

Collections blog

A Collection of Horrors – Turning the 1950s kitchen into something spooooky!

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Posted by Penelope Lovesy at 02/11/2020 13:51:29



This month we've been getting into the spirit of Halloween. We were given the opportunity to share some of our more terrifying, or just slightly spooky, objects in a temporary display in the 1950s kitchen; an opportunity we couldn't afford to miss.

From the outset, we had a vision in mind but as the development of the concept continued towards display, things ultimately changed. There is only two of us working with the collection here in Poole and we both had very similar thoughts on how this could work, which either shows a great connection between our work and the collections or equally disturbed childhoods!

There has always been the talk of ghosts within our buildings and more than a few odd goings-on, so that was an obvious starting point. But how on earth do you create a ghost from actual museum collections pieces? Well, you look for suitable things on the system and trot off to the costume store and have a nosey, obviously. It didn't take long to get the perfect fit; a wedding dress that wasn't in the best condition, but this just added to the ghostly appearance. To begin with, we had considered a Miss Havisham type approach, with a ghostly gown sitting at a table full of food, cutlery and candlesticks, but we have very few suitable examples of those within our collections. We do have two particularly interesting candleholders, but, when we actually unboxed and looked at them, we were somewhat grossed out! When we played around with the dress on our headless manikins, they were too big, so our ghost couldn't be at the table, sitting or otherwise. That's when we began toying with the idea of displaying the dress as if it were floating above the table and whether we could safely and securely do so without effecting the garment's condition.

With that quandary in our minds we continued to list potential, grim and creepy, objects from our stores. The natural history store was an obvious treasure trove; what could be spookier than a series of dead animals? But this display wasn't necessarily designed to send children screaming out of the building, although the front of house team would probably enjoy such a spectacle. Things needed to be selected that would add something to the theme but not be too unnerving. Our natural history collection is wonderful, and it rarely sees the light of day, so this was a fantastic chance to showcase a variety of items. Skulls and horns/antlers were a given but was there anything else that would be safe to display? One of my favourites within the spirit collection (no we don't have ghosts sitting on the shelves in the stores) is a centipede and I was delighted with the

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idea of positioning it within the cupboard, next to the biscuit tins. As it turned out, the jar was too big, but it still made the cut, finding a new home on the dining table. Taxidermy always adds a creep touch, especially if it is something that also holds a spiritual or mythological importance. A watchful magpie in the corner of the store was crying out for a trip to the museum, so in the box it went. With a final flourish we selected a few skulls and antlers and also decided upon, in my option, an absolutely hideous tablecloth for the table, a disturbing displaced mannikin head and an odd sculpture made to look like a display of mouldy fruit...

The following day we stood looking at the 50s kitchen on the second floor and the task ahead of us finally sank in! We'd not attempted anything like this before and we didn't have a concrete plan. We weren't even sure if the dress would safely 'float', and without that the entire thing would be over.

With some clever disguising of a hanger, we gave the shoulders some shape and attached fishing wire that we could send down the sleeves and back. It wasn't the easiest of jobs, but things fell into place surprisingly quickly and, with the help of cotton tape and a helpfully placed set of beams, the star of the show took its deserved place in the spotlight. That's perhaps not the best turn of phrase to use in this case as the lighting was repositioned and dimmed to ensure no damage would occur to the delicate fabric.

The supporting cast found their positions with ease; a head in a washing tub, boar skull on a plate, magpie in the cupboard, the mouldy fruit sculpture, civet cat skull, centipede, a couple of pharmacy jars on that "lovely" tablecloth. The small set of horns was placed on the table too, while the larger set positioned at the back of the display to create a great shadow across the wall.

Our final object was a little tricky to place; Iggy the iguana. We picked Iggy because of his wry, slightly sadistic, expression but because of his posture he didn't sit anywhere easily. After some wiggling on a stand he finally looked happy on the highchair and as his expression hadn't changed, we assumed he was content.

So, with a step back we took a breath and examined the carnage; we'd done it! We'd managed to get the dress perfectly positioned in a way that you couldn't see the wires or the hanger.

We had such a great time planning and arranging the spooky kitchen and it's really got us thinking about the creative ways collections can be safely displayed.

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