

You can't be what you can't see: visible celebration of notable women

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Architecture articulates the experience of our being-in-the-world, [it] mediates and projects meanings. (Pallasmaa, 2013, p. 12-13)

Meanings are projected not just by the buildings themselves, but by how they are furnished and decorated (Williams, 2013). And where almost every image – portrait, photograph, statue – of academic achievement and leadership is masculine (and nearly always white middle-aged), the meaning is clear: to be a successful leader, gender and ethnicity matter.

Portraits of women of achievement are sparse across institutions such as the University of Edinburgh, apart from on exceptional occasions such as International Women's Day when images of successful academic women are made prominent (but not permanent). There is, however, a movement to change this.

Women are challenging the paucity of female portraits, empowered by research showing that: a) women are more confident, and speak with more authority and for equal amounts of time as men when surrounded by images of women of achievement (for men it makes no difference as they are used to being surrounded by images of men of achievement) (Latu et al., 2013); and b) that stereotype threat can be provoked "simply through visual reminders of [a] group's underrepresentation" (Steele, 2011).

This recipe is based on a current Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) project to replace the all-male portraits outside the Debating Hall, Teviot Row House, with a more diverse collection of images. This idea emerged from a debated proposal: "You can't be what you can't see: implementing diversity in student spaces". The proposers referenced the negative impact such an overwhelming and unrepresentative gallery could have on students' confidence and sense of belonging at the University and the proposal's success gave EUSA the mandate to make the changes.

This recipe is also informed by a parallel project in Hertford College, Oxford, where to celebrate 40 years of women in the college, the all-male portraits in the Great Hall have been replaced by specially commissioned photograph portraits of women graduates, staff and students (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/21/oxford-hertford-college-portraits-women-co-ed>).

And finally, the recipe is also proposing the idea that other rooms in the University hung only with portraits of men could be diversified. A clear statement of intent for gender equality would be made by starting with the Raeburn Room (one of the most famous rooms in the University of Edinburgh Old College) and its celebrated portraits.



Ingredients

- Over 100 years of women graduates.
- Confidence to challenge the status quo, backed up by research.
- An imaginative curator.
- Estates storage (large, secure, temperature-controlled unit).
- Access to as many of the following as possible: personal and national portrait archives, photographer, royalty-free images.
- Imagination.
- Budget for frames, high quality print service, picture hooks and wire.

Method

1. Challenge the status quo – examine the academic research; hold a debate as EUSA did; find a champion, like Emma Smith in Hertford College, Oxford; invoke the Athena SWAN movement in the UK.
2. Identify first projects such as landmark rooms in the student union or central university meeting rooms. The University of Edinburgh project identified Teviot Row House and the Raeburn Room initially.



3. Appoint an imaginative curator/ curatorial team to:
 - design and implement innovative strategies (e.g. send the existing Raeburn portraits on tour to build cultural bridges);
 - make choices, and liaise with Estates and other specialists.
 4. Where the removal of portraits leaves a visible gap, capitalise on the space. See the Wikipedia article on Trafalgar Square's 4th Plinth: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_plinth,_Trafalgar_Square
 5. Recognise and respect: the artistic and historical value of existing portraits. For example, the Raeburn portraits are extraordinary works of art and part of Scotland's aesthetic legacy. EUSA recognises the significant historical value of the existing portraits, and have decided to catalogue them and offer them to the University archives.
 6. Identify women graduates of note. The University of Edinburgh project browsed records of 100 years of women graduates including the many women graduates of Edinburgh College of Art such as those in the 2015-2016 exhibition of Modern Scottish Women Painters and Sculptors 1885-1965 in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.
 7. Source images of women graduates – if possible via personal and national archives. If the women are alive, commission a photographer, or if there are prints available, aim to get relevant permission to use them. Mount and frame as your budget will allow.
 8. Implement the curatorial strategy; for example, send the existing Raeburn portraits on tour to build cultural bridges, 'resting' any others by moving to a temperature-controlled storage unit.
 9. Replace with fresh portraits of women of achievement.
 10. If you encounter resistance, make the points that that rooms can have name changes, changes are never permanent, the pictures aren't being burned in a heap, they are being circulated for the greater good of the University, or 'rested' for a decade. They can be reinstated as required.
- At the time of going to press the EUSA project, though delayed, is still happening.
- The University has put up life-size photographs on billboards across the central campus celebrating academic staff winners of Teaching Awards, and there is a clear gender balance.