

# Exhibition Critiques:

## The *British Galleries* at the Victoria and Albert Museum

by Dana Allen-Greil, Colleen Dilenschneider, and Janet Petitpas

### Variety, Evocative Labels, and Clever Interactives Make for a Memorable Group Visit to the *British Galleries* by Dana Allen-Greil

We stepped off the plane at Heathrow bleary-eyed from an overnight flight. I had come to London with two museum colleagues for a series of meetings with staff at the Tate and the British Museum. While both of my colleagues had visited the museum and the city several times before, I had never been to England and was eager to take in as much as I could in the timespan of our short international trip. To their credit, my seasoned colleagues wanted to ensure that I experienced the best that London—and its world-class museums, in particular—had to offer. So, without hesitation, we hopped on the tube towards the Victoria and Albert Museum.

I suggested that we start with the *British Galleries* based on my recollection of a meeting at a history museum many years earlier in which someone referenced the exhibition as a model of visitor-centered interpretation. I remembered that the objects had been completely reinstalled and reinterpreted and that museum educators had been very involved in the decision-making, design, and writing of the exhibition (an uncommon practice in many institutions).

What's important about the particular context of our group visit is that this exhibition critique is written from the perspective of the less-than-ideal visitor. What I mean is: we were not the

visitors you dream of when designing an exhibition. We were incredibly jet-lagged and fatigued. We had a jam-packed agenda that gave us only a few hours to spare in the building. We didn't really feel like reading labels. For some of us, the experience would be brand new while for others it was almost old hat. We represented several generations. We were about to walk from the day-lit bustle of the metropolis into a dimly-lit series of galleries full of really old stuff. In reality, we were the kind of visitors that actually come to your museum every day. And... we had an incredibly enjoyable experience together in this exhibition.

Here's why:

#### 1. Segmentation and variety make the exhibition's large scale manageable.

The *British Galleries* cover a considerable swath of time (1500-1900), house nearly 3,000 objects, and occupy an enormous amount of physical space. To counteract this intimidating size, the chronological framework of the exhibition is broken



Dish, 16th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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up into human-scaled rooms that prevent visitors from feeling overwhelmed. In the various themed spaces, visitors find a mix of objects including furniture, clothing, jewelry, and housewares. The ode to British design includes objects meant for the rich (I call these the “ooh, aah!” pieces) as well as common folks (the “hunh, interesting!” objects). I found the *Galleries* offer a rather nice balance of fancy and ordinary—encouraging us to gape in awe as well as imagine using household items ourselves. The exhibition offers variety in interpretive strategies as well. Text labels, videos, touchable items, and digital interactives offer interesting combinations of things to look at and things to do.

Despite our unique interests and preferences, we found ourselves able to navigate the show easily together without getting lost. We often drifted away from each other, having been attracted to different objects and elements in the *Galleries*. But just as often we found ourselves organically coming back together, compelled to experience aspects of the exhibition as a social group. One of my colleagues was drawn to an exquisite pair of embroidered velvet mittens she had seen and enjoyed in the past; when she found them she waved me over to revel in them as well. I spotted a “What is it?” cabinet full of unusual objects, such as a strangely appealing dish formed with concentric circles. When I opened a panel and read the answer reflected in a mirrored surface, I summoned my group over for more discoveries. (The dish turned out to be a chicken feeder, designed to keep the food or water from scattering about the farmyard). We took turns quizzing each other about what the



Pair of mittens, ca. 1600. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

rest of the objects in the case might have been used for.

This experience I am describing is not a matter of happy circumstance or simply a group of visitors who travel well together. This is the result of an expertly designed museum display that intentionally prioritized participant-driven discovery as well as meaningful group interaction. What’s most impressive is that the designers pulled off their goals in such a way that we felt energized, and not exhausted, by the vast choices on offer throughout the expansive exhibition.

## 2. The labels were written in succinct yet evocative language.

Part of the reason we were able to experience the exhibition both as individuals and as a group was due to well-crafted, multi-level textual interpretation. Intro panels and object labels were brief and highly readable. Not once did I feel the sensation of guilt I often experience in museums when I lose steam midway through a large block of text. Instead, I found I could easily skim a sentence or two and then breeze past if I wished, homing in on an object that caught my eye. While one could certainly spend hours reading everything, the way

the content is written also makes those with less time feel at ease. The V&A's guidelines for writing gallery text get right to the point: "Visitors have come to look at objects, not to read books on the wall."

