



Report on the Positive Images Festival Artist Residency at Coventry Central Library 2021

By Mary Courtney www.marycourtneycoventry.com

Summary

Coventry artist and poet Mary Courtney was appointed by the Positive Images Festival to be **Artist in Residence at Coventry Central Library** for 24 afternoon sessions between August-October 2021. The residency was promoted as “Making Faces”. During this time **380 people participated** (An average of 16 per session).

The project was a great success - based on all the important parameters: the numbers and diversity of participants, the levels of engagement and creative output, the opportunities it gave for social cohesion, and the positive feedback from participants.

The residency also enabled those involved to *connect with and re-discover their own city* - as the activities were not generic, but directly related to a very overlooked part of Coventry: the gargoyles, grotesques and green men on the buildings. Participants were able to see via the photographs provided, the strange, wonderful and fantastical carvings, ask questions about them, where they are and why they are there. Many said they were going out to look for them themselves. Some of the children invented stories about them. This is such a positive outcome. The encouragement to notice: to see and look at the city differently. As no ordinary place, but as a place of treasures, marvels and adventure. A place to feel pride in. What this residency demonstrated is that there is both a lack of awareness of what is there and an appetite to know. Along with a great appetite to be creative and connect with others.

People showed poems and fairy tales and recited their poems, showed their art work on Instagram and in sketchbooks. Found out through discussion about places to exhibit or share their work both online and in real-life. Sent emails of their artwork and photographs of their own finds of grotesques in the city, as well as in Chester and in Oxford. Joined Instagram or Facebook groups to connect with other creatives in the city.

Mary enjoyed the residency a great deal, it also enriched her own art practice and knowledge in the area of *Coventry Grotesques*, and has led directly to further work.

The media and social media coverage of the residency has been extensive and was in addition to the promotional posters. Added to this, coverage of the *Grotesques* project, the *Bling Road* and the *Random String Canal Event*, has been extensive. All local arts projects, installations and events that Mary has been involved in during the time of the residency. This will have highlighted and benefited the Positive Images Festival both directly and indirectly.

Anne Brown, The Library Development Manager at Coventry Central Library, said in an email to Mary that “A lot of people have gained added knowledge from seeing you”.

The best projects benefit all those involved, and there is ample evidence to show that this residency did that.

Making Faces













The creative sessions on offer during the residency

There were four creative options offered during the residency:

- “Making Faces”
- “A Grotesque 100 Quiz” (offered after the summer holiday had ended)
- “Making Dragons” (offered during the last week)
- General drop-in to discuss anything art/culture/poetry related.

The “Making Faces” sessions gave people the option to draw, colour in, use paint-sticks, or make models of faces using modelling clay or cardboard, pipe-cleaners, googly eyes, egg boxes and discarded plastic, using images of grotesques, green-men, dragons and face-pullers on buildings around Coventry as inspiration.

