

# Lesbian Persistence

lesbianpersistence@gmail.com

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Edinburgh Museums

By email to:

museumsandgalleries@edinburgh.gov.uk

museumcollectionscentre@edinburgh.gov.uk

Dear Curators

## **Past Shelves exhibition @ Museum of Edinburgh**

We recently visited the *Past Shelves* exhibition at the Museum of Edinburgh, and enjoyed viewing the materials on display. However, we were disturbed and offended by the narrative framing of these artefacts. Lesbian Persistence is a Scottish voluntary organisation founded in 2024, which works to raise the profile of lesbians socially, politically and culturally. The framing of this exhibition is a good example of why our work is needed.

A large part of the problem is the language that is used throughout, which purports to be “inclusive” but in practice *excludes* lesbians. Far from feeling welcomed, we felt alienated, excluded, and erased, in particular because of the repeated use of the words “queer” and “LGBTQ+”.

## **The use of the word queer**

In the late 20th century, “queer” was almost always an insult hurled at homosexual men and, occasionally, lesbians. But it is not a word any of our members have ever used for themselves, and they unanimously dislike it. (We asked them). We have always called ourselves lesbians or dykes, or sometimes gay.

Today, the adherents of gender-identity ideology have resurrected the word “queer” to mean something entirely different. It is used as an umbrella term for everyone labeled as LGBTQ+. It also includes (non-trans) heterosexuals who wish to be seen as non-conforming in some way. This use of “queer” expresses a desire to be part of a minority, always to be regarded as different, and even to claim membership of an oppressed group. It does not express a desire for lesbian and gay life to be normalised, for deep acceptance and integration.

As same-sex attracted women we do not see ourselves reflected in queer “identities”. More importantly, anyone using the term “queer” or “LGBTQ+” would likely exclude us from their community because we do not accept the basic premise on which it is founded: that it is possible to change sex, that a child can be born in the wrong body, and that men can be “lesbians”. Our refusal to go along with queer discourse regularly sees us branded as “bigots” by people who call themselves queer.

By coincidence, one of us was also a co-founder in the late 1980s of the *Deckchairs Collective*, whose materials are featured (without attribution), in your exhibition, and which

organised the Scottish Lesbian Gatherings. Those events came to an end when activists demanded the inclusion of “trans-lesbians” (i.e. heterosexual men who claim to be women). We can categorically state that to have that organisation “queered” is both historically inaccurate and deeply offensive. This principle would no doubt apply to some of the other featured organisations.

### **The use of LGBTQ+**

The LGBTQ+ acronym is also a misnomer. Although the first two letters are supposed to apply to lesbians and gay men, in practice, for the reasons explained above, it specifically *excludes* same-sex attracted women or men who believe in the immutability of sex. L, G and B all refer to sexual orientation. Everything else relates to some sense of “gender identity” or “queer identity”. These concepts derive from an ideology we in Lesbian Persistence, along with many other lesbians, reject. The acronym is used only to reinforce or promote “gender identity”. We have never come across any use of the term where sex-realist lesbians or gay men are being engaged.

Although the term LGBTQ+ does not occur in any of the exhibition artefacts, it is used persistently in the interpretative narrative as an umbrella term in which internal distinctions are minimised. The components that those letters represent, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, are, foremost, distinct communities, cultures, and identities. And this was especially true in the twentieth century, when the term LGBTQ+ did not exist. Even those organisations that went on to redefine themselves as including Trans and Queer(TQ+), only did so in the last 10 or 15 years, well after the period covered by *Past Shelves*.

LGBTQ+ conflates sexual orientation with gender identity; it treats gender as an individual sense of self rather than a social construct. It depends for its integrity on being othered by the majority population. It prioritises difference (an alleged “LGBTQ+ community” vs everyone else) over diversity (multi-faceted overlapping personal and social identities).

The exhibition’s anachronistic narrative presents lesbians as if we were members of a community that did not (and still does not) in reality exist, and as part of a cause whose political position many lesbians do not share. As lesbians, we regard the LGBTQ+ miscellany as offensive and othering. It encapsulates a specific political position: it valorises gender as a feeling; it diminishes the significance of lived biologically sexed experience, especially of women.

By subsuming distinct communities and conflating sexuality with an individualised belief in gender, LGBTQ+ suppresses lesbian life and culture. It makes us invisible as a distinct group. It denies the autonomy of lesbians, *as lesbians*, to build our own community and public visibility. It puts us in a box that we didn’t choose. It is a highly contested term, not a neutral descriptor.

### **Discourse adopted by the Lavender Menace Queer Books Archive**

The Lavender Menace Queer Books Archive is a genuine treasure in the artefacts it curates. But its curators are unequivocal in their reframing of the past through the LGBTQ+ lens.

[Their website states](#) that they *prioritise inclusive, contemporary language, **though in some cases authors may not have identified with terms used in our database, either from a matter of taste or for the fact that contemporary terms did not exist in their timeline*** (our emphasis).

This highly partisan, ahistoric position is evident in *Past Shelves*, a public exhibition by a public body. It would have been much more inclusive and more appropriate had it not been presented through an exclusive ideological frame.

### **The Museum's responsibility**

Interpreting history is always fraught with unconscious bias. That does not mean that egregious distortion is acceptable or inconsequential. An honest narrative would have acknowledged the distinct cultures that flourished from the 1970s well into the 21st century. It would have explained that communities occasionally came together in common causes but were distinct and autonomous. It would have avoided blatant anachronism. Lesbian culture would have been accorded dignity in and of itself. It would not have been subsumed under a political discourse that many lesbians oppose.

The Code of Ethics (2025) of the Museums Association (of which the Museum of Edinburgh is a member) obliges you to be equitable and inclusive: to foster *understanding and good relations between people of **different identities and beliefs***, to *recognise that narratives have **multiple perspectives*** (our emphasis). It obliges you to be transparent and accountable: to *support freedom of speech, expression and debate*; to *support audiences to embrace and **understand the complexity of information and knowledge by presenting multiple perspectives that have been evidenced and researched*** (our emphasis).

A museum should not be used to amplify a singular framing of history while silencing other voices actively narrating that history. Edinburgh Museums has failed to uphold the Code of Ethics in this exhibition by denying the voices of historical subjects and of many contemporary lesbians, and by suppressing dissent from LGBTQ+ hegemony.

### **Next steps**

This exhibition is a missed opportunity. It could have traced history sensitively and hosted a diversity of interpretations, allowing lesbians to speak for themselves and making lesbians and other distinct communities individually visible. Instead, lesbians have been conglomerated into an incoherent mix whose integrity we and others contest.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns further, and explore future possibilities.

Best wishes

Catherine Lyons, Sally Wainwright