

# 'The Institute of Sexology'

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## CONTEXT

I always enjoy writing the Consumer Correspondent column, but on some occasions the task is more exciting than on others. Spend a day at a sex exhibition? Tough job, but I guess someone's got to do it.

'The Institute of Sexology: Undress Your Mind', the Wellcome Trust's latest exhibition, is an exploration of what one critic termed the "most publicly discussed of private acts". Prompted by the recent (2010-2012) National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-3) survey into sexual habits, the exhibition examines the work of sexologists – researchers, therapists, anthropologists and doctors – from the late 19th century to the present day (Box 1), showing how this work both reflects and shapes our attitude to sexuality.

It is no surprise that Wellcome's offering has already proved a huge success to the point where timed tickets are now being issued during busy periods. But those expecting furry handcuffs and Page 3 cuties are in for disappointment.

Despite warnings – reinforced by forbidding entrance doors – that the exhibition contains sexual material, the grey decor and museum-like exhibition cases instantly make it clear that we are on an intellectual rather than an erotic journey. I imagine that none of my fellow visitors felt an aroused quiver in response to the exhibits. But I felt strong emotions: fascination, admiration, and a certain sadness.

## FASCINATION

I was fascinated to view an early photograph of Marie Stopes' first birth control clinic sited in a wooden caravan; to listen to the NATSAL researchers explain their approach; to sit in a replica of Wilhelm Reich's Orgone Energy Accumulator. All of us probably recognise that some of sexology's pioneers such as Masters and Johnson and Kinsey have entered the spotlight lately. What this exhibition provides is a wider-ranging list, with clear explanation, intelligent analysis – and props.

The exhibition is organised into eight roughly chronological sections. The section

titles – Library, Consulting Room, Tent, Classroom, Box, Laboratory, Home and Archive – though engaging, sometimes feel forced; one imagines much curatorial debate on what to call the area on anthropological research before they finally settled on 'The Tent'.

Within each section, the exhibition cases, pictures and video installations tell a compelling story. 'The Library' of Magnus Hirschfeld shows us early commentary by such figures as Richard von Krafft-Ebbing and Henry Havelock-Ellis and is set alongside a number of curiosities: a small box of sex aids with instructions; a 'Tijuana Bible' palm-sized comic book of erotic images; the VeeDee 'massager' for muscle relief and "Luna" (monthly) female troubles.

'The Consulting Room' profiles Sigmund Freud and Marie Stopes, both of whom dared to suggest that sexuality was essential to physical and mental health. 'The Tent' then highlights studies of sexual behaviour elsewhere: Bronislaw Malinowski on Tobriand Islanders and Margaret Mead's famous book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, each in their way controversial.

'The Classroom' section marks the shift of research focus from Europe to the USA with the groundbreaking sexual survey work of the Kinsey team. 'The Laboratory' explores Masters and Johnson's clinical studies of the human sexual response. 'The Box' majors on Wilhelm Reich and includes that 2014 replica of his 1940 Orgone Accumulator.

'The Home' brings us to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, with its accompanying prejudice. This is positioned alongside a 1988 film by Neil Bartlett and Stuart Marshall that satirises the witch hunts by proposing that simply meeting a gay person could make you turn: "I was getting married yesterday, but halfway up the aisle I realised I'm lesbian".

Finally, we reach the present day with an account of the three NATSAL surveys, and an opportunity for visitors to read, reflect and learn in 'The Archive' of documents, or by joining one of the public guided tours, discussions and



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## Box 1 Glossary of influential individuals

**Alfred Kinsey** (1894–1956) was an American biologist, professor of entomology and zoology, and sexologist who in 1947 founded the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Kinsey's research on human sexuality, foundational to the field of sexology, has influenced social and cultural values in the USA and internationally.

**Henry Havelock-Ellis** (1859–1939) was a British physician, writer, and social reformer who studied human sexuality. He was co-author of the first medical textbook in English on homosexuality in 1897, and also published works on a variety of sexual practices and inclinations.

