

Interpreting Queer Heritage

The Maritime Museum's Rainbow Trail

ABSTRACT

This article explores the possibility of integrating queer heritage into a permanent museum exhibition at the Maritime Centre Vellamo in Finland through the form of a rainbow trail. Informed by previous work on queering museums, exhibitions, and guided tours, the article evaluates the author's intervention at Vellamo, beginning with its initiation, outlining the principles deployed to create the trail, analysing in detail the interpretative strategies used to write the leaflet, and examining visitor feedback collected by the museum. It aims to raise awareness of the possibilities offered by such museum activism for making the historical existence of queerness and queer heritage visible as part of national history, while leveraging the legitimacy afforded by the museum context.

Keywords: Queer heritage, museum activism, queer trail

FINLAND'S NATIONAL HISTORY hinges on narratives that hark back to the wars in which Finland heroically defended its national borders to maintain its independence, memorialised its freehold peasant farmers, and recalled the early suffrage attained by the nation's strong women, as a symbol of the country's successful equality politics (Markkola 2012, 240). One would expect to find these narratives presented in social history museums, especially those affiliated with the National Museum of Finland. The Maritime Museum of Finland at the Maritime Centre Vellamo, however, does not align with the dominant national narrative. Finland's major defensive wars were not fought at the sea but on

land; seamen escaped farmwork; and women, however strong, were historically excluded from working on ships. Moreover, the Maritime Museum must address the reality that shipping relies on transnational exchange and results in porous national borders. Taken together, these features make Vellamo fundamentally “queer.”

With these thoughts in mind, I visited the Maritime Centre Vellamo in Kotka, including its Maritime Museum, the Regional Kymenlaakso Museum, and other exhibitions, in the summer of 2019. My visit took place soon after I had visited the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavík, with its inspiring exhibition trail entitled *A Rainbow Thread* (Jónasdóttir et al. n.d.; Ellenberger in this issue). Following the parlance common in Nordic countries, the rainbow in the guide title refers to LGBTQ+ themes addressed within the exhibition. *A Rainbow Thread* took the form of a leaflet and an audio guide in Icelandic and English and was designed to accompany the museum’s permanent exhibition, *Making of a Nation: Heritage and History in Iceland*, providing both information and questions about queer history in Iceland.

While walking through Vellamo, inspired by the Icelandic rainbow thread, I tried to envision a similar trail for Vellamo that would intertwine maritime histories and queer histories – that is, the histories of people whose lives do not follow heteronormative expectations regarding their gender expression or sexual choices. The thought of queering the permanent exhibition refused to leave me, so a year later, I emailed Vellamo’s director, Erik Tirkkonen, and proposed the following idea: I could write, with his assistance, a manuscript for a rainbow trail through the museum and an accompanying leaflet in exchange for permission to conduct research on the process as part of my employment as a researcher.¹ We agreed to a meeting via Zoom, during which I explained my idea in greater detail.

The timing proved to be right for the project, as the renewed Finnish Museums Act (314/2019) had entered into force on 1 January 2020, following a suite of museum policy changes in Europe and North America (see the discussion of similar trends in Ellenberger in this issue). The act urges museums to promote a sense of community, continuity, and cul-

tural diversity, along with education, well-being, equality, and democracy. This development also opened new possibilities for queer inclusion in museums – something museums have only hesitantly started to address in Finland since 2005 (Juvonen 2021). Moreover, Finland was set to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the following year, 2021. Because the Maritime Museum of Finland at the Maritime Centre Vellamo operated under the aegis of the National Museum, which had already successfully collaborated with the Friends of Queer History, a voluntary association founded in 2020 to promote queer history in Finland – and of which I was chair at the time – both Vellamo and the board of the National Museum happily accepted my proposal in August 2020.

This article explores the possibility of integrating queer heritage into a permanent exhibition through the form of a rainbow trail. Informed by previous work on queering museums, exhibitions, and guided tours, the article evaluates the intervention at Vellamo, beginning with its initiation, outlining the principles deployed to create the trail, analysing in detail the interpretative strategies used to write the leaflet, and examining visitor feedback collected by the museum. It aims to raise awareness of the possibilities offered by such museum activism for “usualising” (i.e., “to make usual” – a term I, following Sanders (2021, 53), prefer to “normalising”) the historical existence of queerness and queer heritage as part of national history, while leveraging the legitimacy afforded by the museum context.

