

**Inspire, Engage,
Preserve, Connect,
Transform:** meeting
the aims for the new
Medieval & Renaissance
Galleries at the Victoria
and Albert Museum

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‘Art isn’t just entertaining or decorative. It is life-giving. Whatever its medium, in the hands of a great master art puts us in touch with a truth about our world, our desires, our culture and ourselves.’ These are not the words of an art historian, but of Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster, in response to seeing the Sistine Chapel tapestries reunited for the first time with Raphael’s cartoons on which they were based¹. He sums up the significance that art can have on human existence and in everyday life. In so doing, he highlights one of the challenges faced by today’s museums and galleries in presenting great works of art, with all the associations carried in their imagery - religious, cultural, historical - to make them accessible and inspiring to a diverse audience. These challenges were tackled in the redevelopment of the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries at

the Victoria and Albert Museum, which opened in December 2009.

More than seven years in the making, these galleries explore the art, design and culture of Europe between AD 300 and 1600, through the Museum’s world-class collections. The £31.9 million project involved a vast range of people from both within and outside the Museum to bring it to fruition, drawing on their diverse skills and expertise.² At the heart of the project lay the collections themselves, the scope of which make them an unparalleled resource for the study of artistic production and culture in the period. Ranging from exquisite early jewellery to the High Altar chapel of the conventual Church of Santa Chiara in Florence, they include numerous outstanding individual pieces, such as the ivory book-cover from the Lorsch Gospels, about 810, and Donatello’s bronze ‘Chellini Madonna’ of about 1450. Equally central are the Museum’s audiences, whose needs and interests informed how the displays were put together and interpreted. The galleries were designed not only to encourage visitors to enjoy these exceptional works of art for their beauty and craftsmanship, but also to provide an insight into the context in which they were created, together with the people who made and owned them. This chapter outlines how the V&A team approached the development of these new galleries and considers how successful we have been at meeting our

1. *The Times*, 6 September 2010, p.18; see Clare Browne and Mark Evans (eds), *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel*, London: V&A Publishing, 2010.

2. The galleries were funded by various generous donors, including a major grant of £9.75 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

aims and objectives.

The idea to redisplay the Italian Renaissance galleries had long been on the Museum's agenda. While the Northern Renaissance galleries and the Medieval Treasury had been reinterpreted in the 1980s, the Italian rooms had changed very little since they were set up in the 1950s, and, despite some low-budget improvement along the way, they were in desperate need of a complete recasting. The notion of bringing together the medieval and Renaissance collections to tell a coherent story for the first time – highlighting the interconnections across the timespan – was first mooted in 2000. Thanks to the generosity of a like-minded sponsor, a Concept Team was set up in July 2002, consisting of four curators and an educator, initially under the leadership of Malcolm Baker.³ They were joined in due course by others, including several curatorial specialists seconded part-time to the project. The galleries were divided between focussed teams, each led by a member of the Concept Team, who together formulated the framework and content for the galleries.⁴

The goal was to present the Museum's holdings

3. The initial Concept Team consisted of Malcolm Baker, Luke Syson, Stuart Frost, Glyn Davies and me. I was appointed Project Chief Curator in October 2003 when Malcolm Baker retired from the Museum; Luke Syson had left to become Curator of Paintings at The National Gallery in January 2003, and we were joined by Kirstin Kennedy in April 2003.

4. The Concept Team members retained an overview of the project that assisted in their decision-making as group leaders. The planning and delivery of the galleries involved a variety of inter-related groups to deal with the different aspects of the project, including the Steering Group, an executive body where decisions would be reviewed. The various teams and groups were streamlined and adapted as required.

in an exciting, meaningful and accessible way. Several key aims were identified: to preserve the collections through conservation, as well as through environmental and photographic provision; to make physical and intellectual connections, and to inspire, engage and transform people through their experience of the collections, enabling them to learn at their own pace both within and beyond the galleries. The team was given a free hand to establish how to organise, present and interpret the material, with only one proviso – they had to build on the achievement of the recently-opened British Galleries, which had won critical acclaim for its award-winning thematic approach. The British Galleries heralded the Museum's FuturePlan, an on-going programme of restoration, refurbishment and redesign of its galleries and public spaces.⁵ FuturePlan has provided a wealth of experience on which to draw, fostering the exchange of ideas across the different projects.

Initial proposals developed through robust discussion, debate and consultation. Brainstorming sessions teased out the key over-arching ideas and the different ways in which they might be addressed.⁶ Alongside the exploration of historical

5. Outlined on the Museum's website at www.vam.ac.uk. For information on other gallery projects, see Christopher Wilk and Nick Humphrey (eds), *Creating the British Galleries at the V&A. A Study in Museology*, London: V&A Publications in association with Laboratorio museotecnico Goppion, 2004; Rosemary Crill and Tim Stanley (eds), *The Making of the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publications, 2006.

