

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How often do you visit museums?
- Which is your favourite museum, and what do you like about it?
- Why do you think museum collections are an important part of the cultural life of a city or country?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then write the words next to the correct definition.

provenance	first edition	incarnations	rocketed	sea change
portals	wreck	mantelpiece	handlebars	
curated	have taken up	mementoes	take hold	
igniting	residence	championing	torpedoed	
eccentric	dereliction	artefacts	transcends	

1. something that remains after a disaster or accident, often under the sea _____
2. objects that connect you to a memory or moment from the past _____
3. a decorative shelf above a fireplace, often used to display personal items _____
4. the history or origin of an object, especially something valuable or collectible

5. the state of being old or abandoned due to neglect, often referring to buildings or places

6. digital or imaginary gateways to different experiences, times or realities _____
7. a rare or unusual printed copy of a book or publication, especially the original printing

8. promoting or strongly supporting a cause, person or idea _____
9. objects made by people, often historical or cultural in value _____
10. to become established or start to have an effect _____

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

11. rose extremely quickly or suddenly, often referring to success or popularity _____
12. attacked or sunk a ship using a bomb called a torpedo _____
13. have lived in a place, especially after moving there permanently or temporarily

14. unusual or unconventional in an interesting or amusing way _____
15. selected and organised carefully for a specific purpose, such as an exhibition

16. causing a series of strong emotions or ideas to develop _____
17. goes beyond the limits of something such as time or culture _____
18. a dramatic and complete change in the way something is thought about or done

19. different versions or forms of something over time, especially a person or character

20. metal bars used for steering a bicycle or motorcycle _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Graham gripped the _____ tightly as the bike sped down the hill.
2. We've spent the last 10 years completely restoring a 200-year-old cottage after years of _____.
3. My grandmother has a collection of china figurines that take pride of place on her _____.
4. As the curtain rose, the actor began one of the most famous _____ of Shakespeare's Hamlet.
5. The company's sales _____ after the product went viral on social media.
6. The lecturer's speech on women's rights was powerful, _____ a wave of activism among her students.

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

7. The new art collection _____ in the city's art gallery since the start of the year.
8. The exhibition included stunning examples of _____ from ancient Greece and Rome.
9. The suspect's identity was confirmed by tracing the _____ of the stolen painting that he had attempted to sell at auction.
10. Luca stood out in the crowd thanks to his _____ fashion choices and bright red shoes.
11. The local history museum's exhibition on working-class life in the industrial north was carefully _____ to tell a compelling narrative.
12. As we dived deeper, we saw the _____ of the ship laid out on the seabed.
13. For me, the film completely _____ my expectations of what a thriller can be.
14. A scrapbook and some photographs acted as one of the few _____ of Penny's time spent living abroad.
15. There's been _____ in attitudes towards climate change over the past decade.
16. After years of quiet support, Lula began _____ the cause of animal rights more publicly.
17. Several warships were _____ off the Norwegian coast during the Second World War.
18. It's possible to see the original _____ of important works of fiction in the British Library in London.
19. Alan's passion for theatre really started to _____ during his first year at university.
20. Virtual reality headsets are becoming popular as _____ into digital worlds.

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

This people's museum is crammed with curios donated by Dublin residents. A major facelift has added a library, archive and exhibition on 'fearless women'

Fergal McCarthy

18 June, 2025

- 1 There are certain museums around the world that go beyond their role of housing artefacts and somehow seem to act as portals to the past. The Frick Collection in New York and Marcel Proust's cork-lined bedroom at the Musée Carnavalet in Paris both have a timeless energy that transcends the exhibits on display. The Little Museum of Dublin is also such a space.
- 2 Within seconds of climbing the stairs of this beautiful four-storey Georgian townhouse at 15 St Stephen's Green, a different era appears to take hold. The modern world disappears and I imagine myself back in Georgian times, when this red-bricked house was built along with so many of the beautiful squares and parks throughout the city centre.
- 3 Dubliner Trevor White persuaded Dublin city council to lend him this building back in 2011 to open the first museum in the city dedicated to all things Dublin. Armed with a great idea and no collection, he asked the listeners of the beloved Marian Finucane show on RTÉ (Ireland's national broadcaster) to trawl through their attics and cupboards for one-of-a-kind curiosities and mementoes relating to the Irish capital.
- 4 More than 1,000 exhibits flooded in, ranging from a pair of Bono's sunglasses to a ticket for the only Dublin concerts the Beatles played, in 1963. James Joyce's death mask was donated along with a first edition of Ulysses. A bottle of unopened lemonade rescued from the wreck of a mail boat torpedoed off Dublin during the first world war was offered for display coupled with an unopened jar of Sudocrem from 1931 (the antiseptic cream was invented in the city). All the items were carefully curated according to the decade of their provenance and exhibited throughout the museum's high-ceilinged rooms.
- 5 The museum became an immediate hit with locals and visitors and more than a million people have taken the 29-minute guided tour of the exhibits over the past 14 years. Tripadvisor rates it as the third best visitor attraction in Ireland, and the 12th best in Europe.
- 6 I often find myself there, early on a Sunday morning, when very little else is open in the city, sitting in the recreation of Irish Times editor Bertie Smyllie's office on the top floor with views across Stephen's Green to the Dublin mountains. Eccentric Bertie pedalled his bicycle to the newspaper until 1954 with a typewriter balanced on his handlebars. He was responsible for championing many of Ireland's greatest writers including Patrick Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien. Next door, in the U2 room, I like to pick out the teenage incarnations of the band from a black-and-white class photo at Mount Temple, the school where they famously first met as schoolboys. This photo, just like this museum as a whole, brings a sense that the past can still be accessed.
- 7 As visitor numbers rocketed, the museum sought funding to expand its exhibits and shop into the basement and garden and to install a long-overdue lift to provide universal access to all the floors. After a year of renovations, at a cost of €4.3 million, the museum reopened on 5 June with a new library and archive, a screening room and a new exhibition of fearless women snaking up the stairwell, taking its cue from a quote by President Mary Robinson: "I was elected by the women of Ireland, who instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system."
- 8 One of the world's finest doll's houses has taken up residence on the first floor. Modelled on Leinster House round the corner, the seat of the Irish government, Tara's Palace took more than 20 years to build and it has been given to the museum along with a number of new donations to celebrate the reopening. President Mary McAleese has sent in her rosary beads; the original sculpture of singer Luke Kelly (of the Dubliners fame) has found a place; and a whole room of wild and wonderful stuffed animals with a Dublin connection have taken up residence.