Outlining the process

When I revisited the Maritime Museum’s permanent exhibition, Tirkkonen gave me a list of the items and texts on the didactic panels displayed in the exhibition. As queer history had not been considered a theme of collecting at Vellamo, there were almost no items that would have evidenced queer lives in and of themselves. Thus, while planning the trail, I relied on the interpretative strategy proposed by Margaret Middleton, who insists on the possibility of queerness in every interpretation (Middleton 2020, 431–434), as well as on the appropriate

strategy of Robert Mills (2008, 49–50), according to whom everyday objects can be resignified and recoded as queer.

Because there is little research on queer maritime history in Finland, I chose to rely instead on more general queer heritage. Drawing on Mills (2006), Siivonen (2013), and Steorn (2012), I argue that to present queer heritage in museums is to present lives lived by queers and the meanings attached to those, with the purpose of enabling queer audiences to establish a sense of themselves and their cultural belonging to a (sometimes imaginary) community that has a history of its own across time. Furthermore, familiarity with queer heritage can allow members of the LGBTQ+ community to see how our queer identifications and desires allow us to participate in the tradition of both material and immaterial queer heritage in our everyday lives. Although academic research on queer history may address aspects of queer heritage, heritage is a broader term than history, even though it draws on the past.

From Vellamo's exhibitions, I selected sixteen items that, based on both my subjective interest in and academic involvement with queer history, I knew could be used to address queer heritage. The following thirteen items made it into the trail (see Table 1):

No	Objects from the permanent exhibition	Panels from the permanent exhibition
#1	Boat <i>Victoria</i> [boat exhibition]	
#2	Sonar Furuno FCV-620	
#3	Scale model S/S <i>Urania</i>	
#4		To Stockholm and Tallinn! [tourism]
#5		Dreaming of a New Beginning [migration]
#6	Wooden relief of a mermaid	
#7		Mythical Woman [harbour prostitution]
#8	Membership card and table standard of the Finnish Seafarers' Union	
#9	Uniform of a captain	
#10	Rivets from a Viking boat burial site	
#11	Painting of frigate <i>Konung Gustaf III</i>	
#12		Wood and Salt [sea trade]
#13	Wedding dress [temporary exhibition]	

Table 1: Reinterpreted objects and panels at the Maritime Museum of Finland's permanent exhibition and other exhibitions at the Maritime Centre Vellamo.

Later, when scripting and finalising the 900-character, reader-friendly texts for the leaflet, I was guided by the same principles applied at Friends of Queer History: the information needs to be accurate and research-based, and intersectional approaches are to be included whenever possible. I double-checked the details against the available literature and marked any gaps that I hoped the director would be able to fill through his privileged archival access to more detailed information about maritime history.

After I finished writing, a significant amount of invisible and time-consuming work remained for Tirkkonen and his team. He filled in the information missing from the drafts, selected the texts to be included, and had the finalised materials approved by his colleagues. In addition, the team proofread the texts, decided on the order of their presentation,

composed a site map, and commissioned an artist to design a logo for the tags needed for the object cases. The rainbow logo was also featured on the cover of the printed trail leaflet. Finally, the museum took care of the layout and printing of the leaflet.

In Finland, it has been rare for marginalised communities to be invited to create narratives about their own culture in memory institutions (Viita-aho et al. 2023, 88). In addition, the setup of this project was typical of the poorly funded museum field in that the neglected incorporation of marginalised groups into museums was outsourced for free to an expert activist from these groups, who was also the initiator of the project (Frost 2021, 124; Rowles 2020, 365). In general, the work of activists who have gathered, over the course of decades, both experiential and theoretical knowledge about their own histories should be acknowledged as expert work and remunerated accordingly (Hernandez 2021; Lindholm & Raudaskoski 2021). As I was not a member of the museum staff, unexpected changes in my affiliation, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, which complicated the scheduling of the museum's programming, resulted in delays. The guide was nonetheless published on 8 March 2022.

Queering the museum has sometimes been described as an uphill struggle in other cultural contexts, such as the United States (Petry 2010), but collaborating with Vellamo was a remarkably smooth experience, thanks to the fortunate timing and relatively flat professional hierarchies in Finnish culture. Although the realisation of the project proceeded at its own pace, it received full institutional support throughout. The institution also placed its trust in activist collaboration. Although the resulting trail leaflet is both state-sponsored and institutionally approved, the museum did not object to any of the proposed texts that prioritised a queer perspective, and the reduction of the sixteen proposed texts to thirteen published texts was based on technical considerations rather than content.

Proposing and scripting the rainbow trail for Vellamo can be seen as queer heritage work, taking the form of queer knowledge activism and world-making in the footsteps of José Esteban Muñoz: a critical interven-

tion in the museum that aims to make visitors recognise the fact of queer existence in the past and to create a horizon of existence that allows them “to act with a mind toward ‘future possibilities’” (Muñoz 2009, 16, 25). Sponsored by the National Museum, the project signalled that, by telling other(s) stories, Vellamo was willing to live up to the Museums Act and to redefine Finnish culture as including queer lives and experiences.