6. Early proposals included constructing the past; imagery, function and use; trade, travel and cultural exchange; devotion and belief; style; production and manufacture.

content and narrative, the collections themselves were interrogated, aided by the specialist curators. This brought to light some of the less well-known aspects of the Museum's holdings, such as the archaeological material from Egypt displayed in the subject on 'Adorning the Dead, 300-800' in the gallery on Faiths and Empires 300-1250.⁷ We were governed to some extent by the nature of the collections. The V&A's holdings were not gathered specifically to tell the story of art and culture in Europe, but as exemplars for designers and manufacturers. Although they are remarkably diverse, they do not, therefore, allow a comprehensive picture of the period, and we did not attempt to present one.

It was important to keep abreast of developments elsewhere in the UK, Europe and beyond, and visits to diverse exhibitions and museums also provided insights into effective means of introducing unfamiliar cultures and concepts.⁸ Occasional visits abroad included a fact-finding trip to North America, which culminated in a seminar at the Clark Institute at Williamstown, Massachusetts, with curators, academics and students participating.⁹ Significantly, discussions took

7. Examples include an amulet excavated from a cemetery in Egypt and given by the renowned archaeologist, Professor William Flinders Petrie (Museum no. 598-1890).

8. Local examples included The Return of the Buddha exhibition at The Royal Academy, 26 April-14 July, 2002, the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum (first opened June 2000) and the Africa Galleries at the British Museum (opened 3 March, 2001).

9. This tour took place in November 2002, with visits to a range of museums in New York, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston, where colleagues generously shared their thoughts and experiences, including their audience research. Presentations were also regularly given to various peer groups.

place with the Museum of London and the British Museum, both of which were planning their own medieval galleries, so as to ensure that the projects complemented each other rather than competed. Pilgrimage, for instance, is an important story for this period, but the British Museum is better placed to tell it than the V&A. The Museum's holdings were supplemented by comparatively few additions, notably a changing display of early manuscript material from the British Library and strategic loans from the British Museum, the National Gallery and others.

Consultation continued throughout the gallery development. This included a series of workshops to debate some of the over-arching issues that were considered to be of central importance both in terms of current trends in scholarship and for an understanding the period. Among these was the inter-connection between the sacred and secular, as well as issues of chronology and of the shifting geo-political map, and the question 'what do we mean by art?'¹⁰ An Advisory Committee was also set up, comprising eminent scholars and educators with whom we discussed our proposals in the early stages of development.¹¹

Together with the collections themselves, our audiences were central to the project. For the purposes of planning, the V&A divides its audience into Families, Schools, Creative Industries, Individual Adults, Adult Groups and Students. A gallery project of this scale is intended to

10. Medieval & Renaissance Gallery Project files are available for consultation through the V&A Archive. The workshops were held February to September 2003.

11. Members continued to provide helpful input throughout.

offer something to appeal to everyone, catering for a range of learning styles. Having an educator as part of the team from the outset – a standard practice for all V&A gallery projects – ensures a focus on the provision of learning opportunities. Visitors were consulted directly through a series of quantitative and qualitative evaluations, including a series of focus groups. They were asked what they thought of the current displays and invited to comment on proposals for the themes and topics. Some fundamental questions were posed, such as 'what do you understand by the terms 'medieval' and 'Renaissance'? Perhaps not surprisingly, many were uncertain about the timeframe of the medieval period, but they were clear that it was dark, desolate, full of plague, mud, war and feudal lords who abused their tenants. It was generally not a period that produced art. They were far more confident about the Renaissance period: at around 1400, the sun came out, and people walked by the Arno drinking wine with Michelangelo. It was a time of great artistic innovation and enlightenment. So, it was evident that we were faced with various challenges in deciding upon our approach, not least to dispel the popular representation of the medieval period as one of little artistic merit.

Due to the complexities of covering 1300 years of European history, we decided to modify the British Galleries' approach to suit the needs of these particular collections. Each gallery is designed like a room in an exhibition, with its own narrative and date range, such as Faiths & Empires 300-1250, the Rise of Gothic 1200-1350, Renaissance Art and Ideas 1400-1550 and A World of Goods 1450-1600. The overlapping chronology highlights connections across the time span, and allows more room for the greater number of objects surviving from the later periods. Taking into account

the nature of the collections and criticism of previous displays, some of our most important or fascinating objects are presented individually to give them prominence.¹² The Medieval & Renaissance Galleries, however, retained the basic organisational approach used in the earlier project of creating a series of subject displays, each based on one of four themes. Although research had shown that few visitors to those galleries noticed the themes, they provided a helpful organising principle for the curators.¹³ The four themes – Styles, Uses & Contexts, Continuity & Change, and Makers & Markets – were chosen to address some of the questions asked by visitors as well as to highlight relevant issues. There are nonetheless pros and cons to the thematic approach. On the one hand, grouping objects in this way provides a context that assists in opening up complex ideas to those who are new to the subject. On the other, it demands a fairly fixed design and a certain amount of flexibility is therefore sacrificed.

