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Queering the Freud Museum: critical reflections on a museum tour about Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham’s life together at 20 Maresfield Gardens

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Abstract

The house in Hampstead that is, today, the Freud Museum London, is best known as the last home of Sigmund Freud and his wife Martha. For nearly four decades, Anna Freud shared this home with Dorothy Burlingham, a fellow child psychoanalyst. A special guided tour of the museum in 2025, the Centenary of Freud and Burlingham’s first meeting, focused on their personal and professional relationship. Part I of this article reproduces this tour through vignettes, photographs, and an edited version of the tour notes. In Part II, we critically consider the tour as an experiment in queering the Freud Museum London. We suggest that contemporary readings of Freudian theory, which emphasise the unpredictability of desire and the instability of identity, can enrich the recent “queering the museum” movement (Sullivan & Middleton, 2021). We consider the repressed queerness of the family tree of psychoanalysis and propose the tour as an encounter with a “ruined museum” (Landau and Pohl, 2021) with many absences and presences. Finally, we consider what these queer interactions with museums and museum objects might mobilise, as complex psychic experiences involving societal and cultural norms about gender and sexuality. We ask, what happens if we encounter the Freud Museum as the queer family home of psychoanalysis?

Introduction

The Freud Museum was the final home of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and his daughter Anna Freud, a pioneering child psychoanalyst.

The Freud family came to England as refugees, having escaped Austria following the Nazi annexation in March 1938. The Freuds were fortunate to be able to bring all their belongings to London. The heart of the house is Sigmund Freud's study and his famous psychoanalytic couch. Freud spent the last year of his life here, and died in his study at Maresfield Gardens.

The house remained the family home until Anna's death in 1982. Anna bequeathed the house to become a museum. Read [Anna Freud's story](#).

(Freud Museum London, 2025b)

This is the canonical story from the Museum's website of how the Freud family home at 20 Maresfield Gardens, Hampstead, became the Freud Museum London. The story starts with Sigmund Freud in 1938, ends with Anna Freud's death in 1982, and links to an account of Anna Freud's life that mentions her father, their chow dogs, her colleagues, and her psychoanalytic work with children (Freud Museum London, 2025c). It does not mention her long-term partner, child psychoanalyst Dorothy Burlingham; a more detailed biography of Anna Freud on the Museum's website only references Burlingham once as co-author of a publication (Freud Museum London, 2025a). This is a strange omission since, by the time the Freuds moved to London, Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud had known each other for 13 years, jointly raised Dorothy's children in Vienna, and purchased a shared holiday cottage in

the Viennese countryside. Dorothy initially lived close to the Freuds in Hampstead but moved into 20 Maresfield Gardens in 1941 and lived there with Anna until her death in 1979. The website states that the house remained ‘the family home’ until Anna’s death in 1982; it does not explain that the “family” for most of that time consisted not of the inventor of psychoanalysis but, rather, of two women in a long-term personal and professional partnership and their maid. However, in a separate blog post, the Museum’s curator explains that ‘Anna’s lifelong friend and colleague Dorothy Burlingham moved into the house at 20 Maresfield Gardens. Anna and Dorothy lived, worked, and wrote together in the house for decades to come’ (Davies, 2018).

Despite this, it is Sigmund Freud whose presence is felt most obviously when a visitor to the Freud Museum enters the house today. Stepping through the house’s original front door, a visitor will immediately see Freud’s heavy *loden* overcoat hanging in a case, as if the man himself might walk down the staircase, pick it up from a peg, and go out for a bracing walk on Hampstead Heath with his dog. Freud’s study, the largest space on the ground floor, has been preserved as it was in his lifetime, ‘legendary, mythic, and almost sacrosanct’ (Morra, 2017, p. 45); his extensive collection of antiquities is on display on his desk and on many shelves. Anna Freud’s presence in the house may be ‘subsumed under the weight of her father’s career in the layout of the Museum’ (Morra, 2017, p. 49), but it is traceable; her plain green psychoanalytic couch and weaving loom are set up in a large room on the first floor overlooking the garden. She often used her father’s coat for walks on Hampstead Heath in later years. However, Dorothy Burlingham’s presence is more difficult to discern beyond a few photographs of her with Anna Freud.

In January 2025, we (Agnes Meadows and Harriet Mossop) organised a tour of the Freud Museum London, focusing on the long personal and professional relationship between Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham in the centenary year of their first meeting in Vienna.

Two cultural events framed the temporality of our tour, which was titled *Queer Encounters with psychoanalytic history at the Freud Museum – the relationship between Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham* (Freud Museum, London, 2025; Meadows and Mossop, 2025). Firstly, the exhibition *Women & Freud: Patients, Pioneers, Artists*, curated by Lisa Appignanesi and Bryony Davies, was in place in the Freud Museum (Appignanesi, 2024). The exhibition installed works by female artists including Marie-Louise von Motesiczky, Louise Bourgeois, Paula Rego, Alice Anderson and Tracey Emin in the Freuds' living space. It also included textual and photographic displays explaining the history and important contributions of the many women who were important figures in Freud's life: family, friends, patients, and analysts. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham both featured prominently in the exhibition, which introduced a display addressing longstanding questions about the nature of their relationship. Several queer women and gender non-conforming people from Freud's life also featured. Secondly, the tour took place a few months after the UK release of the movie *Freud's Last Session* (*Freud's Last Session*, 2024). Although the film's focus is an imagined meeting between Sigmund Freud and the author C.S. Lewis, it also portrays Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's relationship as lesbian and Freud as disapproving of it. The tour provided the opportunity to think about this portrayal of the imagined dynamics around Anna and Dorothy's relationship during their lifetime¹.

The tour is reproduced in the first part of this paper. We have tried to retain the affective experience of a physical tour by maintaining its temporal and spatial structure. Starting in the entrance hall to the museum, we discussed how Anna and Dorothy first met and their later arrival in London. In Sigmund Freud's study, we turned away from the famous couch and explored Anna and Dorothy's professional lives. Upstairs on the mezzanine, we discussed the importance of illness, holidays and crafts in the women's lives, before moving

¹ See Mossop, H., and Gherovici, P. in this issue for a discussion of the historical inaccuracies of this portrayal.

to the exhibition space to look at letters from their archive collections. Finally, in Dorothy's bedroom/study (which is now displayed as Anna Freud's room), we talked about how psychoanalysis historically pathologised lesbian sexualities. We reproduce edited notes from the tour here, together with photographs, archival objects, and a brief description of the space that each section took place in. Through this retelling of the tour, and its movement between domestic spaces in the Museum, we consider what is visible and invisible in these spaces, drawing out less visible threads.

In the second part of this paper, we consider what it means to queer the Freud Museum, as well as what psychoanalysis brings to the “queering the museum” movement (Sullivan & Middleton, 2021). We consider the tour as an encounter with the repressed queer family tree of psychoanalysis, and a “ruined museum”. Finally, we suggest that the affects and fantasies engendered by our tour can, themselves, be psychosocial objects of study. We consider what these queer interactions with museums and museum objects might mobilise, as complex psychic experiences involving societal and cultural norms about gender and sexuality.

Part I

1. The entrance hall: the journey from Vienna to London

Around 40 guests gather in the entrance hall to 20 Maresfield Gardens – psychoanalysts, academics, historians, and current and former volunteer tour guides at the Freud Museum London. There is a dark red carpet on the floor and the walls are painted a warm pink. A glass of wine in hand, visitors circulate around this warm space, greeting friends and

colleagues, glancing up at Tracey Emin's evocative neon installation 'I whisper to my past, do I have another choice?' – part of the Women & Freud exhibition. The group gathers in the dining room to hear the story of how Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham arrived here in 1938. We acknowledge the work of their biographers, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Michael J. Burlingham, in compiling this history.



