main shared values of a project and guide future decision making.
- The RCMG team was also commissioned with the delivery of a workshop focusing on the use and replicability of ethical frameworks in HRP's future project
- As Permissible Beauty hosted events and the Permissible Beauty installation, Hampton Court Palaces had the opportunity to think about provisions for new and more diverse audiences, with additional training rolled out across the institution
- The project had a positive impact on staff morale and enthusiasm, bringing fresh perspectives to HCP's offer and more opportunities for staff to engage with contemporary artists and visual culture



The use of an ethical framework is something I will take forward with future project work.

We held an 'up close' day for community partners/group members. They loved the exclusive access to the creatives and curator behind PB, delving deeper into the thinking behind this. We are now looking to hold more 'up close' days for our community network to enable meaningful, deeper connections to the creative process - beneficial for everyone. We are working on a LGBTQ+ resource, collecting/sharing the stories from HCP so that people can independently learn about the stories.

We found the ethical framework so useful we commissioned a workshop to help us embed this way of working across other projects. It's been really helpful in introducing colleagues across departments to this way of working inclusively.

I have a few team members who worked on the project, who are bringing back challenges to my wider team on how we can do things differently, from use of ethical frameworks to suggestions for a different basis for commissioning for a more equitable programme.

To be more understanding of the sensitivities around displaying an exhibition like PB which is bold and provocative in subject matter for the place it is in. Whilst I loved it, and feel we ought to be doing more, it has been interesting to hear mixed perspectives from visitors and this has allowed me to expand my ability to listen actively and learn and debate with others who may have differing views to my own

It has contributed to a new stream of work that encourages managers to explore the impact of new programming streams on FOH staff and think about ways to provide support and training. Subsequently, this has been rolled out across all Palaces. It also inspired us to consider gender neutral toilet provision on site.

Permissible Beauty has reinvigorated my practice as a facilitator, programmer and producer. I did not realise how much I missed working with visual culture and I found the installation to be so layered and rich and the interpretation so thoughtful it was so refreshing and inspiring to work with. I really enjoyed there being a central theme/question/focus to explore, it is not something I had previously thought about in relation to the site and collection here at HCP and it was great to be challenged to do so.

Hosting a community access scheme event for the palace using PB was a delight, not least from the huge turn out and sharing. One noted interaction I had was with a queer man who identified as gay and of south Asian heritage / Sikh faith. He really opened up about his experience of colourism in the space and used it as a bridge to connect with the friends he had brought there - allowing me into this process was a gift and one that has impacted my wider arts practice.



Challenges

- The respondents' main concern was that Permissible Beauty was a temporary project/installation and the importance of nurturing and embedding the positive changes it had brought about
- Another challenge for the team was lack of capacity and staff time – compensated by a highly-motivated team
- Communicating the aims of the exhibition to HCP's more 'traditional heritage audience' was also perceived as a challenge, with Permissible Beauty providing a considerably different heritage experience compared to the rest of the visit
- On Permissible Beauty, the Palace team worked with a new company to build and install the ambitious designs which, initially, presented challenges because of the sensitivities of working in historic interiors



One of the biggest challenges is that the work that makes HRP relevant to today is often temporary. Permissible Beauty has been a great way to showcase how contemporary works of art can start conversations about things that took place in the past (for example, drawing parallels with the Windsor Beauties - it's an accessible way in for audiences who are not as confident or knowledgeable of reading works of art from the past). But there needs to be something within our spaces to ensure these conversations continue happening.

I saw lots of presentations about PB, several academic/theoretical, making it hard to connect with the exhibition. It was only the community talks where we just talked about the sitters as people, connecting/questioning beauty, that this became very relatable to wider audiences.

Something that could have been a bigger challenge than it ended up being was having a project team that spanned inside and outside the organisation.

Very few, in that we had a team at HRP highly motivated to make this project happen.

Dedicating enough time to really consider what my impact can be in the creative process.

On a personal level, it has been challenging at times to see visitors question the worth or 'the point' of showing an exhibition such as PB. It jars completely with my own feelings and the comments like those are precisely why it is important to showcase and develop more exhibitions like this.

We have been challenged to think of how we might present the project to a traditional heritage audience, and the issues surrounding that. Staff training has been key to this, and has made a real positive impact.

I believe that the exhibition install went really well, we had a great designer and team of set builders who were respectful of the historic space and the working practices we expect from contractors. I can imagine that the front of house team might have had more challenges from visitors, where maybe they weren't sure about the content or what to expect.

Nothing in regards to my work and role. I was just so excited to be able to explore the installation with our community groups and I was not disappointed!

The lighting levels were in the installation section were challenging to navigate when facilitating some groups. For elderly visitors for example they expressed concern as to mobility and depth perception. For a group I facilitated sharing on wellness and mental health, they were scared on going not a space where they could not see what came next / it was an emotional barrier to engage without support.



Future aspirations

- For this work to be permanent
- Hope that ethical frameworks will become a standard methodological tool in future projects
- More investment (time, money and resources) in similar projects



For it to be more frequent and permanent

The use of ethical frameworks is brilliant - definitely want to use in future work. Our work with diverse audiences always seems temporary - I want to see it more in the main, permanent interpretation/storytelling in our palaces.

Permissible Beauty was a relatively small scale exhibition that had a large scale impact - just to be involved in more projects like this is an aspiration.

That we welcome more projects that open our sites and collections for discussion, and by doing so, help them relate to a wider community

Welcoming more projects like this into our world

More more more!

To roll out this training approach to other projects

Hope that HRP are willing to invest and work collectively with artists to tell more diverse stories that can challenge history and how we might look at the collections that we have in the palace.

I hope that it continues our work exploring lesser-known histories, stories and narratives here at HRP.

More - the scholarship, heart and quality was exemplary

