

CASE STUDY



Presenting Communal Heritage via Heritage Scents

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Tasha Marks with 5318008, a Scented Bronze Sculpture Commissioned for the [Being Human](#) exhibition. Photo credit to Angela Moore and courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

Photo Courtesy of Claire Dobbin.

A V M C U R I O S I T I E S

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Different heritage institutions have different themes and narratives to tell within their collections. In 2021, sensory consultant [Tasha Marks](#) and freelance museum curator [Claire Dobbin](#) worked together on the [London: Port City](#) exhibition at the [Museum of London Docklands](#) in London, UK, which highlighted the historical and cultural significance of working docks. For the area of the exhibition focussing on the twentieth century, emphasis was placed on the unique olfactory history of this area and time. For a collective and communal approach to the creation of the scents, Marks consulted oral histories from former dock workers which were selected by Dobbin and an active team of volunteers with personal connections to the area. Four smells were created to try and encapsulate the dockworkers' experiences and memories: The Warehouse, Handling Hides, The Docks, and Home (descriptions below).

This interview captures Marks' and Dobbin's personal thoughts and experiences from working together on the London: Port City exhibition. They discuss how they employed olfactory storytelling as a way of addressing and presenting communal heritage and at the same time, how they overcame challenges along the way.

Who is Tasha Marks?

Tasha Marks is a sensory consultant, scent designer and the founder of [AVM Curiosities](#). Marks has a history of working in the museum and cultural industries and created the olfactory identity for the [London: Port City](#) exhibition at the [Museum of London Docklands](#). She is an advocate of the sensory museum, and champion of food and fragrance as artistic mediums. Past projects of her's include: [creating a sculpture that emits the scent of breastmilk](#) for the [Wellcome Collection](#), recreating the [smell of the New York Tenements in 1890](#) for the [Ulster American Folk Park](#) and animating a Georgian Dining Room with [an 8-course menu of scented napkins](#) for [The National Trust](#).

Who is Claire Dobbin?

[Claire Dobbin](#) is a freelance curator, educator and interpretation specialist, who curated the *London: Port City* exhibition at the Museum of London Docklands. She is passionate about multisensory engagement, inclusive design, and the creative use of collections to engage and develop audi-

ences. Her doctoral research, recent publications, and conference contributions focus on the benefits and impact of multisensory visitor experiences.



Display of Scents of Place. Photo credit to Tasha Marks.

Can you explain what you aimed to achieve through the use of olfactory storytelling in the exhibition?

CLAIRE DOBBIN: From a visitor experience perspective, it was to provide a change in pace within the exhibition, encouraging people to slow down and reflect. Curatorially, the goal was to bring another sensory dimension

to extracts from oral histories, which helped interpret the sensory environment and lived experience of London's historic former docklands in a more immediate way. In turn, we hoped this would enable visitors to connect and engage with the content on a more personal and emotional level.

How and why did you choose to use oral histories as the inspiration for the scents and how were these histories interpreted into physical scents?

CLAIRE DOBBIN: During the content planning process, we identified the need for the docks to be interpreted as a place that was experienced – that was a way of life – that was more than just a built environment and a feat of engineering. We knew that some visitors would have lived experiences and memories of the twentieth-century working docks and we wanted to include that and attempt to start a dialogue about it in some way. We also wanted to bring the stories within the oral history to life in a way that would resonate and have impact for the widest possible audience. Olfactory storytelling provided a way to meet these objectives, which were established within our interpretation planning process.

TASHA MARKS: The creation and evaluation of the scents were based completely on the oral histories I re-

ceived from the museum. By listening to these first-hand experiences, I was able to craft the olfactory identity of the exhibition. My aim was to translate the subjects' experiences into scent. My goal was to use their words, objects, sensations, spaces, and feelings and turn them into an aromatic experience that the contemporary visitor could relate to.

What was the biggest challenge of the scent development process and how did you 'evaluate' if the scents achieved their impact?

TASHA MARKS: The biggest challenge was how to summarise 90 years of multiple people's lived experiences into a series of four smells. I had to translate individual histories into general impressions that would still do their stories justice. In the end, the four smells embraced this idea of the macro and the micro, to embody personal stories told in scent alongside atmospheric imaginings. For instance, the smell of 'Home' was based on one particular oral histories' story about a person's father's woollen coat drying on an electric fire, but it also aimed to evoke a sense of 1960s domestic life. To make sure the scent resonated with different audiences, I tested it on multiple groups including a group of volunteers whose family members had worked on the docks. When it evoked the feeling of home for them – one

even going into depth describing her grandfather's wallpaper – I knew I had got the scent right.

The Heritage Scents of the London Docklands:

The Warehouse | Wooden containers, hessian sacks, concrete floors, coffee, tea, tobacco.

Handling Hides | Animalistic, musk, leathery, flesh, skin, bone, fishy, visceral, guttural.

The Docks | Smoky, industrial, smog, fog, coal, oil, engines, cold air, marine edge, wood, watery, brine.

Home | Warm, welcoming, comfort, coat drying by the fire, smoke, fire, vanilla, tobacco, wool, wood, 1960s wallpaper.

**These scents were created by [AVM Curiosities](#) in collaboration with [Aroma Prime](#) and [CPL Aromas](#). Commissioned and curated by Claire Dobbin and the Museum of London.*

How were visitors encouraged to engage with the unscented and scented content of the exhibition?

CLAIRE DOBBIN: The smells were informed by and displayed in conjunction with extracts from the oral histories, which recalled sensory experiences of London's docks between the 1920s and 1980s. The design of the physical space, which presented olfactory and aural/audio content, also drew on the museum's photography collection. These images illustrated the different aromatic products that moved through and were stored in warehouses within the docks. Alongside the photographs were also historic samples of such products from the collection displayed. But the primary content in this section of the exhibition was always the smells and the stories that informed and inspired them.