Image 1: Tour guides and participants gathering in the hallway at 20 Maresfield Gardens on 31 January 2025 (Photograph: Barbara L'Episcopo)

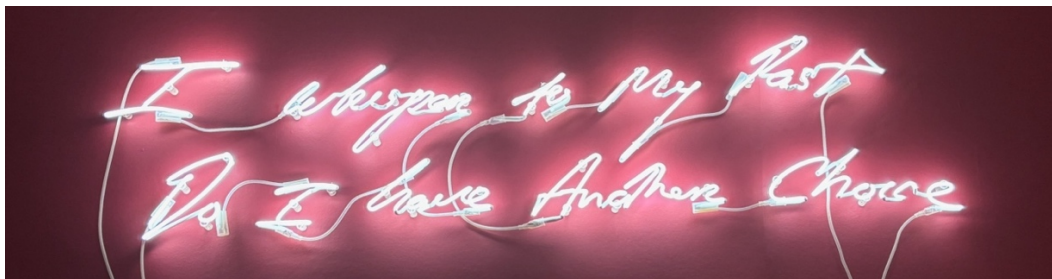


Image 2: Tracey Emin *I whisper to my past Do I have another choice?* (2010) (Photograph Harriet Mossop)

Anna Freud was born in December 1895, the sixth and youngest child of Sigmund and Martha Freud. According to her biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Anna Freud was a spirited, cheeky young child who grew into an introspective adolescent who experienced periods of feeling ‘stupid’ when she became lost in daydreams. She was close to her father and wrote to him about her troubles and her dreams when she was away from home. She initially trained as a teacher. However, she also had a strong interest in psychoanalysis and began to attend meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society which took place at the Freud family home in Berggasse. She had a first analysis with Sigmund Freud from 1918-1922 and presented a paper about beating fantasies – based on her own analysis – to gain entry to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1922. This was followed by a second, shorter analysis with her father from 1924-25 as she was starting to work clinically, mostly with children. In her twenties, Anna Freud had several male suitors, including Ernest Jones, Hans Lampl, and Siegfried Bernfeld. In 1925, the year that she and Dorothy Burlingham first met, she turned 30 and was establishing herself as a child psychoanalyst and as secretary of the newly formed Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute. Although she was busy with work, she also sometimes felt that she wanted something of her own (Young-Bruehl, 2008).

Dorothy Burlingham was born in 1891, the youngest of seven siblings and half-siblings. Her grandfather, Charles Lewis Tiffany of Tiffany & Co., was a canny businessman who pivoted from selling jewellery to weapons and armour during the Civil War. Burlingham’s father, Louis Comfort Tiffany, was a visual artist who contributed to the trend for stained glass at a time of high demand in the late 19th and early 20th century. Dorothy went to boarding school, where she was miserable but sporty, according to her biographer and grandson, Michael J. Burlingham (Burlingham, 1989). Dorothy married Robert Burlingham, a doctor, in 1914, a love match that was initially opposed by her father. They had four children together. Robert Burlingham probably suffered from bipolar disorder; he had a

major breakdown in the first year of their marriage and his illness affected his wife and children deeply. Bob, the eldest of their children, was very unwell from the age of six months with skin conditions and asthma. Dorothy left Robert before their youngest child was born in 1921. She was financially independent due to family money but was criticised by the Burlingham family for leaving her husband when he was unwell. In 1925, Dorothy travelled to Vienna to ask Anna Freud to treat Bob. Since Dorothy was struggling due to the stress of her marriage and a difficult relationship with her father, she also started analysis with Theodor Reik, and subsequently had a 12-year analysis with Sigmund Freud (Burlingham, 1989).

Dorothy made her home in Vienna, quickly becoming close to Anna through long conversations about the Burlingham children, who all had “lessons” – analytic sessions – with her. The families holidayed together in the Austrian countryside, and Anna and Dorothy travelled together to Italy. Dorothy moved to an apartment in the same block as the Freuds in 1929; the two women’s bedrooms were connected by a private telephone line that is visible in the Freud Museum in Vienna today. They worked together closely: they established *Das Bauernhaus* school in 1926, a seminar on child psychoanalysis, and ran the Matchbox/Hietzing School, based on psychoanalytic principles, from 1927 to 1932. Although Dorothy was initially known as ‘Anna’s American friend’ (Burlingham, 1989, p. 177), she soon developed her own professional status. She trained as a child analyst from 1929 and in 1933 was granted membership of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. In 1936, they set up the Jackson Nursery for under twos where they started to develop their early observation technique and the indexing system which would become important in their later work (Young-Bruehl, 2008).

The late 1930s were a period of much turbulence, change, and loss for both women. Their lives and work were increasingly disrupted by the persecution of Jewish people and then the

Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. Dorothy travelled to Switzerland in April 1938 and, together with Marie Bonaparte, used her influence to support the Freuds' exit from Austria. Robert Burlingham died by suicide in May 1938, perhaps realising that Dorothy was not planning to return to the United States and their marriage. On June 4th 1938, the Freuds took a train to Paris and then London. They soon moved to 20 Maresfield Gardens, while Dorothy lived in a flat close by with her daughter. Dorothy was in the United States for the birth of a grandchild when the Second World War broke out, and she was still there when Sigmund Freud died in September 1939. In 1941, Minna Bernays, Anna's aunt, also died, which allowed Dorothy to move into 20 Maresfield gardens with Anna and her mother 'as a way of cutting down expenses as well as living together' (Burlingham, 1989, p. 273; Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 246). It seems there was initial friction with this living arrangement: in 1943, Dorothy was frustrated when she couldn't invite her family for lunch when they were in London (Burlingham, 1989). However, in 1944, Dorothy wrote that she 'cannot imagine not sharing Annafreud's life' (Burlingham, 1944 cited in M.J. Burlingham, 1989).

2. Freud's study: Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's professional life in London

The tour group moves to Sigmund Freud's study, a long room taking up the entire depth of the right-hand side of the Museum. The group is compressed into the small space left free from Freud's desk, couch, and shelves crammed with antiques. Sarah Lucas' SEX BOMB balances precariously and provocatively over a chair. We share a photograph of the

two women by Michael J. Burlingham, taken in this room in 1979 during a visit from Burlingham and his fiancée Rose. A Bodhisattva of Compassion figure and an Egyptian mummy mask sit on the table between them, below a photograph of Sigmund Freud.

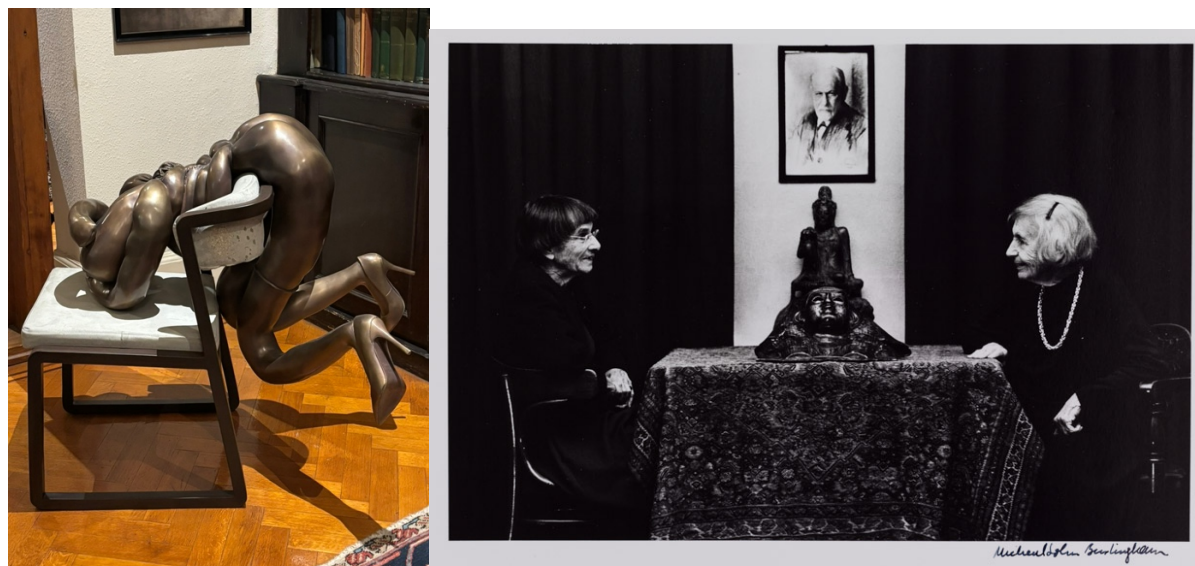


Image 3: Sarah Lucas *SEXBOMB* (2022) (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

Image 4: Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud at 20 Maresfield Gardens in 1979 (Freud Museum, IN1484) (Photograph: Michael J. Burlingham)

As child psychoanalysts, Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham were very concerned with children's experiences of the disruptions of wartime. In 1940 they set up the Babies' Rest Centre (later, the Hampstead War Nursery) nearby in Netherhall Gardens and in New Barn in Essex. These centres catered for up to 120 children who found the enforced separation of evacuation to the countryside particularly challenging. Alongside many colleagues, Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham taught on the Centre's staff training programmes from 1941. Following the end of the war in 1945, Anna Freud had time to consider the future of 20 Maresfield Gardens. At first, she planned to create a study centre with a library and seminars. When the child psychoanalytic training programme started in 1946, there was no money for

classrooms, and it is likely that the lecturers met with trainees in Freud's study. However, it was carefully preserved as it had been in his lifetime. Dorothy's study remained on the first floor, and Anna's on the second.