Considerations on composing the trail

Before describing the reinterpretations of the exhibits in detail, I lay out some broad considerations and decisions made when drafting the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet. In general, to avoid personal biases, it is advisable to engage several people in the creation of a queer trail or a guided tour when resources allow (Clayton & Hoskin 2020). In Vellamo’s case, paying additional workers was not feasible, so I tried to learn from my past mistakes² and be as inclusive as possible – yet a museum about seafaring is bound to be dominated by men, as is any queer trail through it. Similarly, I sought to draw lessons and best practices from the museum tours I had previously visited and analysed (Juvonen 2020). In hindsight, though, it is clear that a more inclusive trail could have been created had I been more familiar with trans heritage and history (Mills 2006, 257–258).

The director was aware of a well-known predecessor to the trail: a temporary queer exhibition in a maritime museum, called *Hello Sailor! Gay Life on the Ocean Wave*, shown at the Maritime Museum in Southampton in 2007, which leaned on previously published research based on the oral histories of seafarers (Baker & Stanley 2003; see Frost 2008, 33; Tibbles 2012). A similar approach was taken in the temporary exhibition *Frizon* at the Maritime Museum in Stockholm, which was based on the research conducted by Arne Nilsson (2006) and which later toured Sweden. Oral histories also formed the foundation of the temporary *Queer at Sea* exhibition at the Maritime Museum in Bergen, Norway, which opened in October 2022. Research on queer seafarers had, however, never been conducted in Finland, and we did not have the resources to realise such a project by 2021.

Therefore, the Vellamo Rainbow Trail instead followed the example of *Pride and Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay London* (1999), an exhibition that drew more from cultural and social history (Frost 2008, 32). This focus aligned with my training in gender studies and social sciences. The effects of disciplinary differences become evident when the Vellamo Rainbow Trail (Juvonen & Tirkkonen 2022) is compared with the Icelandic *A Rainbow Thread* (Jónasdóttir et al. n.d.). *A Rainbow Thread* highlighted source materials and problematised both the use of historical concepts and contemporary readings of the sources themselves, which are crucial topics for academic history writing (see Ellenberger in this issue). Although the Vellamo Rainbow Trail contained historical information, its focus was on lived queer heritage and its meanings. In this context, history was used as a tool to address the present disregard for queer people in permanent exhibitions and, critically, to provide them with a sense of lineage (de Szegheo Lang 2015, 231). This was achieved by foregrounding the social processes, experiences, and practices of queer people, using the Maritime Centre Vellamo as a platform.

Because the museum's rainbow trail was an unplanned addition to the existing permanent exhibition, it could only comment on the pre-existing heteronormative narrative conveyed by the displayed items; it could not rewrite the exhibition narrative from scratch. Quite justly, one visitor noted in their written feedback, "It feels like the trail is superimposed."³ When a museum chooses to display queer heritage and culture in its exhibitions, it must decide whether to focus on displaying actual queer objects, such as a protest sign, or on the queer persons who owned, created, or used these objects (Armstrong 2022, 210). Unsurprisingly, none of the objects displayed in the exhibition were explicitly queer in the sense that they would have been chosen to represent queer history, as queer themes remain routinely unacknowledged and excluded, if not actively suppressed, in museums (Venegas 2010, 163–164; Tibbles 2012, 164; Frost 2021, 123–124, 127). Likewise, almost nothing was known about the possible queerness of the people mentioned in the exhibit. Hence, neither of these standard starting points for interpretation could be relied upon. Sometimes, the solution to such a problem can be to

focus on spaces or organisations instead of objects or persons (Freixo, Schmidt & Bauer 2020, 17), but in an existing maritime exhibition, that approach was likewise unrealisable.

Therefore, the focus of the Maritime Museum's rainbow trail was the reinterpretation of the displayed objects from the critical perspective of queer heritage. The decision was guided by the assumption that understanding queer heritage would be important for visitors, who have often been deprived of such knowledge in schools and elsewhere (Armstrong 2022, 206, 210–211). Although, in current parlance, the term “queer” is easily pigeonholed into implicit identity categories, it is advisable to remember that, historically, the word has had capacious meanings (Bengry 2021). Such capaciousness should and could also guide queer curation and scriptwriting (Jukes & Roe 2023, 5). Therefore, the task of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet, as an intervention, was to provide queer interpretations and alternative readings based on the exhibited items and the pre-existing didactic panels, thereby adding new layers from queer heritage to their descriptions and conclusions.

