C&CI Collections statement - **DATED July 2020**

**\***TST now known as TTEA (Transatlantic Traffic in Enslaved Africans) – May 2021

The Culture & Creative Industries Team of Bristol City Council is responsible for extensive collections of objects, art works, specimens, photos, oral histories, paper archives and similar. Over 2million museum items and c. 10 miles of archive shelving are held at its 5 main museum sites and other stores and at the Bristol Archives

The first museum opened in 1823 and Bristol Archives in 1924. Both have accumulated extensive holdings but those in the Archives relating specifically to the city of Bristol. Museum collecting has continued over nearly 200 years, amassing museum artefacts from centuries past from across the world, along with contemporary items. This material has been divided into collection departments, of Fine, Applied and Asian Art, Archaeology, World Cultures, Biology, Geology, Industrial, Maritime and Social History based on a Eurocentric way of dividing the world and the products of human cultural endeavours.

It is recognized that the initial formation of these collections and the establishment and development of these institutions therefore took place during the height of the British Empire. Resources of the countries that had been colonised were forcibly taken to increase the wealth of the Empire and this included the art, archaeology and personal and religious material culture of the local peoples. Bristol, as a major trading port, was a gateway for much of this sort of material entering the country and therefore to some degree its museums.

It is further recognised that Bristol, along with Liverpool and London, was a major centre for the ‘Trans-Atlantic Trade (TST)’\* – involving the enslavement of millions of African people, transported to work in the Americas and that the collections held across our museums and in the archives can reveal that ‘uncomfortable’ and shameful past.

More recently, in 2012, the City Council took over the majority of the collections which had been put together by the independent British Empire & Commonwealth Museum, located in Bristol and open to the public between 2002 and 2008, that museum was wound up by its trustees in 2012. This collection, a mix of written archives, photographs, film and museum artefacts specifically reflects the experiences of the colonial agents and the some of their interactions with the people they attempted to control.

This history of exploitation, belief in the supremacy of White peoples and systems of knowledge and the legacies of this story of Empire remains with us across society today.

**Using and interpreting these collections**

Until relatively recently, museum and archive collections in Bristol and elsewhere in the UK have not fully considered, explored and interpreted their collection holdings in the light of the colonial period. The story of how such artefacts actually came to be in the UK and the context in which they were acquired has often not been recognized or interpreted for the visiting public.

Consequently, Bristol Culture & Creative Industries staff have begun a process of reviewing how these stories can be opened up and how the significance and, in some cases, the future ownership of some items can be debated and examined. This process usually involves collaboration and partnership with people and organisations with a vested or close connection to the artefact’s origins. For example, photographs of Nairobi, Kenya taken shortly after the Second World War and held in the British Empire & Commonwealth Collection have been used to create an exhibition in Nairobi in 2019. The exhibition ‘*Fabric Africa*’ held at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery in 2019 involved members of the local African community in the city exploring their relationship to the collections. ‘*Empire through the lens’* (2017-18) invited members of the local community to choose and write the interpretation of sometimes disturbing images of exploitation and Imperial power.

A very particular aspect of our work has been to highlight Bristol’s role in the enslavement of Africans in the TST\*. Currently this is acknowledged in displays at two museums – M Shed and the Georgian House Museum but we recognise that much more needs to be done in order for the city to truly acknowledge the part it played in this inhuman traffic and the legacy that still persists.

A very specific part of the discussion, as to recognising the true history of the artefacts we possess, is whether some should actually be returned to their country of origin. To this end we have reacted to requests from source communities for this restitution, based upon the individual circumstances of each case. As a consequence we have returned human remains to Australia and New Zealand, human remains and grave goods to a native North American group in California and most recently have agreed to return a hunter’s coat to an indigenous community in what is present day Canada.

In these three areas described above (the colonial context of the acquisition of much of our collections, the role in trans-Atlantic slavery and the restitution of cultural items) we are now developing a proactive approach rather than reactive. Consequently, we welcome enquiries related to these topics and we will be creating an action plan to ensure we are delivering agreed outcomes against these aims. We will also be actively looking to amend and redevelop our position, approaches and policies as our partnerships move forward and our understanding progresses.