When additional space was needed for the children's clinic and training seminars in 1951, 21 Maresfield Gardens was purchased with foundation money from the United States. Dorothy Burlingham supervised projects for the analysis of mother/child couples and worked closely with Anna Freud to develop the clinic's research methods. This included Burlingham's index cards with topical cross references to each child's analytic and observational material by topic, and a diagnostic profile questionnaire for use before analytic work started. In 1956 Freud and Burlingham set up a nursery school at 12 Maresfield Gardens, also with foundation money from the United States. Anna Freud said of the clinic: 'It is a most pleasant place, it looks so gay and charming that one regrets not being a problem child oneself' (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 340).

Together with their colleagues, Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham collected a significant body of experience of child psychoanalysis; Dorothy's grandson describes them as 'a matriarchal society of child analysts' (Burlingham, 1989, p. 300). The Concept Group, sponsored by Anna Freud, produced four volumes of brief articles on the concepts of psychoanalysis for training candidates. By the 1960s, when the two women were in their 60s, thoughts turned to succession, retirement, sustainable funding, and the next generation of Anna Freudian child analysts. The administrative work involved in running the clinics was significant: Young-Bruehl (2008) notes that in 1965 the clinic had 43 part-time analysts, 30 secretaries, receptionists and nursery workers, and that filling in funding applications was very time consuming.

Although Anna Freud had decided against moving to the United States in the 1930s – she would not have been able to work there as an analyst without a medical degree – she and

Dorothy Burlingham made many connections there to fund their work. Anna Freud was frequently invited for university guest lectures, and Dorothy sometimes accompanied her on these trips. Anna Freud became an important figure in psychoanalysis in the United States, and her work had a social impact there.

3. Freud's Study: Dorothy Burlingham's professional life



Image 5: The table at which Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham were photographed in 1979, with Rachel Kneebone's *Oracle* (2013) placed on top of the rug, and the Bodhisattva of Compassion and photograph of Sigmund Freud behind. (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)



Image 6: Sigmund Freud's desk with Rachel Kneebone's *Totem* (2021) (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

We remain crowded into the study, facing not towards Sigmund Freud's famous couch but away from it, towards the table where Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham were sitting when Michael J. Burlingham photographed them in 1979. In the spirit of reorienting ourselves towards feminist histories, we choose to talk about Burlingham's overlooked clinical and theoretical work on the mother-child relationship, twins, and blindness in which she developed a clinical approach that was uniquely attentive to the perspective of the child in an adult's world.

Burlingham's key essays on the mother-child relationship, *Child Analysis and the Mother* (1935) and *Empathy between infant and mother* (1967), included observational material about mothering from her own experience of being a mother and being mothered

(Burlingham, 1989). In her early work, she suggested that young babies had telepathic abilities that helped them understand their mothers; similar theories appeared in Ferenczi's early work (Soreanu, Forthcoming). But she later revised this idea to suggest that the infant simply had a very intense capacity for empathy, allowing them to intuit and try to make sense of the mother's actions and feelings. In contrast to Melanie Klein's focus on the child's hatred, guilt or aggression, Burlingham believed that it was joy that drove the child's first steps into communication. Her clinical and research methods are informed by this understanding of the child's empathy and ability to observe; she and Anna Freud used empathetic observation as a research method (Young-Bruehl, 2008). As Burlingham's long-time colleague Doris Wills said at her memorial service, 'Burlingham constantly modified the theory to fit the child' (1980, p. 87).

Burlingham first worked with blind children in an institution in Vienna in the 1920s. The psychoanalytic field on blindness and disability was, at the time, very small. Most of Burlingham's contemporaries conceptualised disability as an inevitable result of what they saw as a physical limitation. Instead, Burlingham's psychosocial approach focused on the social and relational conditions that limited and disabled blind children, such as parental fears and society's emphasis on sight; her different view resulted in debates with several colleagues. She suggested that blind children lived a double psychic life (1952) trying to fit into the sighted world. Burlingham 'had the greatest respect for the blind child's pursuit of his own way of life, and would never accept statements made in the literature such as that blind children lack fantasy, saying always, "perhaps we do not catch it"' (Wills, 1980, p. 86). In 1958, aged 67, Burlingham opened a Nursery School for the Blind at 21 Maresfield Gardens. She published *To Be Blind in a Sighted World* (1972) in the year of her death.

Burlingham published *Twins: A Study of Three Pairs of Identical Twins* (1952) based on children she had observed in the Hampstead Nurseries during the war. The book is

dedicated to her sisters, Comfort and Julia, who were themselves identical twins. Just as in her work with blind children, Burlingham was interested in how adults' reactions to twins could emphasise their difference to other children. She observed that adults would 'gaze from one twin to the other, making mental comparisons. Often [saying things like] "How charming", "How interesting", "How odd", "What a trouble they must be"' (1952, p. 7).

Burlingham observed that identical twins seemed to have a more complex relationship with the mother because, instead of only mother and child, there is another person there – the other twin. Because of this, the twin's first relationship is with a peer instead of with the mother. She was also interested in the fantasy of having a twin, which she saw as an oedipal fantasy arising from the search for a perfect love and companionship that could end loneliness. It says a lot, then, that she often spoke of her relationship with Anna Freud as twin-like.

4. Stairway landing: leisure, relaxation and holidays

We pause on the mezzanine. In the exhibition catalogue, Lisa Appignanesi describes this space: 'Upstairs, just past the twirling mechanical doll, the hysteric as everywoman, of Deborah Levy and Jane Thorburn's evocative Freud's Last Lecture, is the Mezzanine. This was Martha Freud's favourite reading and resting nook'. This was also a favourite spot for Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham. On the wall is a page from Alison Bechdel's psychoanalytic memoir Are You My Mother? (2012) and by the window are books by Judith Butler, Sylvia Plath, and Appignanesi – an imaginary library for Anna, Dorothy and Martha? We are here to talk about Anna and Dorothy's leisure time, which they filled with knitting, weaving, and holidays.



Image 7: Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham on the mezzanine at 20 Maresfield Gardens, Photograph found in Anna Freud's personal paper, AF/01/03/04/015: Freud Museum London.



Image 8: Bookshelf at 20 Maresfield Gardens, curated by Lisa Appignanesi and Bryony Davies (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham were both periodically ill from the mid-1940s onwards. Dorothy Burlingham developed a mysterious psychosomatic illness in 1944, which later became tuberculosis and an infection of both lungs. She continued to suffer from episodes of tuberculosis until the 1950s, when a treatment was discovered. Anna Freud, meanwhile, nearly died from pneumonia in 1945. In her fever, she had a series of vivid dreams about her father's illness and death which she later interpreted as being about 'losing her father and of his being lost as a projection of her own being lost' (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 311). A glimpse into her relationship to her father, these dreams led to the important essay *About Losing and Being Lost* (1967). Illness prompted questions of how to live well. Young-Bruehl writes that 'in her mid-seventies, Anna Freud's letters contained, more and more frequently, reflections on aging and illness, on ways of living out one's decades and ways of dying' (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 400).

The two women started holidaying together soon after they met in Vienna. They developed a long list of holidays to complete together: Italy, the Scilly isles, Puerto Rico, Ireland. In 1958, they rented a canal boat and 'spent five days steering it about the Norfolk Broads' (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 373). In England, they bought three cottages in Walberswick, a village on the Suffolk coast, and a house in County Cork, Ireland – a property empire perhaps less surprising in the context of Burlingham's status as heiress to the Tiffany fortune. They went away frequently on weekends and (following psychoanalytic tradition) for two months in the summer.