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

- 9 In 1988, Dublin marked the millennium of its founding with a year-long celebration of civic events. Many homes in the city still proudly display a famous milk bottle from this time, embossed with the Dublin City coat of arms, and you can find one of these on a mantelpiece at the museum. After decades of neglect and inner-city dereliction, 1988 marked a sea change in how many Dubliners viewed their capital. Trevor White also traces the igniting of his passion for Dublin to this time. Everything he has worked for at the Little Museum of Dublin, along with his equally passionate team, has been designed to inspire an appreciation and love of Dublin, the little city that could.

© Guardian News and Media 2025
First published in *The Guardian*, 18/06/2025

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct option (a, b or c) according to the information in the article.

1. According to the author, certain museums act as 'portals to the past' because they ...
 - a. house the most valuable artefacts in their collections.
 - b. present their exhibits in a way that goes beyond their displays.
 - c. are located in historically significant buildings.
2. Trevor White's strategy for building the museum's collection was ...
 - a. purchasing items from antique dealers across Ireland.
 - b. appealing to radio listeners to search their homes for Dublin memorabilia.
 - c. borrowing exhibits from other established Irish museums.
3. The museum's exhibits are organised ...
 - a. by their monetary value and historical importance.
 - b. based on their connection to famous Irish personalities.
 - c. chronologically according to when they originated.
4. Bertie Smyllie's most significant contribution to Dublin's cultural life was ...
 - a. promoting and supporting Ireland's literary talent.
 - b. demonstrating an eccentric cycling routine to work.
 - c. establishing the Irish Times as a major newspaper.
5. The recent 4.3 million euros renovation was primarily motivated by the need to ...
 - a. increase exhibition space and ensure access for all visitors.
 - b. compete with other major European cultural attractions.
 - c. accommodate larger touring exhibitions from abroad.

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

6. The 'fearless women' exhibition draws inspiration from ...
 - a. Dublin's historical tradition of influential female leaders.
 - b. the personal achievements of former President Mary McAleese.
 - c. a statement about challenging established systems instead of traditional roles.
7. The 1988 Dublin millennium celebration was significant because it ...
 - a. attracted over a million international visitors to the city.
 - b. provided the direct inspiration for founding the Little Museum.
 - c. represented a fundamental shift in residents' perception of their city.
8. The museum's success can be attributed to its ability to ...
 - a. house the most comprehensive collection of Dublin artifacts.
 - b. foster affection and admiration for the Irish capital.
 - c. provide the most detailed historical chronology of the city.

4 Key language

- a. Find the phrasal verbs from the box in the article. Then write the phrases next to the correct definition.

armed with coupled with dedicated to flooded in pick out trawl through

1. to choose something or someone from a group, often carefully or with effort

2. having something useful or necessary, especially to support or strengthen a position

3. arrived or appeared in large numbers or quantities, often suddenly or overwhelmingly

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

4. connected or combined with something else in a way that increases effect or impact

5. showed strong commitment or purpose towards a particular task, belief or cause

6. searched through a large amount of information or material in a detailed or systematic way

b. Complete each sentence with a phrasal verb from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. The museum archives were massive, and Evelyn had to _____ thousands of old documents to find the original.
2. _____ enthusiasm and clear evidence, the proposal was hard to reject.
3. Dozens of applications _____ after the job was posted online.
4. Hidalgo spent hours trying to _____ just the right quote for his presentation.
5. The campaign was run by a team who were completely _____ social justice.
6. _____ hard facts and years of experience, the defence barrister had a distinct advantage over the prosecution.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you think community-sourced museums are more historically important than traditional museums? Why or why not?
- How important is civic pride for a city's development? Give examples from your own experience.

From Joyce's death mask to Bono's sunglasses: a look around the Little Museum of Dublin's grand curiosities

Level 3: Advanced

6 In your own words

- a. If you were to choose one item to give to a local museum in your hometown or city, what item would you choose and why? Write an essay of between 250-300 words explaining your choice.

Consider:

- what the item represents about your local area or personal connection to it
- why it would be meaningful for future visitors
- how it reflects the character or history of your community

- b. Share your essays with your classmates.