Sloane’s Treasures
A cultural and scientific exploration of the research potential of Sir Hans Sloane’s collections

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This AHRC Science in Culture Exploratory Award project has been looking at ways of making available the collections of Sir Hans Sloane – one of the most important collectors of the 17th and 18th centuries whose collection became the foundation of the British Museum, Natural History Museum and British Library.
Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), was a physician, traveller, natural philosopher and man of letters responsible for gathering one of the largest and most significant collections of natural and artificial curiosities assembled during the Enlightenment. This huge collection includes 80,000 natural and artificial objects, a vast herbarium and a library of 50,000 volumes and a range of botanical and zoological specimens.

On his death, Sloane’s collection was acquired for the nation and it became the founding collection of the British Museum and was also later divided across the Natural History Museum and the British Library. These three institutions formed a Consortium in 2011 to address the physical and intellectual fragmentation of Sloane’s collection. This exploratory award has helped develop a proposed consortium Programme called Reconstructing Sloane, which plans to digitise and research the collections and to develop public engagement activities to raise the academic and public profile of Sloane’s important collection.

The Sloane’s Treasures project has fostered varied collaboration and partnership development across the disciplines of sciences, arts, humanities and digital humanities and between the Consortium and other HEIs and MLAs. Three Sloane’s Treasures project workshops were held in 2012 and were attended by specialists and curators from varied disciplines. The workshops’ physical and intellectual connections revealed potential projects for research into knowledge making and exchange, exploring and pushing digital boundaries, and groundbreaking public engagement. Academic colleagues gained insight into the type of research curators engage in, and through consultation priorities were established and potential partnerships were created. The project networking activities have also stimulated the development of a network of individuals within and outside of the Consortium, who are interested in and engaged in various ways with Hans Sloane’s collections.

The Sloane’s Treasures Public Engagement and Digital Humanities Working Groups explored potential future activities including multi-site displays and online experiences including games, apps and transcription tools. These activities would raise wider public awareness of the international breadth and interdisciplinary depth of Sloane’s collections and encourage ‘a public understanding of how science and culture were not as separate in (Sloane’s) world as they are in ours’.

The project has also produced outputs of significant public impact. Audio recordings of Sloane’s Treasures workshop presentations generated high public interest and received 41,500 internet hits from the public between April-Sept 2012 and a promotional Programme leaflet was published in Autumn 2012.

The exploratory award has enabled the Consortium to outline a 5-year research programme which will aim to develop a portfolio composed of interlocking funding streams to enable the three key activities of digitisation, transcription and groups of research projects across diverse and varied disciplines, including the digital humanities, history of science and medicine and Enlightenment Studies. The Consortium hopes to begin the Reconstructing Sloane Programme in 2014.

Further information can be found on the Sloane’s Treasures webpages on the Natural History Museum and British Museum websites:


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