By the late 1950s, they hosted many widowed friends and colleagues, including Jeanne Lampl, Marianne Kris, and Princess Marie Bonaparte, in Walberswick. All of these women were psychoanalytic colleagues as well as friends, making this world of holidays also a professional space for women. Unlike Marion Milner, for whom holidays were a route to solitude and connection with a deeper inner self, holidays for Dorothy Burlingham and Anna

Freud therefore often centred around connection to other women. But, as for Milner, their holidays were rich in meaning and ‘involve[d] a distance not just from the demands of day-to-day living but also the norms of [their] place and time...[a] way of crafting a response to the history [they] lived through’ (Singh, 2021, p. 34).

Crafts such as knitting, weaving and sewing were another crucial element of the two women’s lives beyond the psychoanalytic clinic. As a child, Anna Freud was taught to knit by her nanny, Josefina, so that she could join the other women in the house in the family knitting circle. Although she said she wasn’t good at knitting, she became completely absorbed by her projects, to the extent that her family asked her to spend less time with it. Long after that family knitting circle, crafts continued to play a role in many of Anna Freud’s relationships with women: when her nephew Heinerle died, she knitted and sewed for weeks with female family members. She knitted and sewed a whole wardrobe of clothes for Lou-Andreas Salome when she was struggling to live on a small income.

Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham had a loom in Walberswick and would weave together on their holidays there – this loom is now on display in Anna Freud’s room in the museum (formerly Burlingham’s office), along with pottery and knitted shawls made by the two women. Anna Freud always said that at 60 she would retire to Walberswick, where she would weave, farm, and ride horses. In fact, she worked almost up until her death in 1982. After Dorothy’s death in 1979, however, Anna’s leisure time now ‘hung very heavy’ (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 444). Anna comforted herself by wearing Dorothy’s sweaters around the house: she was seen ‘stroking these representations of the friend whom no-one in their acquaintance had ever seen her caress or embrace’ (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 443). And in 1981, when Anna was unwell, receiving blood transfusions and taking a leave of absence from her work, she started to dream about the clinic and decided to knit and weave things that could be sold off to raise money for it. She raised £2,500.

Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's crafting and creative practices throughout their lives were a counter-balance to their busy and stressful working lives, and a space for reflection and relaxation that related intimately to the lines between their personal and professional lives.

5. The lecture and exhibition rooms: The 'To Destroy' letter and the archive

Moving upstairs, we stop in what was Martha Freud's room and is now a lecture room for events. For the Women & Freud exhibition, the room opens out into the exhibition room next door. The walls of both rooms are full of pictures and biographies of significant women from psychoanalytic history. Lining two walls are Louise Bourgeois' papers – sketches and notes searching for the meaning of analysis ("analysis is [...] a job, [...] a duty, [...] a joke") – and her Breasts and Blade sculpture (1981): a sinking and headless body, breasts rising from the shoulders and chest. The group takes their seats and looks towards the projector screen, where a letter from the Freud Archive is displayed.



Image 9: Louise Bourgeois *Breasts and blade* (1991) (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

Image 10: Anna and Dorothy letter

Please upload to the folder.

The museum's archive, which is now held upstairs in an attic room, has much to reveal about the complexities and ambiguities of the private female spaces that coexist with the museum's official narrative. Privacy is particularly significant to the archive. Founded by a group of loyal Freudian analysts in 1951, its explicit purpose was to preserve Freud's legacy after his death and to defend the status of psychoanalysis. Anna Freud agreed with archive founder Kurt Eissler on a strategy of closed access (Malcolm, 2018), keeping researchers from the archive.

When cataloguing Dorothy Burlingham's archive collection in 2017, Agnes came across a scruffy accordion binder of correspondence between her and Anna Freud (Meadows, 2022). Burlingham organised this file herself for inclusion in the archive, and at the beginning was a note on which she had written: 'These letters of Anna Freud to me are

especially interesting. I have withdrawn any that seemed too personal' (1975). The accordion file mostly contained blue airmail that fold up to make their own envelope. They cover Anna Freud's visits to America in the 1950s, '60s and '70s to the Yale Child Study Centre in New Haven and the Menninger Foundation in Cleveland. On these trips, they write to one another every day, and since the early 1950s Anna Freud visited America at least once every two years. But there was one item that stood out from the airmail: a white envelope stuffed with thin white writing paper with Anna Freud's tidy school-teacher cursive. On the envelope, Burlingham had written "To destroy" and underlined it twice. This difference in paper quality and quantity, evoking another level of care and intimacy, and Burlingham's admission of having removed other letters from the archive, create what Maryanne Dever calls the 'heightened materiality' of the archive (Dever, Vickery and Newman, 2009, p. 175). Was this one of the letters that Burlingham intended to remove for being too personal? And what makes an archive item "too personal"? There is a long history of women removing their letters from all kinds of archives, but here it seems particularly complicated. Were love letters between two women being removed from the official narrative psychoanalysis? Was this an attempt to protect the archive, and continue its role in defending psychoanalysis? Who was this withdrawal for, and what was removed?

In the letter, Anna writes from a visit to the Yale psychology department in 1963. She starts this tender, confiding and anxious letter by describing a recent dream about Dorothy that expresses concern about her recent long car journey. She writes, 'Above all, I want you to be safe for your health and not to do anything rash so that we can take up our life together again, with you all right, and not like last year when you were really quite ill' (Freud, 1962, p. 2). This reference to their life together is revealing – was it this shared life being that was concealed, or the women's struggles with illness? Although they don't define their relationship, Anna Freud wrote to her friend Max Eitingon that '[b]eing together with Mrs

Burlingham is a great joy for me' (1926) . And Burlingham wrote to Anna Freud in 1939 that theirs was 'the most precious relationship [she] ever had' (1939 as cited in Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 138). But those letters were not marked "to destroy".

In contrast to this companionship and solace beyond professional life, Anna also writes about the 'depersonalisation' that she feels in the professional spaces of Yale as a woman and a Freud. She recounts a story about meeting a neighbour in New Haven who asked if she was really Freud's daughter, and when she responded affirmatively, 'looked at me all over, shook his head and said slowly and wonderingly: "Is that so!", very much as if I said I had come down straight from the moon or even from much further' (Freud, 1962, p. 4). Perhaps this helps to make sense of the removal of the letter. Burlingham's act of removal sits within the tradition of using this archive to protect Freud's legacy but also slips out of that legacy, reflecting Anna Freud's attempt to manage her distance from her father by drawing lines between a private world of women in which she is Anna and a familiar (or perhaps *familial*), and a depersonalised professional world in which she is a Freud. Burlingham's removal of the letter preserves a personal sphere of female companionship *from* the professional archive that is so determined by the father. If, as Appignanesi suggests in her exhibition catalogue, psychoanalysis 'raised women's concerns, the ordinary matter of gossip, the secret fears and desires of "hysterics", into a professional and public discourse' (2024, p. 9) then we can read Burlingham's destruction as an act against psychoanalysis, reserving the right to keep some things unconscious – especially, perhaps, illness and its effects on professional life and productivity – and releasing the two women's concerns from the public and professional discourse back into their private women's discourse of holidays and leisure.

6. Dorothy's study and bedroom: queer historiographies of the museum

The group moves through the exhibition room, taking a moment to look at the wall plaques commemorating Freud's female colleagues and patients. There is a full-length photograph of Margarethe Csonka-Trautenegg, the patient in Sigmund Freud's Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality (Freud, 1920), and an inset of her lover, Leonie Puttkamer-Gessman. The queer, polyamorous partnership of modernist poet H.D. (a patient of Freud's) and Bryher is referenced, although Bryher's gender-nonconformity is not mentioned. High on a lintel, a statement from Freud's Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis is reproduced: 'You can attribute some degree of homosexuality to every child without doing him an injustice' (Freud, 1910, p. 43).