When determining the appropriate tone for texts in a leaflet designed to accompany a rainbow trail in a general museum, the dual nature of the audience must be considered. I clearly wanted to prioritise queer audiences and their historical longings, yet this had to be done without alienating straight visitors. I envisioned the rainbow trail as a contact zone for visitors, in which encounters with queer culture could take place. Because some straight museumgoers might be scandalised by queer information, the texts sought to channel any emotions aroused into building empathy towards queer people (Middleton 2017, 80). Moreover, I tried to balance the information with points of cross-sexual identification and humour, when appropriate, to reduce straight visitors' potential anxieties about the assumed sexual Other. The response I received from the museum staff after submitting the manuscript was encouraging: “[I]t received only positive responses, and the writing style is very fluent and suitable for the museum” (Tirkkonen 2021, my translation).⁴

Choosing to rely on a written leaflet that can be studied privately and even taken home, instead of a guided tour, kept the trail's content inde-

pendent of a tour guide's ad hoc decisions made in response to visitors' reactions (Armstrong 2022, 215; Rowles 2020, 368). The final product, the Vellamo Rainbow Trail, includes an introduction to the purpose of the guide, a map of the path, and short descriptions of thirteen items on ten pages (Juvonen & Tirkkonen 2022).⁵ The introduction lays out the queer political reasoning behind making a rainbow trail and publishing a leaflet. It addresses the importance of the year 2021 for the Finnish queer community, which commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexual acts, the fortieth of the de-medicalisation of homosexuality, and the tenth of the de-medicalisation of fetish sexuality. It also notes that the museum sector has had little reaction to these changes, with exhibitions still built from a heteronormative perspective. To address this situation, the Maritime Museum's rainbow trail was created in collaboration with the Friends of Queer History⁶ as an overdue gesture towards the queer community and to make visible the queer heritage that is often overlooked and at risk of being forgotten.

Exposing constructed history in the rainbow trail

When I retrospectively analyse the content of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet, some clear themes and aspirations become evident. One of the key messages I wanted to convey to visitors is that what we consider historical facts are actually constructs and, hence, can change over time. The same applies to our historical understanding of gender and sexuality. I sought to denaturalise binary discourses about gender and sexuality in relation to two displayed objects.

The first item was a collection of rivets from a Viking boat burial site, accompanied in the trail leaflet by Text #10, which focused on gender. Drawing on queer archaeology, the question of archaeological excavations of graves was raised, as was the fact that changing the gender assignments of found remains may alter readings of the past (Eetu-Sihvola 2017; Laskar 2019, 49–50; Moilanen 2021). This text, which challenged a simple and straightforward understanding of gender, repeatedly received the most positive responses in the visitor feedback. This may have been because questions around gender diversity are

present in young visitors' minds or, possibly, because it was the only text that challenged the reader by addressing them directly with pedagogical questions: "What was the gender of the people whose bodies were burned in the Viking-era boat funeral at Pappilanmäki in Raisio? What could information about their gender tell us?"

The second object was a painting of a frigate carrying the name *Konung Gustaf III*, in honour of King Gustav III of Sweden. Whereas the various portraits of the king demonstrate how conceptions of gender expression and masculinity have changed over time, Text #11 in the leaflet problematised the difficulty of proving the nature of his sexuality, which was the subject of discussion and rumours already in his lifetime (Juvonen 2020). The text highlights how interpretations of his sexuality are bound to change based on the context and approach to history writing.

These two items provided potential trans or queer lineages for visitors otherwise lacking access to such heritage. Moreover, the themes raised by them – the problematisation of taken-for-granted genders and sexual orientations in historical materials – clearly must be addressed by a queer exhibition. These themes also open the door to the inclusion of trans* lives and sexualities beyond heterosexual monogamy. Some of the feedback also explicitly expressed a hope for a more diversified approach to genders and sexualities in future museum exhibitions.

Addressing sexuality

The many exhibitions about the sexually explicit art of Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, have shown that it is possible to address homosexuality in Finnish art museums. However, social history museums have rarely addressed homosexuality directly. In this trail leaflet, I wanted to include explicit references to queer sexuality, when appropriate, as an integral part of some men's lives. In so doing, I also wanted to indicate that gay sex, like heterosexual sex, is an acceptable topic to ponder in museums, as there is nothing inherently inappropriate about it. However, the feedback indicated that such an approach was unexpected in a museum context. In response to the question, "What

aspects or which items of the rainbow trail surprised you and why?” one of the respondents noted, “Surprisingly sexual in tone.”