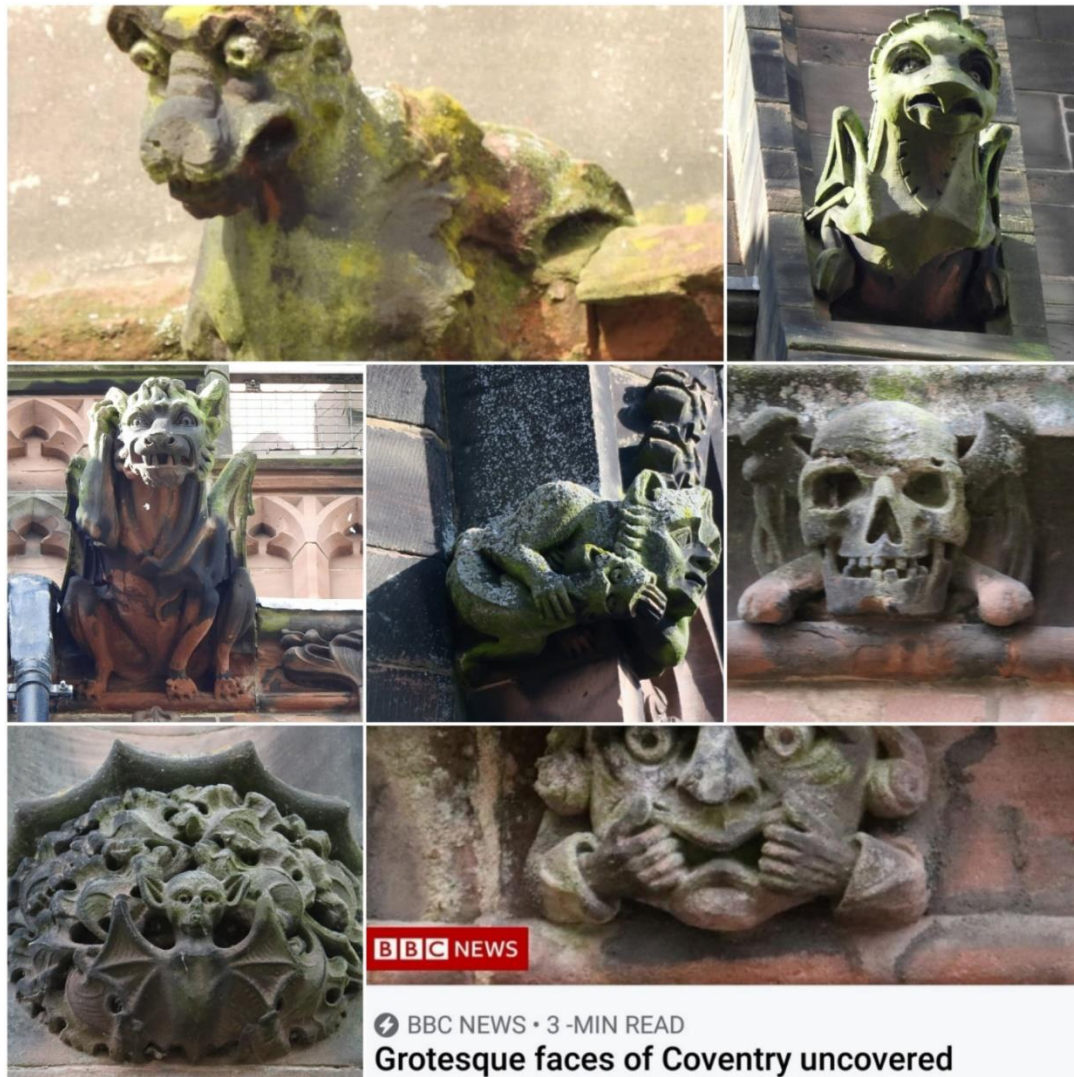
Having several different creative options meant that it was possible to cater to people on an individual level according to their preference, time and confidence creatively. It also meant that there were different options for people who returned. Having postcard images of the faces from the buildings of the city worked on several levels. It provided an opening for conversation, curiosity and questions, as well as providing a visual reference and starting point. 16 images were used. The most popular ones were batboy, the skull and the face-puller, all images from Coventry Cathedral ruins – these generated the most drawings. The sessions were offered on a drop-in and free to use basis at Central Library between 1pm and 4pm on the dates set out below.

The materials were set up ready to use by 1pm. The focus was on creating a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere so people could spend time creating and enjoy the experience. Mostly people kept to making faces based on grotesques or making dragons, though planes, flags, flowers, rainbows, butterflies, landscapes and even the solar system and a times-table were made! When someone brought in a pumpkin, several people made pumpkin faces and little pumpkins out of modelling clay. When someone brought in about 40 different nail polishes there was some creative nail polishing done. There was no forcing of people to adhere to the creative stimulus. Just going with the flow of the creative spirit. This was an effective tactic. Sometimes a mother would sit with her child and watch and then after a while you would see her colouring or drawing. One Albanian woman left with a huge smile and a bouquet of colourful pipe-cleaner flowers she had made whilst her children were occupied in the workshops for a couple of hours. For several adults these sessions were the first time they had done any drawing since childhood. One grandmother started off colouring in one session and then progressed to drawing. She was delighted that she had done this. The majority of artwork was taken home by the participants. Approximately 50 images are available for exhibition.

Mary has a PGCE teaching qualification and 17years experience of teaching adults in Further Education. She has run art workshops for groups with health needs such as Escape Community Arts and Artyfolks, as well workshops for post-graduate students, professors and primary school children. Mary was Poet in Residence for Warwickshire Libraries (including libraries in Nuneaton, Bedworth and Atherstone). And for several years ran a big draw event for 200+ people at Earlsdon Library. This

combination of community experience to draw upon meant that she was able to cater for the diversity of people who joined in. It also helped that Colin Scott from the Positive Images Festival was able to be flexible with the materials budget to buy extra paper and card to adapt to the number of participants without wasting money on unnecessary frontloaded spend.