While I was familiar with the V&A's ten-point guide (available on their website: <http://tiny.cc/vaguidelines>), I didn't realize until after my visit that it was developed based on audience research conducted in the revamped *British Galleries*. The guidelines are now applied throughout the museum. Here's just a taste of the brilliant tidbits you'll find within:

- **Write for your audience:** "Assume no knowledge of history, nor patronize the reader."
- **Engage with the object:** "(The label) should encourage visitors to look, to understand and to find their own reward, whether aesthetic, intellectual, or personal...in helping people to appreciate the object, be careful not to rob them of the chance to make their own observations."
- **Bring in the human element:** "Link the past to the present, the familiar and the unfamiliar . . . another way of linking objects to our own lives and experiences is to evoke the senses of touch, taste, sound and smell."
- **Write as you would speak:** "Enthusiasm matters. If our text is to be friendly, and if we would like visitors to respond positively to our displays, we have to show our own love for the collections."



Peg tankard, 1655-1657. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

### 3. The content prompted meaning-making through conversation.

In my opinion, the contributions of the V&A's label-writing principles to the visitor experience cannot be underestimated. Here's an example of bringing in the human element through writing that ties together the familiar and the unfamiliar: The label accompanying an engraved silver tankard explains that the pegs affixed vertically inside are designed to denote the amount of liquid (beer, ale, or cider) to be consumed before passing the vessel along to the next drinker. The phrase "to take someone down a peg" apparently refers to rudely drinking beyond one's measure. The tankard and its accompanying interpretation prompted my group to discuss (with wrinkled noses) the relative hygiene of sharing beer with a pub full of drinkers and to ponder whether the phrase more familiar to our American

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**References:**

Packer, J., and Ballantyne, R. (2005). Solitary vs. shared: Exploring the social dimension of museum learning. *Curator*, 48(2), 177-192.

Falk, J. and Dierking, L. (2013). The museum experience revisited, p.150-151. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

tongues (“take someone down a notch”) was also derivative of this artifact of 16<sup>th</sup> century life.

Research on learning in museums (Packer and Ballantyne, 2005) has shown that those who visit museums with others value being able to share the experience and discuss ideas with members of their group. Though I saw thousands of objects during my brief sojourn across the pond, this tankard stands out in my memory because of the dialogue it stimulated. Indeed, conversations can be pivotal in a group’s attempt to find shared meaning in museums (Falk and Dierking, 2013). In writing this critique many months after our visit, and without benefit of notes, I am struck by how critical these kinds of object-inspired conversations were to my own learning and enjoyment of the museum.

**4. Hands-on and interactive elements spurred engagement with and among visitors.**

A good example of content that encouraged me to look closely and engage with the object was another simple “lift the panel” type interactive. I was asked to determine which of two 18<sup>th</sup> century dishes was made in China and which in England. Following hints, I was able to spot the difference between the Chinese export and the English dish that was instead decorated in a Chinese style. Without this interpretive device, I would easily have ignored both objects, having never felt particularly inspired or well-informed enough to engage with ceramics in the past.

In another room, the enormous and impossibly fluffy-looking Great Bed of

Ware practically begs to be stroked or jumped on. Thankfully, the V&A offers touchable samples of the mattress and bits of fabric, sparing the original artifact such abuse. In fact, it was while I was feeling a silky layer of cloth that I remarked to my colleagues how much I—someone whose career has centered on digital museum experiences—forget the power that simple touch interactives have to engage visitors. And while the *British Galleries* offer quite a number of computer-based touchscreen interactives, I found none of them to be particularly compelling compared to the other experiences available. (I did note, however, that all of them were in working order, a feat that is not easily accomplished after more than a decade of use.)

Perhaps my favorite hands-on experience of the trip was when my colleague and I were able to try on replicas of 16<sup>th</sup> century ruffs. We spent quite a bit of time perfecting our postures for a photograph. Sadly my colleague’s photos were later lost; I would have loved to share this memento of our social experience with you. Instead that snapshot is etched in my memory as both a bonding experience and an opportunity to consider what it might have been like to don such elaborate costume had I been born a few centuries earlier.

**5. Intensive front-end audience research and prototyping laid an interpretive foundation.**

For an exhibition so clearly designed with learning and audience needs in mind, it should come as no surprise that significant resources were put towards research. In fact, the V&A commissioned (or conducted themselves) baseline studies,

formative evaluations, prototyping, and summative evaluations. A trove of reports is available on the V&A website: <http://tiny.cc/varesearch> I hope that the museum community will use these resources to plan and design similarly successful exhibition experiences for visitors in the future.