Image 11: Margarethe Csonka von Trautenegg: panel from the Women & Freud exhibition curated by Lisa Appignanesi and Bryony Davies (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

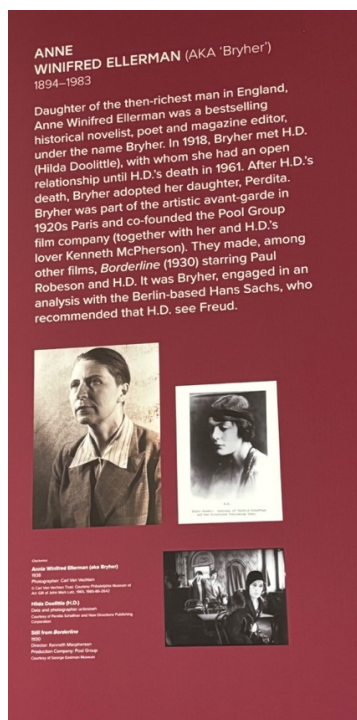


Image 12: Anne Winifred Ellerman (Bryher): panel from the Women & Freud exhibition curated by Lisa Appignanesi and Bryony Davies (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

*We reach the room at the rear of the first floor that is known as Anna Freud's room, where her couch and weaving loom are displayed. But this was actually Dorothy Burlingham's study and bedroom (Davies, 2018; Mossop, 2025). Anna's bedroom was next door, and her study/consulting room upstairs is now an office. For the Women & Freud exhibition, two large plaques have been installed, side by side, on the far wall. Dorothy Burlingham is described as 'Anna Freud's life partner, co-founder of the Hampstead War Nurseries and the Hampstead Clinic, and co-author of *Infants without Families*'. In a display case, four paragraphs of text acknowledge the questions about the nature of their*

relationship. In this closing section of the tour, we critically consider psychoanalytic theory about queer sexuality, and how it is represented in the Freud Museum London today.

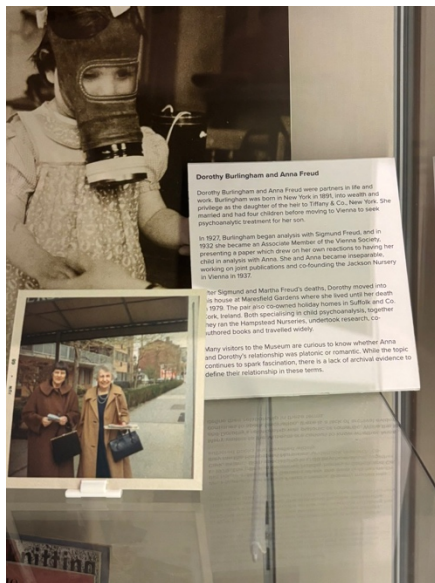


Image 13: Display case from the Women & Freud exhibition curated by Lisa Appignanesi and Bryony Davies (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)



Image 14: panel from the Women & Freud exhibition curated by Lisa Appignanesi and Bryony Davies (Photograph: Harriet Mossop)

The complex history between lesbians or queer women and psychoanalytic theory and practice has been the subject of examination by both queer theorists and psychoanalysts since the 1990s (O'Connor and Ryan, 1993; de Lauretis, 1994; Burch, 1997; Glassgold and Iasenza, 2004; Czyzewska, 2022). Whether or not we believe that Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's relationship was "homosexual", "lesbian" or "queer", social and psychoanalytic attitudes to lesbians are relevant to understanding their lives.

The movie *Freud's Last Session* depicts Freud as believing that homosexuality is not immoral in men, but that 'lesbianism is different... perhaps unchecked, it becomes progressively more unstable' (*Freud's Last Session*, 2024). There is no evidence that this was Freud's view. Although he does write more often about male than female homosexuality, his case history of "female homosexuality" (Freud, 1920) in which he describes the short analysis of Margarethe Csonka-Trauteneck demonstrates that he did not believe that he could change his young patient's love for women. According to Csonka-Trauteneck's biographers, she found him to be a 'disgusting brute... [with] the dirtiest fantasies a human being can have' (Rieder and Voigt, 2020, p. 45); an apparent reaction to Freud's speculation about her early Oedipal fantasies about her parents. Poet H.D, whose *Tribute to Freud* represents one of the most detailed records by a patient of their analysis with Freud and was featured in the *Women & Freud* exhibition, had a more positive view of her short treatment with Freud, calling him the 'blameless physician' (Appignanesi and Forrester, 2005). H.D. formed a close although sometimes argumentative relationship with Freud, and was delighted that he did not try to change her bisexuality (McCabe, 2021).

Anna Freud would likely have been aware of Sigmund Freud's work with Csonka-Trauteneck, which took place towards the beginning of her own analysis by Freud. She must also have been aware of the sensational Vienna court case in 1925, the same year that she met Dorothy Burlingham for the first time in which Csonka-Trauteneck's lover, Leonie

Puttkamer-Gessman, was accused of poisoning her husband, imprisoned, and then sectioned in a psychiatric institution (Neue Freie Press, 1924; Shapira, 2023). The Austrian press report assumed that being a lesbian was sufficient evidence of a woman's capacity to murder her husband. In England, the Radclyffe Hall novel *Well of Loneliness* was banned after a very public trial in 1928; lesbianism became more visible but also more controversial.

Whatever the status of their relationship, Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham would have experienced lesbophobia and curiosity. Their sleeping arrangements in London and Vienna were the subject of gossip, and even official inquiries to the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society (Burlingham, 1989). During the 1940s and 1950s, psychoanalysis in the UK and US changed from being only 'moderately homophobic' to being 'the propagandist and enforcer of social norms and values' (Lewes *et al.*, 2008, p. 302; also see Kunzel, 2024). For example, psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch – who was close to Freud in Vienna until she moved to the US in 1935 – worked with several lesbian patients and wrote openly about their erotic transference to her in the 1930s (Deutsch, 1933). However, by 1944, this same openness was not possible in her clinical writing and Deutsch's description of the erotic transference was muted (Deutsch, 1944). We can also trace lesbophobia in the "controversial discussions" between Melanie Klein and Anna Freud in the 1940s. Klein's beliefs about when the super-ego develops led to technical differences with Anna Freud about whether transference forms with child patients and whether to involve parents in treatment. These disagreements at times became very personal. Ernest Jones, a supporter of Klein, suggested in a letter to Freud that Anna Freud disagreed with Melanie Klein on the super ego because Anna Freud's Oedipus complex had not been sufficiently analysed (by her father) (Jones, 1993). Freud defended his daughter – and his own analytic work with her. The accusation of an incomplete resolution of Anna's Oedipus complex implied that her work with patients was also incomplete, a potentially damaging accusation. If Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's relationship had

been known as a lesbian relationship, the consequences for their professional standing as analysts would have been serious. We see this as lesbophobia; even, possibly, in very polarised times, as an anxious fantasy that if Anna Freud was a lesbian, and hence an unfit inheritor of Freud's legacy, the whole theoretical and clinical edifice of psychoanalysis would be destroyed.

The current strand of queer psychoanalytic theory that emphasises Freud's permissiveness about homosexuality compared to later generations of analysts presents us with a tempting vision of a "Pink Freud" (Fuss, 1995) whose radically queer views were misrepresented by later analysts (see Gherovici, in this edition). This reading of Freud focuses on quotes such as the one displayed in the exhibition room during our tour: 'you can attribute some degree of homosexuality to every child without doing him an injustice' (Freud, 1910, p. 43) and Freud's famous letter to the mother of a gay man where Freud says that homosexuality is 'nothing to be ashamed of' (Freud, 1935). This re-appraisal of Freud is important, and there is indeed much queer potential in Freud's writing. But "Pink Freud" is also a fantasy that can cover over the deeply problematic history of psychoanalytic pathologisation of homosexuality. We also need to recognise the parts of Freud that are more difficult to read today. For example, later in the same lecture, Freud says that exclusive homosexuality belongs to 'classes of disturbance [that] represent direct inhibitions in the development of the sexual function; they comprise the perversions and, what is by no means rare, general infantilism in sexual life' (Freud, 1910, p. 44). Taken out of context – as it was by most psychoanalysts and psychiatrically informed psychiatrists from the 1940s to the 1980s – Freud's writing about homosexuality in children implies that homosexuals never develop a fully adult sexuality. In a socially conservative environment, this was developed into a general psychoanalytic view of homosexuality as a form of arrested development,

supporting a ‘psychiatric diagnosis that sanctioned and cast a stigmatizing pall over gay men, lesbians, and gender nonconforming people for decades’ (Kunzel, 2024, p. 2).