Some of the images used in the workshops as visual inspiration



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Positive Image Festival



POSTED 16/08/2021



EMMA



Photo credit: Toni Peach. This is an extract from a blog by Radio Presenter Toni Peach on the residency on the HillzFM website

Colouring was popular. This was the favourite of the cartoon drawings I made, offered in black and white for people to colour

Colouring was offered as an option. It is a way to ease people into creativity in a non-threatening way.



Numbers and diversity of participants and levels of engagement

The table below sets out the numbers of people who participated during each session.

. Date of Residency	Number of participants
August	
Thur 5th	20
Sat 7th	21
Thur 12th <i>Karen Johnson</i>	19
Friday 13th <i>Karen Johnson</i>	23
Thur 19th	14
Fri 20th	16
Thur 26th	23
September	
Thur 2nd	27
Saturday 4th	15
Thur 9th	10
Fri 10th	3
Thur 16th	8
Thur 23rd	10
Fri 24th	3
Thur 30th	7
October	
Saturday 2nd Oct	26
Thursday 7th Oct	8
Friday 8th Oct	9
Thurs 14th Oct	12
Fri 15th Oct	12
Thur 21st Oct	15
Fri 22nd Oct	12
Thur 28th Oct	32
Fri 29th Oct	35
TOTAL	380

After each session a written record of the numbers of participants was given to the library for their records, and a photograph of this form along with photographs of the persons participating (those who gave permission) was sent to Colin Scott and Mehru Fitter of the Positive Images Festival.

Karen Johnson, an experienced artist with 17yrs experience as Head of Art at Hereward College, took two of the afternoon sessions when Mary was ill. It was good to have this contingency in place. Mary has worked closely with Karen on art projects and workshops and her input to the residency was excellent.

The youngest participant was 3 years old and the oldest 81 years.

The summer holidays and half-term times and Saturdays were the busiest times and tended to be mainly families/parent with a child/children. Term times the participants were mostly adults. The two groups who attended during the Term times were Headway and Grapevine. These were planned in advance with numbers of participants agreed and the library liaised with by email two weeks in advance. Mary contacted several groups when it became apparent after one session with 3 people that a more proactive approach of direct invitation was needed to make the best of the term times. It was decided then that offering something specifically to cater for those interested in heritage and history could be a good idea. That is how the *Grotesque 100 quiz* evolved, where 100 images were set out of the faces on buildings for people to look at and pit their wits against. Posts were placed in True Coventarian and Visit Historic Coventry and Sitting Rooms of Culture Facebook Groups to promote this and it was effective at bringing people in. Mehru Fitter and Colin Scott were sent a screenshot of feedback from one of the people who posted about how much she had learnt. Peter Garbett and Scott Duffin from Visit Historic Coventry also visited as a result of this outreach and posted selfies with Mary on their site.

The mix of people participating was very **diverse**, including an Albanian family new to Coventry, people from Syria, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Iran, Poland and Hong-Kong, people born and raised in Coventry from English and Asian backgrounds, Chinese families, people from African heritage brought up in America and Birmingham. Three ex-homeless men participated, several wheelchair users, three teenagers with autism, Lady Godiva (Pru Porretta), Leaders of the *Visit Historic Coventry* Facebook Group, two local radio presenters (Toni Peach and King David), students from Coventry University, researchers from the University of Warwick, several people with learning disabilities became regulars, and people from the *Headway Group* (which caters for people who have had head injuries) along with members of Grapevine, joined in.

The photo collages give a flavour of the diversity in age, gender and ethnicity.

For the image collage on the next page, the woman in the top picture on the right is 81 years old. She attended two sessions, produced some wonderfully creative work and said she “Really enjoyed the drawing and the conversations we had with a young Asian digital artist who stopped to chat”. The gentleman in the middle came in twice and had the opportunity to meet one of the City of Culture producers as well as do some drawing. Greg also sent images by email of grotesques high up on the cathedral. The image bottom left is of Scott who met the new artist in residence at Coventry Artspace during one of the sessions. Also in conversation with them, but not pictured, were two ex-homeless men who spoke about their forthcoming exhibition. One of whom recited several of his poems in readiness for his performance the next day.

People engaged with activities and/ making new connections with each other



Hundreds of photos were taken over the residency period. Positive Images Festival has a bank of them all as they were sent after each session. The pictures here represent only a fraction, but enough to show the levels of engagement with the project.

Creators with their creations



Here are a range of creators and creations, showing the drawing of their own dragon inventions in both 3D and drawing.