TASHA MARKS: As this exhibition was due to run for a number of months, the distribution method needed to be low maintenance. The number of nearby historical items also meant that it would be advisable to keep airborne droplets to a minimum, so it was decided that a scent chamber, which could be opened and closed would lead to the most visitor interaction, while also keeping the scent confined. The scents were further encapsulated onto EVA beads, which can hold 30% of their weight in fragrance

London: Port City exhibition view. Photo courtesy of the Museum of London.



- this increases the surface area and allows for a slow and steady diffusion, whilst also meaning there are no pools of liquid that might lead to spillages in the exhibition. This is my preferred distribution method in general as it gives the most flexibility in display and easy maintenance throughout the exhibition cycle.

What precautions did you take to ensure a safe space for the Museum of London Dockland's staff, visitors, and collection?

TASHA MARKS: The distribution method was important here. The scent chambers kept the fragrances out of reach so there would be no skin contact possible for the general public. The hatches also allowed the attendee to choose the experience, rather than the aroma filling the space. Meanwhile, for the staff, I provided safety data sheets for all the aromas, and a maintenance manual, which had instructions on how to handle and store the scent.



Visitors engaging with the exhibition's smell stations. Photo courtesy of Museum of London.

Visitor Reflections on London: Port City:

Visitors found the exhibition engaging due to the expert usage and variety of immersive multimedia, especially the moving images, large video projections, and audio oral histories. They also praised the olfactive time capsules as being very evocative of the past, such as the scents from the port.

“The wood smell is very overpowering in a positive way, which struck me.”

There was also positive praise on the way oral histories were paired with the different smells – “just such a really powerful way of bringing up memories.”

The wooden crates and scents from the port were the highlight of families and were perceived by adults as a very clear way to engage with the younger audiences.

“It was really nice. We didn’t spend very long there, my son is 3 and has a short attention span. But he enjoyed the wooden crates and scent boxes.”



London: Port City exhibition view. Photo courtesy of Museum of London.

In your experience of collaborating on this exhibition, what was the biggest challenge of using olfactory storytelling?

CLAIRE DOBBIN: The use of olfactory storytelling is not yet an established interpretive approach – and there is not yet an established way to evaluate its impact. As a result, evidence of its benefits and why it should be used more is not yet fully tangible. It is not always easy to convince museum staff and stakeholders of the role and importance of an olfactory dimension to an exhibition. That is why Odeuropa's Olfactory Storytelling Toolkit is so important – and why more robust ways to evaluate the impact of olfactory experiences are needed. Providing tangible, generalisable evidence of why and how olfactory narrative experiences can enhance engagement and the memorability of exhibitions is the key to more being invested in for the future.

TASHA MARKS: Our experience of scent is very individual, both in what and how we smell, as well as our own associations and memories attached to it. This means when using scent as a storyteller you cannot always predict the impression on the visitor. Scent is a subjective medium, but it is also our most suggestive sense, so by curating the interpretation around the aromas, including words and imagery, we are

guiding the visitor to have the experience that we hope for them to have. Interpretation is key!

If you could offer one piece of advice to heritage professionals who want to use olfactory storytelling, what would it be?

TASHA MARKS: If you are considering scent as part of your exhibition or museum display but are unsure where to start, it can be worthwhile hiring a specialist to advise. My role on this project – as well as others – was a halfway between perfumer and curator, and as such, I work across a range of expertise to refine the sensory offering. This way of working means the sensory offering is closely tied in with the rest of the exhibition content, adding to the atmosphere and enhancing the visitor experience.

CLAIRE DOBBIN: It is essential to factor sensory storytelling in from the start, so it can inform and be an integral part of the interpretation, content, and design development. Scents are too often an add-on – an extra layer to add at the end – rather than a core curatorial and interpretive tool. For smell to be a meaningful part of the narrative experience, it needs to be given the same amount of credit (and time) as text or audiovisual interpretation provisions.

Why is it important to safeguard and showcase elements of olfactory heritage in heritage institutions?

CLAIRE DOBBIN: Smell has been underused and underexploited in museums. It is an integral part of how we experience and remember our own lives – so when you think about it – removing it from narrative experiences in museums, especially social history museums, is ludicrous. For olfactory heritage and olfactory engagement to become an integrated element of museum collections and interpretation (which I believe it should be) it needs to be identified, documented, and exhibited – all of which require new ways of working and new research. Otherwise, it will always be the exception not the rule – and effective narrative experiences that draw on the many benefits of olfactory heritage for engaging audiences and helping us understand and interpret our past will remain disappointingly few and far between.



In your experience, how does engagement with scents contribute to worthwhile storytelling in heritage institutions?

CLAIRE DOBBIN: Audiences seem to engage with smell in a more intuitive, personal, and confident way within museum spaces than they do with artworks, objects, and text. In my experience, the inherently subjective nature of smells – or at least how they are interpreted – gives people the freedom to offer comments and responses, or start conversations with less fear of being ‘wrong.’ We are so much more confident to defend our ‘taste’ and opinions related to food and smells – in terms of what we like or dislike, how they make us feel, what they remind us of, or mean to us. This is exactly how visitors should feel in museums – about the collections, narratives and spaces that are being developed and interpreted for them.

TASHA MARKS: Scent is an unparalleled educational tool and unique avenue for learning. It enables us to craft a visceral experience in the mind of the viewer and infuse a long-lasting knowledge that goes beyond the gallery walls. Fragrance can draw the visitor in, infusing their mind with an unforgettable experience – using aroma as a storyteller, to tell a micro story of a macro world.