A century after Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham first met, it seems fitting that Dorothy has finally been acknowledged as Anna’s life partner by the Freud Museum London. In the context of long lives dedicated to child psychoanalysis, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has suggested that their partnership is ‘only a strand in the great weave of their remarkable love and work’ (Young-Bruehl, 2008, p. 3). This strand of their partnership continues to fascinate and perplex us today. In the next part of this paper, we consider the increased visibility of this relationship in the light of the “queering the museum” movement.

Part II

1. Queering the Freud Museum

The “queering the museum” movement took shape in the 2010s and 2020s as part of a broader attempt to reassess the role of museums in cultural life amidst growing recognition that ‘[m]useums are not neutral....[but the] result of a complex intertwining of ideologies, knowledge, historical events, political choices, and fortuities, as well as the educational background, sensibilities, ambitions and tastes of those involved in their history’ (Zanetti, 2020, p. 106). Museums are ‘implicated in systems of power and privilege’ (Sullivan and Middleton, 2021, p. 107) and these systems affect display practices, cataloguing, collection development, and community engagement activities. As Anna Conlan puts it, ‘[m]useum representations of sexuality and gender matter because they are also political deployments of sexuality and gender’ (Conlan, 2010, p. 261). Museums that leave out queer people and

issues support dominant heteronormative and cis-normative narratives (Middleton, 2017).

And in museums, these narratives must be considered critically within post-colonial frameworks that structure privilege based on whiteness, class, and ability (Sullivan and Middleton, 2021).

The “queering the museum” movement also critiques simple moves towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion. When not well considered, such exercises have resulted in exhibitions that unintentionally reinforce other structural inequalities; for example, exhibitions of ‘queer’ art that centre the work of cis, white, able-bodied men (Sullivan and Middleton, 2021), or temporary exhibitions that do not result in long-term structural change at the museum (Zanetti, 2020). Inclusion strategies can also create false binaries between cis and trans, straight and queer. Curators working towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion therefore need to consider the politics of assuming that ‘identity (whether of objects or people) is somehow innate, singular, autonomous, and knowable, rather than constructed, contingent, relational, intersectional, and always in-process’ (Sullivan and Middleton, 2021, p. 108). The theoretical underpinnings of the “queering the museum” movement are poststructuralism and queer theory. Sullivan & Middleton draw on Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* as a collection of embodied, unintentional or not wholly conscious dispositions to particular practices that shape the ways we perceive and operate in different contexts (Bourdieu, 1990), considering how practices of museum curation are unconsciously transmitted and absorbed within the professional environment of the museum. One way of disrupting these practices is to invite external collaborators into the museum.

Psychoanalytic theory does not seem to have played a significant role in theorising the “queering the museum” movement; it has not considered visitors’ unconscious motivations beyond Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. We suggest that psychoanalysis therefore has something important to add. The Freud Museum’s most

famous occupant provided, in psychoanalysis, a powerful tool for thinking about gender and sexuality. Although in popular culture Freud is often seen as misogynistic and homophobic, queer theory and psychoanalytic theory have much in common. In contemporary queer and trans readings, the Freudian unconscious undermines the idea of coherent sexual identity; desire is contradictory, problematic, often different to what we consciously expect it to be, and identity is relational and shifting. Furthermore, the Freudian subject is opaque to itself and can never know itself fully due to the impenetrability of the unconscious (Gozlan, 2014; see, for example, De Lauretis, 2017; Giffney and Watson, 2017; Gherovici and Steinkoler, 2022; Sinclair, Punzi and Sauer, 2024, 2024). Freudian and post-Freudian concepts of disruptive desire and non-fixed categories of identity are therefore resonant with Sullivan & Middleton's argument, based in queer theory, that we should be suspicious of movements towards LGBTQIA+ "inclusion" in museum spaces that leave heteronormative structures in place and reify identity.

Both psychoanalytic theory and queer theory lead us to question how, if desire and identity are not fixed, binary, or knowable, they can be represented in a museum. If all desire is inherently disruptive and non-normative, what would it mean to include or represent queer subjects in the Freud Museum? Sullivan & Middleton answer this challenge by arguing for a version of Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 2006), recognising the limitations of binary categories but also their necessity when arguing for queer and trans visibility on museums. We suggest that psychoanalytic theory can thicken this approach. Sigmund Freud was a Jewish man living in a place and time where Jewish masculinity was pejoratively linked with effeminacy and homosexuality (Gilman, 1993). Because of this, some have argued that his theory is sensitive to the interaction of normative expectations about gender and sexuality within

a racialised society (Punzi, 2024), although most critical theorists argue that Freudian theory has significant lacunae, especially in respect of race (Gilman, 1993; Khanna, 2003; DeLire, 2024). Whether reading Freud directly, or for those moments when he ‘goes astray’ (Laplanche, 2014), psychoanalytic theory provides vital tools in understanding how normative expectations about gender and sexuality become encoded in our psyches in a racialised society, without taking those identities as fixed or, ultimately, knowable. If this contemporary “queer / trans psychoanalysis” can be deployed at the Freud Museum London, we believe the Museum has the potential to be a vibrant site for imagining and conjuring queerness and transness.

At the same time, psychoanalytic practice has often reinforced societal norms about gender and sexuality violently in the clinic (Dean and Lane, 2001; Saketopoulou and Pellegrini, 2023; Sinclair, Punzi and Sauer, 2024). The Freud Museum London is embedded in and subject to normative societal forces. It was established in the mid-1980s when gay, lesbian and trans candidates were routinely excluded from psychoanalytic training (Ellis, 1994). As a site where psychoanalysis is made visible to the general public, it has sometimes been a focus for struggles between different factions in psychoanalysis and the world at large (e.g. Blumenthal, 1981; Kendall Adams, 2025). The Museum has hosted many talks on queer and trans topics in the last two decades, including the launch of Giffney & Watson’s important edited collection *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality*; it has also hosted talks recommending clinical practices that we would see as transphobic. As far as we are aware, no consideration has yet been given to what it might mean to queer the Freud Museum London. Our tour can, therefore, be seen as an experiment in queering the Museum. We were clear from the early stages of planning the tour that this required the bringing together of queer theory and psychoanalytic theory, as well as a consideration of the damaging ways in which

queer and trans people have been encountered in the psychoanalytic clinic, both during and after Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's lifetimes.

2. Psychoanalysis' queer family: the Freud Museum as a "house museum"

Unlike the Freud Museum in Vienna, which has white-painted walls and little furniture beyond display cases, the Freud Museum London has been carefully preserved as a home and a psychoanalytic consulting space, containing the Freud family's possessions shipped from Vienna. It is therefore an example of a house museum: a museum that has an 'indissoluble link between container and contained, between palace/house/apartment and permanent collections/furnishings/ornamental fixtures' (Leoncini, L. & Simonetti, F. in Pavoni, 2001). Joshua Adair has argued that, because of their domestic nature, house museums are particularly prone to inadvertently reinforcing heterosexual norms about family and domestic arrangements (Adair, 2010). For example, many house museums in the United States were created by gay male couples who lived in historic buildings, renovated them, and turned them into museums. Adair, writing in 2010, observed that the queerness of these couples was erased in the museums' exhibits and online presence.

Since the Freud Museum London was inhabited for nearly four decades by a household made up of two women in a lifelong partnership and their maid, and these two women played significant roles in the transformation of 20 Maresfield Gardens from a home to a museum, we can see it as a queer example of a house museum. Yet the Museum's queerness oscillates in our vision, struggling to come into focus. Key details of the queer family occupying this home are fuzzy: the date of Dorothy Burlingham moving into the house is reported as 1941 (after Minna Bernays' death) by both Burlingham and Anna

Freud's biographers (Burlingham, 1989; Young-Bruehl, 2008), but as 1951 (after Martha Freud's death) on the Museum website (Davies, 2018) and in the display in the "Anna Freud" room. The website describes in detail how Anna and Dorothy's co-habitation was dependent on a separate room becoming available for Dorothy, in line with expectations for an upper-middle class woman of the time, yet this hyper-attention to detail is, itself, rather queer. Perhaps it is difficult to imagine that Dorothy and Anna cohabited whilst Anna's mother was alive? Further fuzziness is created by the current arrangements of rooms in the Museum, where Dorothy Burlingham's room is displayed as Anna Freud's room, resulting in a spatial confusion that mirrors psychoanalytic myths about lesbian merger (Mossop, 2025).