Queer sexual heritage was addressed in relation to a didactic panel in the permanent exhibition *Mythical Woman*, which concerns the issue of female prostitution in harbour cities. Text #7 in the trail leaflet added to this, by also addressing gay male prostitution in the same cities (Rosenkranz et al. 2009, 132–133). In addition, in Helsinki, adventurous young men were known to visit ships that arrived at the harbour, to have sex either for fun or for money (Eronen 1967). Hence, the chosen wording and framing of the trail leaflet provided language to discuss queer cultural experiences regarding promiscuous sex and male sex work, thus seeking to empower and sympathise with those on the margins (Brunow 2018, 320) while breaking the silencing shame often applied to them.

The didactic panel “To Stockholm and Tallinn!” presents the development of city cruises between Finland and its neighbouring countries – a topic with which many Finns are familiar due to their own travels. Text #4 of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet explains why gay men in search of sexual adventures sought to travel by boat from Finland to Stockholm and Copenhagen: the first gay bar opened in Helsinki only in 1984, whereas in Sweden and Denmark, men could frequent gay venues decades before homosexual acts were legalised in Finland.

Text #9, which concerns captains’ uniforms, contributes to Finnish public discussion, in which the gay artist Tom of Finland has practically gained the status of a national treasure (Taavetti 2018). However, this has happened at the cost of erasing the central element of his art, namely fetish sexuality, from his public image (Kauppinen 2016, 2022). The trail leaflet notes the enticing lure of sailors’ outfits and captains’ uniforms, which many people, regardless of their sexual orientation, may recognise. It is noted that those who dress up in such garb, either casually or purposefully, regardless of their sexual orientation, seek to harness the many positive connotations of seamen, including capability, freedom, and adventure.

These texts sought to describe gay sex and diverse sexual desires as existing historical phenomena that can be acknowledged and dis-

cussed in a museum context. The leaflet entries also address the exciting opportunities entailed by seeking and offering sex, as well as the risks involved. Likewise, they seek to blur normative preconceptions and diminish the assumed difference between heterosexual and homosexual sex, highlighting their shared elements of seeking and enjoying sexual excitement and pleasure.

Showing changed attitudes

An important aspect of the trail leaflet was to show how attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity have changed over time. The trail leaflet does not avoid acknowledging conflict (Brunow 2018, 188), and it also seeks to show how the legal rights that homosexuals now enjoy in Finland were won quite recently. This was the “take-home message” of one of the visitors, who shared their realisation that “Finland is a backward country.”

Text #1 refers to the boat *Victoria*, shown in the boat hall. It belonged to the female artist couple Tove Jansson (1914–2001) and Tuulikki Pietilä (1917–2009). Although they were lovers and lived in the same apartment building beginning in the 1950s, they each had an apartment of their own, which conveniently obscured the nature of their relationship at a time when homosexual acts between women were illegal in Finland. They could live freely only during the summers, when they took their boat and went to their summer cottage on a remote island (Jansson & Pietilä 1996) – an experience to which Finns who withdraw to their own summer cottages to enjoy solitude can easily relate. Visitors responded very positively to this object, possibly because it was the only one in the trail for which the narrative was directly linked to the object and its renowned owners, as one observant visitor noted in their feedback.

The displayed objects that belonged to the long-standing chairperson of the Finnish Seafarers’ Union prompted a discussion in the trail leaflet about the Union’s changing politics towards homosexual seamen. Text #8 recapitulates the Union’s institutional discrimination against homosexuality, including a proposed proscription against gay men working as sailors and their exclusion from the Union.⁷ Although the decriminalisation

of homosexual acts ended such initiatives in 1971, the Union continued to stress the “celibacy out of solidarity” rule on ships – because the absence of women made heterosexual encounters impossible on ships, gay men were also expected, out of solidarity, to abstain from homosexual encounters.

The exhibition’s didactic panel, “Dream of a New Beginning,” addresses economic migration out of Finland in the twentieth century, as well as the forced migration of asylum seekers and refugees to Finland in the twenty-first century. To this general narrative, Text #5 of the trail leaflet adds the concept of the sexual refugee. It describes how Finnish homosexuals felt compelled to leave their home country when homosexual acts were still illegal and how Finland has since become a country that shelters sexual refugees – albeit ambiguously, as shifting government policies could easily render their situation more precarious. The item about sexual refugees, which both contrasts and connects the past with the present, was one visitor’s favourite part of the trail leaflet. It was also singled out in a blog review of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet (Emmi & Unska 2022).

At the time, the Kymenlaakso Regional Museum, which is part of the Maritime Centre Vellamo, had a temporary exhibition, *IDO*, about wedding dresses. Text #13 complements that exhibition by including a narrative about the tumultuous history of the Finnish Equal Marriage Act, which came into force in 2017. The leaflet highlights how the Equal Marriage Act was needed to replace previous discriminatory legislation on same-sex registered partnerships but was passed only due to the pressure the very successful citizens’ initiative Tahdon2013 placed on parliamentarians (Järviö 2018).

