

looking for  
**QUEER**  
**POSSIBILITY**  
in the  
**MUSEUM**

a guide to help you make  
queer connections in museums  
and record your queer experiences

BY MARGARET MIDDLETON

**This guide is especially written for queer people to use when visiting museums.**

I use the umbrella term queer to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and anyone - past and present - who embodies a queer way of being.

I've written this guide from my point of view, as a white genderqueer person who works with museums and also loves to visit them.

**Queer people are told we  
are a new phenomenon,  
a deviation from the norm,  
a social contagion,  
a Western invention.**

You and I know this isn't true.  
But what evidence do we have?

Queer people aren't typically born  
into families that share our queer  
identities. We have to look beyond  
our traditional genealogies to  
find our queer ancestors.

Where to begin?

# Have you ever seen something in a museum that just seems ... QUEER?

There's no indication on the label and no one else in the gallery seems to be noticing what you're noticing. But something has pinged your gaydar and caught your attention. You have found an **Object of Queer Significance**.

Maybe you look it up on Wikipedia and confirm the object's connection to queer history or maybe you simply found an object that speaks to you. What you see and how you feel about it is valid.

## **It's no accident that Objects of Queer Significance are not often identified as such in museums.**

Homosexual behavior and gender variance have been stigmatised, pathologised, and criminalised for centuries - particularly in the colonies of the European Colonial empires.

Throughout queer history, people have destroyed their belongings and obscured the queer meanings in their artworks and writings out of self-preservation.

Historically, museums have not told queer stories. Heteronormativity and gender normativity continue to pervade contemporary museum practice.

**“For queers, the gesture  
and its aftermath, the  
ephemeral trace, matter  
more than many  
traditional modes of  
evidencing lives and  
politics.”**

**José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia**

## **Are they ... you know?**

Have you ever exchanged a knowing glance with a queer stranger?

Queer people have a way of finding queer kin, even when we don't speak. How do we clock one another? Sometimes it's the way we present ourselves or how we move or an energy we embody.

Andy Warhol evoked all three when he described his queer way of being as "swish".

**Queer experience is  
a kind of expertise.**

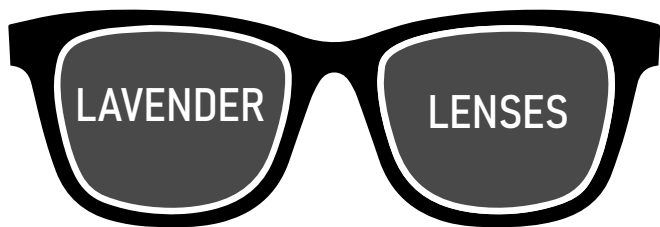
**Gaydar is a way of knowing.**

Though the word “queer” may not appear on many museum labels, there are more **Objects of Queer Significance** in museums than you might think.

**Let's look for them.**



**Calibrate your gaydar  
and get ready to see  
the museum through**



Use the following techniques to tap into your innate sense of queerness to find **Objects of Queer Significance** and make personal queer connections in the museum.

look for

## LAVENDER LANGUAGE

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Read the room: labels may not specifically mention queerness but there might be hints.

Here are some common euphemisms and clues I look for:

- ▼ “never married”, “lifelong bachelor”, “spinster”, “loner”
- ▼ “unusual for [their] time”
- ▼ “flamboyant” men, “masculine” women
- ▼ “lifelong friend”, “close companion”, “roommate”
- ▼ nicknames, alter egos, “disguises”

# Notes

seek out  
**SYMBOLS**

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There are trends in queer visual language, either through symbols or themes. When these are present, they may indicate either a queer creator, a queer subject or a queer collector.

Here are some common things I look for:

- ▼ pansies, violets
- ▼ Saint Sebastian
- ▼ Diana/Artemis
- ▼ Sappho
- ▼ sailors, sex workers, witches

# Notes

feel for  
**VIBES**

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Because queer traditions vary so widely between cultures, over time and around the world, your lens is unique to your own queer experience.

What do YOU see?

# Notes

What did you find?

What piqued your curiosity?

What questions came  
up for you?

What captured your  
imagination?



# Notes

**“Our feelings are our most  
genuine paths to knowledge.”**

**Audre Lorde, Conversations with Audre Lorde**

## **One last note.**

If you're thinking that it's not fair that the burden of finding queerness in museums is placed on the individual, I agree.

Museums, like most other institutions under the cisheteropatriarchy, have a lot of work to do to become less heteronormative. As a queer person working in the museum field, I want you to know that there are queer museum workers and museum workers queering museums. But most museums don't yet interpret queer history and art.

In the meantime, use this guide to uncover queer history that has yet to be interpreted and most importantly, make queer connections that are personally meaningful to YOU.

# **OUTBURST** ARTS

Produced in collaboration with Outburst Arts  
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