Sara Ahmed argues that, '[i]n being orientated toward other women, lesbian desires also bring certain objects near [...] that might not have otherwise been reachable within the body horizon of the social' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 103). Ahmed reminds us that 'how lesbians are read often seeks to align their desire with the line of the heterosexual couple or even the family line. The disappearance of lesbian desire simultaneously involves the erasure of signs of difference' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 96). She suggests that '[h]omosexual desire in a woman...challenges the family line and the image that the family has of itself' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74), leading to a 'departure from the family line' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 76). Our tour highlighted how Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham oriented themselves towards each other throughout their lifetimes through cohabitation, working together closely, and shared holiday trips (Mossop, 2025). It also demonstrated the importance of spatiality in how we think about their relationship today by drawing out how the Museum's current arrangement of rooms makes the relationship between Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham more or less visible. We considered how this desire to live together departed from the family line of psychoanalysis at a time when homosexuality and lesbian sexuality were actively being suppressed by psychoanalysts in theory and clinical practice. The tour provided space to

wonder what might have been erased from the history of the Museum in order to make this desire line up better with heteronormative expectations, and to consider Sinclair, Punzi and Sauer's important question in their recent edited collection of essays *The Queerness of Psychoanalysis*: '[t]o what extent can one speak of a queer history or heritage of psychoanalysis?' (Sinclair, Punzi and Sauer, 2024, p. 3)

It was noticeable that although queer female artists, patients and writers were included in the *Women & Freud* exhibition, no openly queer analysts were represented. This suggests that the "family tree" of psychoanalysis, through which knowledge is transmitted through training analyses and supervision, is heteronormative. However, we see the "family tree" of psychoanalysis as inherently queer, even if this queerness is subject to repression in the discourse of the unconscious. Ernst Falzeder notes that 'through the training analysis, each psychoanalyst becomes part of a genealogy that ultimately goes back to Sigmund Freud and a handful of early pioneers' (Falzeder, 2015, p. 77). Falzeder's family tree of psychoanalytic affiliations (Falzeder, 2005) is full of incestuous analyses of children, mutual analyses, multiple analyses, and even analyses combined with erotic relationships. It looks more like a plate of spaghetti – or the famous "Lesbian chart" showing how characters from the television series *The L Word* were connected through love and sexual relationships (The L Word Wiki, 2004) – than a normative family tree. Despite this inherent queerness, these genealogies are spoken of today in rather heteronormative terms: the British Psychoanalytic Council's "Homosexuality Statement of Regret" referred to these historic figures as 'analytic parents and grandparents' (British Psychoanalytic Council, 2021). Falzeder discusses Anna Freud's importance in this genealogy as Sigmund Freud's daughter and analysand and as training analyst for many influential psychoanalysts. Our tour highlighted, in addition, Anna Freud's complex role as someone whose domestic arrangements and

relationships had the potential to queer the family lines of psychoanalysis. It suggested the possibility of a queer family tree for psychoanalysis.

3. An encounter with the Freud Museum as a “ruined Museum”

To find the traces of the house’s history beyond Appignanesi’s exhibition and beyond the museum that Anna Freud helped to curate, we wanted ‘to study not only what “is” there and tangible, but to attend to the implications of absence’ (Landau and Pohl, 2021, p.200). To do that, we decided to create a tour of what is not there: the decades of history that slip out of view. And, because Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham made it their business to withdraw parts of their lives from the professional, academic, and historical record of psychoanalysis, we felt that a purely academic event would miss the point. As visitors to the Museum ourselves, granted temporary access to 20 Maresfield Gardens by a supportive events team, we wanted to set a tone that would be open to academics, analysts, and anyone curious about this aspect of the Museum’s history.

In curating the Women & Freud exhibition, Appignanesi writes that she was driven by a ‘dream in which artists mingled with Freud and the history of the women patients and pioneers of psychoanalysis shimmered and was gradually translated into the geography of the Museum’ (Appignanesi, 2025, p.7). With a similar dream, we wanted to bring Burlingham and Anna Freud to mingle with the rest of the house. We approached the Freud Museum as what Landau and Pohl call a “ruined museum”: a space that combines the museum’s attention to what is present in objects and archives with the ruin’s attention to what has been lost and destroyed. These “ruined museums” reveal themselves as contested, haunted, and

ambivalent’ (Landau and Pohl, 2021, p.200). Through a tour, our event would ‘makes present the absence of lost people and matter, yet it turns this loss or absence into fleeting artefacts to be encountered anew on a daily basis’ (Landau and Pohl, 2021, p.199).

This interest in the encounter – rather than academic argument – has emerged from the wider turn toward inclusivity in museums over the last 30 years. As museum critics Andermann and Arnold-de Simine (2012) explain, ‘In this new emphasis on the “museum encounter” as a performative and intersubjective “event” – sometimes referred to as the “educational turn” in museum curatorship – a new type of “inclusive museum” has emerged’ (2012, p.1). The encounter that we hoped to create within the Freud Museum was one that attended to the absences as well as the presences within the spaces: not only the objects and verifiable facts of history, but also the gaps and stories that were removed from the record. Liao (2022) traces this movement from arrangement to speech and enactment across museums: ‘museums have changed from storehouses where objects are collected and preserved to sites of memories where the past is recollected, narrated and performed’ (2022, p.170). As Arnold-de Simine (2013) puts it, museums ‘have become places of recollection, not so much driven by objects but by narratives and performances.’ (2013, p.2). Framing the tour as an encounter also resonates with the encounter between queer theory and psychoanalysis that was staged by analysts Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson in their edited volume *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality* (2017). Part of the importance of this volume was that the editors invited later contributors from both fields – queer theory and psychoanalysis – to read and respond to earlier contributions. They could not predict what would emerge from such an encounter; our tour also left space for the unexpected by inviting in an audience, and by encouraging questions and discussions of the objects that we encountered.

That said, paying attention to the gaps in the historical record is not the same as trying to fill those gaps. This couldn’t be more important in Anna and Dorothy’s histories: as we

introduced the tour, we noted that there would be no answer to the mystery of their relationship, and we would not attempt prove what went on behind closed doors, one way or another – though we might have our theories (Mossop, 2026). As Dever (2009) puts it, ‘We often harbour an insistent (deeply suppressed and often denied) desire to find in our archival sources a whole where there can only ever be random parts, to perform acts of reconstitution in the service of producing a coherent and seamless account of our subject’ (2009, p.6). The point we highlight here is the impossibility of the complete answer. Anna and Dorothy’s fragmentary traces in the museum – whether in the original life of the house, its status as a museum, or its archive – reflect their complicatedly (and yet also very ordinarily) fragmented life together: split between professional and domestic spaces, levels of disclosure and intimacy, maintaining both closeness and distance from their families and from each other. As Dever explains, it is characteristic of women’s archives to reveal this ‘interface between public and private selves,’ to emphasise ‘how individuals are constituted by, but also negotiate, social identity’ (Dever, 2009, p.2).