On the one hand, these entries convey a rosy “it gets better” narrative; on the other hand, they point out the dark heritage, longstanding negative attitudes, and discriminatory practices and laws that have shadowed individual queer lives in Finland. Dagmar Brunow has noted that “historical exhibitions should highlight that democratic rights are not won forever, but need to be continuously defended” (Brunow 2018, 188). Revisiting these historical facts may also encourage visitors to pay critical attention to future legal developments.

Adding queer heritage to cultural history

The trail leaflet's presentation of information about the presence of queer heritage in our current culture achieves various outcomes. For queer visitors, it seeks to reconstruct the queer heritage they were never taught at home or in school, thus giving them a sense of how their predecessors have made their mark on the culture at large over a long period of time. This objective was apparently achieved, as two visitors from the local LGBTQ+ association remarked, "We walked in thinking that we knew a great deal about these things, but as we walked out, we had to admit that we surely learned quite a bit of new stuff" (Emmi & Unska 2022). In addition, the leaflet seeks to show how straight visitors, too, are already implicated and involved in queer cultural production, making them always at least slightly queer themselves.

Taking its cue from a mermaid relief carving on a ship, Text #6 revisits the tale written by H. C. Andersen about the mute mermaid who could not utter her feelings to the prince she loved and who, therefore, had to watch while he married someone else. The queer reading proposed in the trail leaflet links the mermaid to a gay man who could not utter his love to another man. The proposed reading notes how common narratives can be read from different perspectives – without having to engage with the complex details of the scholarly discussion of Andersen's own sexual orientation (Heede 2005). The feedback showed that this queer reading, which decentred the heteronormative narrative, took one visitor by surprise, as it was novel to them, whereas two others chose this as their favourite item on the trail.

A scale model of the ship S/S *Urania* prompted a discussion in Text #3 about the subtle but enduring queer cultural references attached to the ancient Greek personification of heaven, Uranus. In the tradition of Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue*, these cultural references can be traced back to queer men who sought solace in the ancient world in order to take pride in their same-sex love in a hostile environment, to early German homosexual activists who coined the word "Uranian" to describe man-man love, and to early British gender-bending feminists who published a journal titled *Urania* (Grahn 1984, 230) – and even to

astrology or the most recent Japanese manga series *Sailor Moon*, with its gender-fluid character Sailor Uranus. This entry sought to make the often invisible traces of queer heritage accessible to present-day visitors.

Hence, the interpretative techniques used in this text include queer readings, which propose alternative perspectives on existing heteronormative narratives and concepts. When made aware of such possibilities, visitors may become inspired to conduct queer readings themselves. Another technique was making visible the enduring queer recoding (Mills 2008, 50) of culture by excavating and linking queer people's rereadings. By attending to the queer history of ideas alongside more commonly rehearsed narratives, the continuous presence and endurance of queer heritage within our culture is revealed. Taken together, these texts in the trail leaflet aimed to increase visitors' familiarity with queer culture and heritage, to enhance their queer competence, and to help them see a place for themselves in a queer historical continuum. This also expands the horizon of national histories towards the transnational and beyond the confines of heteronormative narratives.

Adding margins to mainstream

I also found opportunities for queer heritage in historical exhibits by observing material culture more closely. Text #2 in the trail leaflet provides a contemporary glimpse into the historic conditions of queer subcultures in relation to an exhibited sonar system, Furuno FCV-620, which the text links to the concept of "gaydar." The ability to send and receive covert signals about people's homosexual inclinations accurately was a necessary skill when homosexual acts were illegal. Today, people use the word "gaydar" to refer to this art of intuiting or reading, by observation, others' homosexuality (Tooth Murphy 2024, 272–276). Adding this colloquial phrase to the trail received positive feedback from visitors: "Humour has not been forgotten!"

Much of the interpretative cultural work performed by queer people, often referred to as gaydar, is carried out by keenly observing others' accessories and outfits. Thus, when the didactic panel "Wood and Salt" discusses the material goods transported by sea to and from Finland,

Text #12 adds a discussion of fashion trends. Many of these trends spread from seamen to the gay subculture abroad, including coastal gay meccas in the United States. Trends travelled from there to the gay subculture in Finland, only to be disseminated further to the general population. The items identified here include earrings worn both by sailors and by travelling Roma people, who wore golden earrings to keep their property close and secure. Gay men who fancied sailors later began wearing an earring in only one ear as a secret code to signal same-sex sexual interest. Similarly, bandanas, which were used to signal sexual preferences in gay BDSM and fetish subcultures, became fashion items for straight trend-setters. These and other gay clues were presented by Hal Fischer in his groundbreaking *Gay Semiotics* photo-text compilation (Fischer 1977). One of the visitors was particularly positive about this entry, noting in their feedback, “Fashion generally interests me.”