More creators with their creations



A mix of adults, young children and teenagers

More creators with their creations



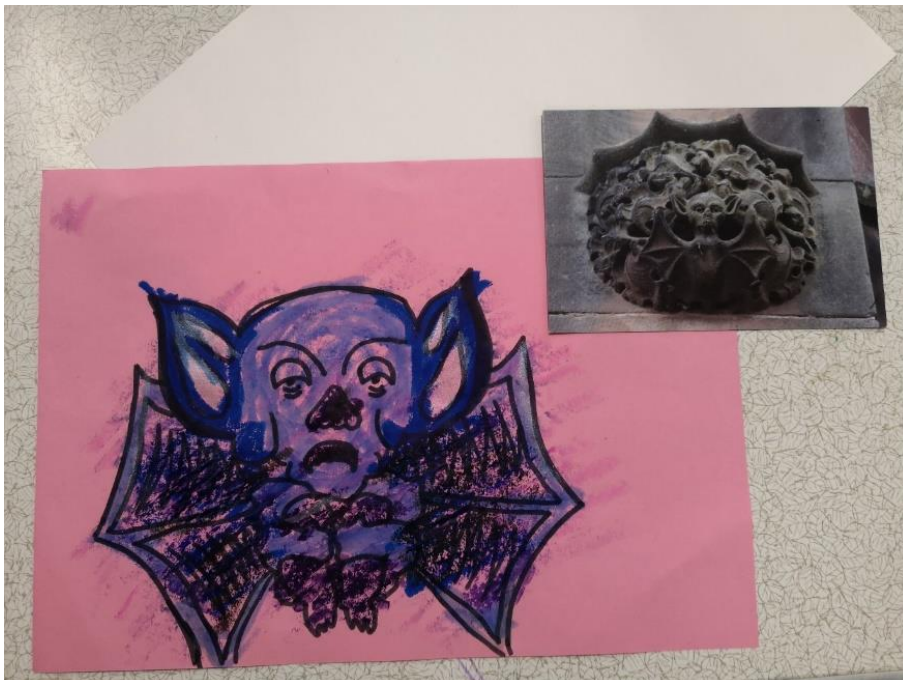
A mix of younger and older adults, with various activities: colouring, drawing, using paint-sticks and doing the Grotesque 100 quiz. The faces are the participant feedback!

A young family with one of the postcards as a stimulus and some of cartoon outlines offered to colour in

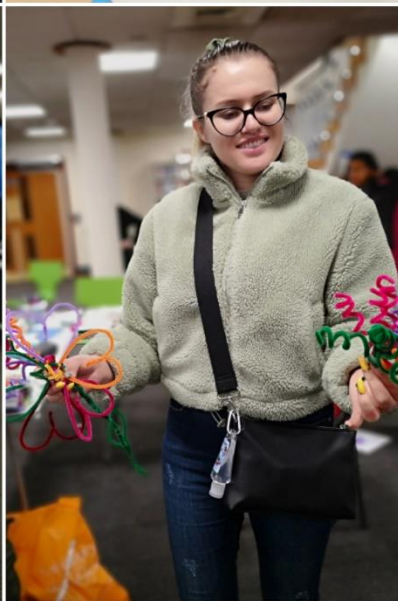


On the left of the picture you can see the batboy drawing. Batboy was very popular

Here is batboy from the Cathedral ruins, and an artistic interpretation of him by a young adult



More creators with their creations



Diversity of creative experience

In one session a 3year old sat next to a retired graphic designer. Both were focussed fully on their creative process. This is creative diversity! All were valued equally. Here are their creations.



Media and Social Media Coverage

BBC online

Midlands News online
BBC CWR Coventry Creates with Rachel New
BBC CWR on air twice
BBC CWR Facebook and Twitter
Coventry Observer
Hillz FM Interview with Toni Peach about Grotesques
Hillz FM Blog
Hillz FM Interview with King David
MaryCourtney Art Instagram 6 posts

Coventry Society Talk at the LTB
Grotesque 100 Screening LTB
Coventry Society Grotesque Blog
Coventry Grotesque 100 You Tube

Launch of Coventry Grotesque Facebook
Launch of the Coventry Grotesque Digital Map
Coventry Grotesque Instagram