**Magnus Hirschfeld** (1868–1935) was a pioneering German sexologist drawn to the study of human sexuality. He believed that sexual orientation was a naturally occurring trait worthy of research not social hostility.

**Marie Stopes** (1880–1958) was a British author, palaeobotanist, academic, eugenicist, campaigner for women's rights, and birth control pioneer. She founded the first birth-control clinic in Britain, and wrote the influential sex manual, *Married Love*. She opposed abortion, arguing that preventing conception was all that was needed.

**Richard von Krafft-Ebing** (1840–1902) was an Austro-German psychiatrist and author of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, one of the first books about sexual practices that studied homosexuality/bisexuality.

**Wilhelm Reich** (1897–1957) was an Austrian psychoanalyst, who in 1940 developed a metal-lined device named the Orgone Accumulator, believing that the box trapped orgone energy that he could harness in scientific groundbreaking approaches.

**William Masters** (1915–2001) and **Virginia Johnson** (1925–2013) pioneered research into the nature of human sexual response and the diagnosis and treatment of sexual disorders and dysfunctions from 1957 until the 1990s in the USA.

lectures. There is also an accompanying illustrated hardback book<sup>1</sup> and a series of nationwide live performances, films and interactive events until the exhibition closes in September 2015.

### ADMIRATION

I admire this exhibition's aims thoughtful curation. Placing the Neil Bartlett film alongside a 'Don't Die of Ignorance' AIDS poster struck me as thought-provoking. Juxtaposing Reich's Box with a clip from Woody Allen's film *Sleeper*, which satirises Reich's concept, seems inspired.

Yes, the videos of animals mating may have been a little too strong for 11 o'clock in the morning, but they are nevertheless revelatory – keep watching until you see the gay guinea-pigs. And I welcome the fact that the whole exhibition is shot through with invitations to engage and contribute, including a specially written lesson guide for teachers.

Critics largely echoed my enthusiasm. There was one remark about the presentation being "frigid" and one remark about the coverage lacking depth; but largely, commentators were celebratory.

Suzi Godson writing in *The Times* called it "a remarkable reminder of how we have managed to mystify our relationship with our own bodies". "Clinical does not mean boring" agreed the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. Meanwhile, diversity commentator Meg John Barker in her blog ([rewritingtherules.wordpress.com](http://rewritingtherules.wordpress.com)) pointed out how the exhibition chronicles the designation, condemnation and alienation of so many sexual practices and gender identities other than the heterosexual and penetrative.

### SADNESS

This exhibition also made me sad. I flinched in response to the entrance warnings that the exhibition contains sexual content. For while I acknowledge some people's distaste for or wariness of sex, I find it dismaying that such is still an issue. The pioneering researchers, academics, medics and educators profiled in the exhibition were all aware of the central place that sex holds in human existence, and fully aware of its power and glory. It seems lamentable that even now some don't share that view, and tragic that some should condemn those pioneers. Displays include Marie Stopes' hate mail: "Go back home and preach your dirty methods there"; film of Nazis burning sexual books in their attack on gender diversity; and a mechanism to prevent male masturbation that seems to be an instrument of torture. In particular, we hear how Wilhelm Reich's belief in the healing power of orgasm caused authorities in the USA to brand him a fraudster, destroy his writings, and imprison him until death. A key theme throughout this exhibition is the emotional and also physical courage of many of the individuals profiled.

### GRATITUDE

I left 'The Institute of Sexology' with a feeling of gratitude. Yes, there is still prejudice and persecution. Yes, we still discriminate, medicalise and pathologise. But I'm grateful to be a woman alive now and not at the end of the 19th century. Grateful I've benefitted from the insights of the pioneers I now know more about. Grateful that the Wellcome Trust has launched this exhibition. I urge you to go and see it if you can.

### EXHIBITION INFORMATION

'The Institute of Sexology: Undress Your Mind' is at The Wellcome Collection (<http://wellcomecollection.org>) until 20 September 2015. No admission charge.

**Competing interests** None.

**Provenance and peer review** Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

### REFERENCE

- 1 Cornwall A (ed.). *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*. London, UK: Zed Books, 2013.