In these entries, I sought to link different subcultures using an inter-sectional approach to make sense of their shared roots in everyday practices and to explain the queer meanings of such traditions, which may otherwise seem strange, thereby rendering them more comprehensible to museum visitors. These entries noted the importance of reading and translating historical queer cultural narratives and clues conveyed by the material culture already available in daily life – when one knows what to look for. Keen visitors can take home such lessons and continue to notice traces of queer heritage wherever they go.

Reception and evaluation of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet

People go to museums to be exposed to new things. This makes them ideal places to introduce new ideas about gender and sexuality. Hence, it is not particularly surprising that visitors’ feedback on the Vellamo Rainbow Trail has been predominantly positive, and the museum’s customer service has received no negative face-to-face feedback about the leaflet (Tirkkonen 2022).⁸ Such positive experiences are common in other museums that have provided queer exhibitions or guided tours (Frost 2021, 130; Tibbles 2012, 168–171). The trail leaflet received forty-seven responses, which judged the trail to be necessary (nineteen mentions)

and interesting (twenty-four mentions). Due to visitors' keen interest, the museum decided to make a second printing of the leaflet.

What contributed to the positive response to the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet? In scripting it, I sought to entice visitors with edutainment: I provided interesting and surprising facts to offer them easy access to potentially difficult knowledge. For some visitors, even this approach was too much; their religious beliefs caused them to view the Vellamo Rainbow Trail as “disgusting homo ideology impudently forced upon families with children,” although the leaflet was by no means an obligatory part of the museum visit but rather an optional addition to it. Tellingly, some of the people who commented negatively on the trail also stated that they had chosen not to engage with it at all.

Although it is impossible to please everyone – including the (possibly young) visitor whose concise feedback was “Homos suck” – some said, “[r]ainbow history is everybody's shared history; great that the trail exists!” Many visitors also expressed how pleased they were to learn new things:

As we moved along the trail, our conversation started increasingly often with such sentences as, ‘That I wouldn’t have known!’ ‘Well, that’s exciting; I didn’t know where that originated,’ or ‘I’ve never thought about it from that perspective.’ Do you know which habit gay men copied from sailors, and why? We didn’t, even if it could have been seen as ‘stereotypical.’ (Emmi & Unska 2022)

However, does simply providing new information – the main approach used in the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet – result in both learning and the equally necessary unlearning? In this respect, *A Rainbow Thread* (Jónasdóttir et al. n.d.) took a potentially more promising route, as it included stimulating questions in every entry that problematised and challenged previously taken-for-granted knowledge and forced visitors to think further (Ellenberger in this issue). One may hope, however, that the visitors who followed the Vellamo Rainbow Trail and read the texts may also have been emotionally affected, moved, and even

shaken by what they read – especially when the texts sought to deconstruct assumed sexual normativities, binaries, and boundaries (Sullivan & Middleton 2020, 36). The thoughts and emotions that the material objects and accompanying texts evoke in visitors may resonate with their own personal histories and thus raise haunting longings, memories, and hopes that disrupt their ideas of themselves, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation (Juvonen 2020, 16, 19). If so, they may have learned something new, not only about queer heritage but also about themselves.

From the feedback, however, it is obvious that queer visitors, especially, were thrilled about the rainbow trail. Several expressed their delight and were thankful that the museum had acknowledged their existence, made them visible, and supported their community by informing them about their heritage. Whereas the negative feedback questioned bringing homosexual themes into the Maritime Museum altogether, one visitor wrote that it was “[d]elightful to see the rainbow themes go along with maritime themes in the exhibition, as they do in real life, too.” Another pointed out, “In maritime professions and industry, there are many gay and lesbian workers right now – many of whom still must stay ‘in the closet.’ Awesome that you participate in deconstructing the prejudices through the rainbow trail.” Such feedback shows how museums, even when they apparently address histories, significantly affect the present and future horizons of their contemporary visitors, too.

It should be noted that the materiality of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail leaflet also creates a new kind of social space within the museum for visitors. They seek and follow the rainbow tags, hold a rainbow trail leaflet in their hands, and engage with the displayed objects and texts while seeing others doing the same in an act that has been legitimised by the museum. This kind of activity queers the space temporarily and makes it safer and more welcoming for queer visitors – much as a gender-neutral toilet in the museum did for some of them (Emmi & Unska 2022). Taken together, the feedback about the Vellamo Rainbow Trail vividly shows how analytically many visitors engaged with it and how critically they began to observe and evaluate the kinds of choices made in both the trail leaflet and the museum exhibition.