Positive Images Festival Facebook (10 posts) and Instagram
Coventry Libraries Facebook 3 posts
Visit Historic Coventry 3 posts
True Coventarian 3 posts
Sitting Rooms of Culture Facebook 5 posts
Mary Courtney Facebook and Instagram
Forthcoming:
HCE poetry and art magazine (Here Comes Everyone) Interview for the HCE website
Coventry Central Library posters at the library entrance and in the library



Coverage for the Bling Road and Random String Canal Event

BBC CWR video of the Bling Road (**Over 13k views**)
Coventry Live Facebook post
Coventry Telegraph one page article
BBC CWR on air
BBC CWR Facebook and Twitter
Ludic Rooms website
Random String website, Instagram and Facebook

" The people we invited to create grotesques with Mary all had a fantastic experience. Mary's warmth and enthusiasm were infectious and everyone loved the idea of finding faces and animals around the city. I know a few people went back by themselves to take part in further sessions."

Andrea Mbarushimana from Grapevine's Help and Connect project.

Concluding Remarks and Next Steps

There were so many positives from this residency.

There were outcomes and lovely moments that couldn't be predicted:

- Meeting Elinor Cole meant that a one-minute soundscape story was sent to her for inclusion in her storybench. It is the imagined voice of the face-pulling grotesque on the cathedral ruins. This face-puller which proved so popular with the children will also be carved onto the bench. The idea is that people sit on the bench and the bench yields an audio story. Elinor also invited me to contribute to a possible forthcoming gothic event for teenagers at Coventry Cathedral.
- Meeting King David resulted in an invitation to be on his local radio show. He will also be introducing a regular artist focus on his show from November to put the spotlight on local talent.
- Talking with Toni Peach led to an invitation to talk about grotesques and other art stuff on her Hillz FM Tuesday show.
- A 13year old Muslim girl came in twice to find out more about grotesques. She persuaded her parents to take her to the LTB to see the Grotesque 100 screening and stayed for a long time to discuss these carvings further.
- In the last month of the residency it was apparent that people were inviting their friends/family to join them in the sessions. There were regulars, and this was an unexpected outcome.
- One man from Sudan came in for 5 weeks each week to improve his conversation skills and to see a friendly familiar face. He was invited by a couple who had attended twice to join them after the session for a coffee. An elderly Irish man dropped by twice just to have a chat. He had been locked up for 11months with the pandemic and he was hungry to talk. "Being of the same generation as my parents I knew the names of the old dance halls and other reference points to help connect". Although both didn't engage with the official purpose of the residency there is no doubt that the residency was of benefit to them.
- Taiwo had joined Artspace from Birmingham and was new to Coventry. During the sessions she met new people, came back to say hello and had followed up on looking at new art venues in the city. The residency was of value in helping her to feel welcome in a new city.
- After meeting Mick at one of the sessions, going to his exhibition opening "Agency" the next day. This was the exhibition focussing on those who had experienced homelessness. "Having said I'd be there, he arrived with two pictures of grotesques for me".
- Running a session for Headway has resulted in the invitation to lead six further workshops for this group. An invitation to run a workshop for Hereward College students has also been made.

- Several people asked Mary to share their artwork on social media as they didn't use social media. And several people sent examples of their work by email.

What seemed evident was the appetite for creativity in the central library setting.

- The school holidays and weekends are ideal periods for this to happen on a **regular basis** - as the numbers who joined in at these times show.
- In the last month during the daytime afternoons during term times it also became apparent that several people with learning disabilities and their friends had come to enjoy the *regularity* of the workshops and seeing a familiar friendly face. Again, another point to consider.

There will be a display of work in early 2022 and Mary is liaising with Colin Scott about that.

The Grotesque Project will be developed, and if funding can be obtained the material can be used to make a book.

The residency was of great value to Mary's artwork project. It gave ample evidence of the lack of knowledge in the city of the grotesques. It also meant that there was the opportunity to share specific local expertise in this area.

Thanks to the library staff for putting the posters in the library, doing printouts of the cartoons and dragons and providing a great space for creativity. The location in a highly visible part of the library was much appreciated.

The Positive Images Festival team were a pleasure to work with throughout. Thanks!

Green man artwork by Greg Fletcher emailed to Mary for social media sharing



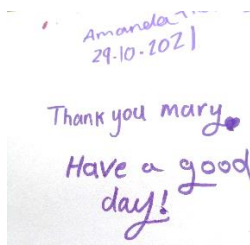
“Here’s my artwork!”: Sharing images at a session



A creative interpretation of one of the green men carvings on the cathedral ruins



An unexpected message behind a drawing!



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