4. Queer fantasies in the Freud Museum

We now consider these different facets of the tour – a queering of the museum, an encounter with psychoanalysis’ queer family, and an encounter with gaps and silences in a “ruined museum” – through a psychosocial lens. That is, we consider the conscious and unconscious psychological experiences of visitors’ interactions with museums and museum objects in social and cultural contexts. Frogget & Trustram (2014) suggest that museums facilitate the use of their objects as shared cultural resources by acting as holding environments (Winnicott, 1960) to ‘enable people to connect psychically with objects and so find “external” forms for their experience’ (2014, p. 491). They describe how museum visitors project their inner experience onto a museum object, in what Winnicott calls “object

relating”, and contrasting moments when visitors experience an object as independent ‘in itself’; what Winnicott calls “object use”. In this object-relational psychosocial model, museum objects become a ‘symbolic third’ between the individual and the cultural sphere and self-states can be ‘negotiated and transformed...expressed in symbolic systems that secure participation in a shared and communicable culture’ (2014, p. 495). This provides a rich language for thinking about the psychic processes underpinning visitors’ affective experiences in the museum, including the projection of unconscious memories and affects onto museum objects (Ford, 2022, pp. 125–126).(Ford, 2022, pp. 125–126)

Walsh & Kokoli (2022) suggest that an object-relationship model can help to repair the modern museum’s traumatic legacies of oppression. They propose, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reading of Melanie Klein, that decolonial repair in the museum might involve ‘the assembling of damaged part-objects into “something like a whole [but] *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*”’ (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 128; in Walsh and Kokoli, 2022, p. 4). Importantly, they recognise the museum’s ‘substantial potential to (re)traumatise’ (Walsh and Kokoli, 2022, p. 5) since museum objects have often been violently removed from their people and communities, asking ‘whose stories are visible in museum spaces and how they serve their audiences?’ (Walsh and Kokoli, 2022, p. 15). They use a critical lens to examine the inherent ““goodness” thought to reside in object relations’ (Walsh and Kokoli, 2022, p. 15), recognising that reparation always has to ‘reckon with damage, not deny it, as otherwise historical trauma continues to resurface rather than being worked through’ (Walsh and Kokoli, 2022, p. 14).

We agree with Walsh & Kokoli that a critical, decolonial and queer approach is needed when thinking psychosocially about museum spaces. Such an approach questions what a holding environment is, whether it varies depending on what sort of visitors are in the museum, and for whose benefit. It also asks whether there is, in fact, such a thing as an

object's innate self that is available for a visitor to relate to. And it throws into question the "shared and communicable culture" that visitors are assumed to participate in: whose culture is it, and how is it created and communicated? Who participates in it, and who might be excluded? In the context of the Freud Museum London, it must bring into play the troubled history between psychoanalysts and queer and trans people. It suggests that existing structures might need to be queered, disrupted, to make space for what has been repressed. Accordingly, the queer psychosocial approach that we have developed through this tour reverses the usual dynamic in which the museum display is assumed to tell the story. Instead, as queer visitors to the Museum ourselves, we take visitors' affective and fantasy responses to the museum as psychosocial objects of study that might illuminate complex questions about potentially non-normative sexual subjects of the past, without looking for clear answers. The fuzziness, silences, ruins, and spatial confusion that we have highlighted in this paper mean that queer interactions with museums are complex psychic experiences involving societal and cultural norms about gender and sexuality. This complexity is captured in Joshua Adair's writing about house museums. He notes that we can rarely find definitive answers to whether historic figures conformed to societal norms of gender and sexuality. However:

...we frequently catch glimpses of lives lived in ways that did not appear to adhere to traditional narratives of gender and sexuality.....Visitors, myself [Adair] included, may sense some resonances with a particular historical figure, they may even glimpse some shadow of recognition or possibility of non-normative gender and/or sexuality because we ourselves fit into such categories and are keen to establish such linkages with the past. (Adair, 2017, p. 118)

As demonstrated by Adair, museum visitors create their own interpretations and affective responses to exhibits about potentially non-normative sexual subjects. The affective responses of queers have long been an object of study for queer theorists. Heather Love suggests that we embrace the difficulties of engaging with the putatively queer past, warning that '[t]he effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start. To reconstruct the past, we build on ruins; to bring it to life, we chase after the fugitive dead' (Love, 2007, p. 21). Saidiya Hartman, in *Venus in Two Acts*, evokes the total silence in the archive about the stories of enslaved African women who were forced to make the dangerous journey across the Atlantic in slave ships. In the archive, she finds the temptation to 'fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none' (Hartman, 2008, p. 8). In response, she develops the practice of critical fabulation as a method of 'straining against the limits of the archive' to 'jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done' (Hartman, 2008, p. 11). Psychoanalytically speaking, these critical fabulations include complex projections, identifications and introjections of societal norms.

When researching Anna Freud and Dorothy's histories and archives to design our tour, we felt resonance with Love's writing about doomed attempts to capture a queer past and Dever's desire to respect the gaps in women's archives, as well as with Hartman's longing to fill in the gaps in the archive with queer fabulation, imagining what might have happened. Agnes has written about the moment of excited hope when she found the 'To destroy' letter in the Freud/Burlingham archive, only to realise that the contents were less conclusive than she might have imagined (2022). Harriet has explored how Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological vocabulary makes visible normative Western orientations towards sexuality, gender and race, focusing on how people have thought about and questioned Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's relationship throughout history (2025). Responding to these

two approaches, and in dialogue with the “queering the museum” movement, we decided to keep our tour close to the archive, working with the rich information about these two women’s lives, and the aesthetics of the art from the *Women and Freud* exhibition. We did not produce a critical fabulation; given the richness of the archival, artistic and museum objects, and an unwillingness to reduce the complexity and historical context of the two women’s relationship to fixed or simplified identities, this felt unnecessary. However, we were mindful of the potential queer use of ‘fragments, snippets of gossip, speculations, irreverent half-truths’ (Mills, 2006, p. 86) and of the potentiality of the encounter with the Freud Museum as a house museum, a ruined museum, and a space of repressed queerness in the psychoanalytic family tree, as discussed above. Through the encounters between museum objects, archival objects, texts, spaces, and theory that the tour staged, we wanted to allow our visitors to conjure fantasies about what might have happened, been said, or done in 20 Maresfield Gardens, in the imagined past, with its multitude of queer possibilities.

Of course, our own fantasies about Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham emerged during and after the tour. We saw potential for the story of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham’s first meeting in Vienna to be told in the genre of a lesbian rom-com “meet cute”. We wondered what might have been lost in the journey from vibrant post-war Vienna to the increasingly repressive Nazi environment of the 1930s, to wartime and then post-war London; in the journey from young women, through wartime, menopause, middle-age, and illness, to the grey and white-haired women of Michael J. Burlingham’s 1979 photograph. We felt sadness and anger when we notice that even in this quiet moment from the end of their lives, Anna’s father watches over them from a photograph on the wall above. We noticed that thinking about “Anna’s room” and “Dorothy’s room” in the Museum sets in motion fantasies about their sleeping arrangements, and questions of whether that tells us anything about the status of their relationship. We wondered whether heteronormative

notions of one working partner and one supportive partner have prompted many to overlook Burlingham's work on disability. We remembered that a former guide at the museum told us that many young visitors are curious about the nature of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's relationship (Smith, 2024). And we wondered what Anna and Dorothy themselves would have made of our tour, given that, according to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, they wanted to make sure that people knew they were not lesbians (Young-Bruehl, 2008).

The way that the Freud Museum London narrativises Anna and Dorothy's relationship, whether through the placement of objects in the Museum, display labels or website descriptions, influences the generation of visitors' fantasies about it. It is therefore important in the context of the queering the museum movement and the ethical imperative to represent queer and trans lives in museum spaces. Dorothy's place as a member of the family living in the house that became the Freud Museum London was erased for the first decades of the Museum. This erasure and silencing echoes the constraints on many queer and trans people in psychoanalysis over the last century. We felt these echoes, and the need to confront the 'ruined past' of the history of psychoanalysis, as we prepared our tour and walked the rooms together with colleagues and friends in January 2025. It is very positive that the *Women & Freud* exhibition included, for the first time, a direct acknowledgement of the nature of this relationship and our questions about it. However, the troubled history of psychoanalytic homophobia and lesbophobia that affected the lives of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham – as well as many other patients, analysts, and people who might have liked to have trained as analysts – remains submerged, unvoiced, and repressed.

We hope that each of our tour guests left with an enriched field of affects and fabulations about the Freud Museum London and about Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's lives together, though these responses will be unique to each individual. We hope that approaching the Museum with the intention of staging a queer encounter has

unsettled its canonical history, and that the way this history is told will continue to evolve.

In the much-quoted words of queer theorist Jose Esteban Munoz:

Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.

(Munoz, 2009, p. 1)

We invite the reader to imagine with us what new worlds and better pleasures might be dreamt of within the walls of 20 Maresfield Gardens: the last home of Sigmund Freud, whose work on sexuality and gender has shaped modern discourse, the queer family home of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham and, perhaps, the queer family home of psychoanalysis.

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