Conclusion

As Peggy Levitt argues, museums send a clear message about who belongs to the nation by choosing what to include in their collections (Levitt 2015, 6). Compared to many other countries, Finland has been late not only in establishing queer-positive legislation but also in queering the museum field. However, especially since the *Finland 100 – In Rainbow Colours* project that queered the nation's centenary at art museums, the museum field has made rapid progress in this regard (Paqvalén 2021, 256–260) – often with the help and encouragement of the Friends of Queer History.

The rainbow trail through the Maritime Centre Vellamo's exhibitions offers visitors an opportunity to recognise that the version of Finnish national history with which they are most familiar is only a partial and biased account. Prior to the trail's initiation, the dark heritage of diverse minorities, particularly queer people, was not adequately addressed in the Maritime Museum of Finland's permanent exhibition.

The chosen strategies for the intervention at Vellamo made visible queer heritage around gender, sexuality, and desire, even when these might previously have been considered obscene (Frost 2021, 123–124; Heuvel 2024, 253); took queer inclusion as a given and placed queer people in history in parallel with their straight counterparts (Heuvel 2024, 256); deconstructed and decentred familiar heterosexual stories playfully and unexpectedly (ibid., 254, 257); and used surprising historical interpretations to make connections between lost heritages of queer experience and contemporary culture (Frost 2021, 125; Middleton 2020, 433). These strategies were applied to various pre-existing thematic topics throughout the trail.

The new layers of queer heritage introduced by the trail enrich the Finnish national narrative and widen the horizons of belonging, even for those who are not personally addressed by the trail. However, those who benefit most from the trail are queer visitors who have thus far been deprived of both knowledge about their own history and heritage and of the validating affirmation of such knowledge.

Despite these positive developments, a crucial question remains: what is the future of the Vellamo Rainbow Trail? Since the Maritime Museum's permanent exhibition is bound to be revised, the trail is certain to lose its point of reference in the original exhibition setting – as has already happened.⁹ It remains to be seen whether the museum will change its curation practices to intentionally collect queer maritime history so that it can purposefully add more queer items to its new permanent exhibits, or whether it will incorporate some ideas initiated by the rainbow trail into a new narrative for its permanent exhibition (see also Ellenberger in this issue). As one visitor wrote in their feedback, “In a perfect world, we would not need a specific project on rainbow history; instead, one could talk about gays in the actual exhibitions.”

TUULA JUVONEN is Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies at Tampere University, Finland. She has published monographs and articles about Finnish LGBT history and recently compiled the *Online Dictionary of Queer History*. Moreover, from 2020 to 2024 she was the chair of the registered association the Friends of Queer History. Juvonen currently leads a Research Council of Finland funded project, “Picture Me: Presenting Queer Visual History” (2025–2029).

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NOTES

1. Writing about the rainbow trail became part of my own subproject in “Affective Activism: Sites of Queer and Trans World-Making” (2021–2025; #341571), funded by the Research Council of Finland.
2. My previous activist collaboration with the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas resulted in a rather lesbian-heavy exhibition, which certainly overlooked aspects of even recent history that were beyond my own and my activist companion’s experience (Juvonen 2021).
3. The written feedback was collected by Vellamo through a survey sheet added between the printed guides. The response has been low, with only forty-seven responses between March 30, 2022, and April 14, 2023 (copies in the possession of the author). In this article, the feedback is used verbatim, translated by the author.
4. Email correspondence with Tuula Juvonen from April 26, 2021.
5. Texts of the leaflet are available in Finnish at <https://vellamo-kanava.fi/teemat/sateenkaaripolku/#Artikkeli>.
6. Although the text was written by the director and me, we also wanted to give credit to the Friends of Queer History for their groundbreaking work in making Finnish queer and trans history accessible through their website sateenkaarihistoria.fi, which is also partly available in Swedish and English.
7. I wish to thank Danish scholar Peter Edelberg, who passed on the information he had found about the Finnish Seafarers’ Union policies in the Danish gay magazine *Pan* (January 1958), which he was consulting for his own research project. Likewise, Tirkkonen’s work with the Finnish Seafarers’ Union’s archival material was invaluable in adding this entry to the guide.
8. Email correspondence with Tuula Juvonen from April 14, 2022.
9. Although the leaflet was still available at the Maritime Museum in 2024, items 2–5 and 13 were no longer on display in the exhibition, and by 2025, the whole trail had been moved online.