When it came to putting the ideas into physical form, first and foremost, the objects had to look stunning. The conservation of many of the pieces transformed their appearance as well as our understanding of them, and often informed the approach to their display. Pragmatic decisions

12. The board that bestowed the European Museum of the Year award for the thematic approach felt that the British Galleries 'maintained a balance between masterpieces and curiosities', while James Fenton disliked what he described as the 'throwaway' nature of the thematic approach of setting art within a broader social and material culture in relation to major works of art, such as Bernini's Bust of Thomas Baker (The Guardian, 1 February 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/feb/01/heritage.museums>).

13. For British Galleries audience research, see http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/research/visitor/galleries/index.html

also had to be made if the galleries were to be delivered on time, so while many objects were thoroughly investigated, both in terms of conservation and curatorial research, others remain projects for the future. In addition, as is often the case, new questions arose in the course of solving others. It was also necessary to balance the needs of the objects with that of the carbon footprint by pursuing an environmentally-friendly approach to the conditioning of the galleries.

The design team was led by the innovative architects, MUMA, who shared the curatorial vision of placing objects centre stage and who arrived with a number of ideas for transforming the spaces through sensitive intervention. Their proposals opened up the building, making it fully accessible for the first time, and turning a rather unprepossessing back-of-house zone into an exciting new daylit space where we could take a different approach to the displays.¹⁴ They reclaimed areas of the Aston Webb building (opened in 1908) that had originally been designed as gallery but never used as such. By imaginatively developing the curatorial brief, MUMA also married the physical with the intellectual. For example, the glass roof of the gallery entitled 'Inside the Church' was modified so as to evoke an ecclesiastical space while providing a suitable environment for showing light-sensitive altarpieces. Similarly, a dynamic link was made by piercing a hole in the wall between two galleries, connected by a fifteenth-century balcony, allowing visitors to walk from the Renaissance interior displays to look down onto the 'Renaissance courtyard and garden' below.

14. Here originals and replicas are brought together in imitation of the 19th-century displays of the then South Kensington Museum, but in a 21st-century design environment.

The need for variety in pace and mood, important for sustaining any visitor's interest, is reflected in both the architectural design – such as smaller, darker galleries contrasting with larger, lighter spaces – and in the individual displays. At times objects of one type or material are massed together, at others diverse objects are brought together to tell a particular artistic or cultural story such as 'Metalworkers and Enamellers 800-1250' or 'Marriage & Motherhood 1430-1550'. The displays are all founded on historical and art historical research, and while the narrative is undoubtedly one of the elite, given what has survived, there was a conscious attempt to present the more everyday wherever possible. For example, a Venetian platform slipper, or *piannelle*, which might have been worn by either a courtesan or a courtly woman, is juxtaposed with child's leather shoe found in a London plague pit. Similarly, the design was influenced by the historic context. For example, MUMA chose to diffuse the daylight into the gallery entitled Devotion and Display 1300-1500 through onyx screens inspired by medieval alabaster-clad windows, providing both a beautiful and practical solution for display.¹⁵

Placement and relationships can go a long way towards evoking context or direct engagement with the objects, whether an artefact is placed high as originally designed to be seen or instead positioned to offer a rare opportunity to examine it at close-quarters. In order to establish those decisions, mock ups with templates and the objects themselves proved invaluable. In addition, previous

15. MUMA also proposed a stunning display on Religious Processions as a centrepiece for that gallery, illustrating another fruitful aspect of the exchange between curators and designers.

displays and exhibitions were useful testing grounds.¹⁶ Team members curated two related exhibitions during the course of the project, one of which, 'Depth of Field: the place of relief at the time of Donatello', was proposed by the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds with that purpose in mind.¹⁷ In the gallery devoted to Donatello and the Making of Art 1400-1500, where the role of the artist and the meaning of images form the focus, the Leeds 'Virgin and Child wall' morphed into the 'Virgin and Child niche' in London, and white walls create the feel of a modern art gallery.¹⁸ However, there is a significant difference between a temporary exhibition and a permanent gallery display. Galleries are not only planned for the long view – these have an intended life-span of 25 years – but the story they tell is based around the permanent collections, rather than bringing together the ideal companions to make a particular point.¹⁹

16. For example, *Earth and Fire: Italian Terracotta Sculpture from Donatello to Canova*; The Museum of Fine Arts, House, 2001-2002, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2002, co-curated in London by Bruce Boucher and Peta Motture, and 'At Home in Renaissance Italy', co-curated by Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, where Luca della Robbia's roundels from the ceiling of Piero de' Medici's study were first installed on a vault. This idea was put forward in about 1990 by Anthony Radcliffe, former Keeper of Sculpture at the V&A but was independently proposed by the exhibition curators. Significant research was undertaken by the curatorial team of the *At Home in Renaissance Italy* exhibition, and by the Material Renaissance group (see Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis (eds), *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: V&A Publications, 2006) and Michelle O'Malley and Evelyn Welch (eds), *The Material Renaissance*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. Members of both those teams contributed to the galleries.

17. See Penelope Curtis (ed), *Depth of Field: the place of relief in the time of Donatello*, Leeds: The Henry Moore Institute, 2004.

18. This is the only area in which white has been used, and it deliberately breaks with the sequence of dark walls for the smaller spaces.

19. The Leeds exhibition was an exception, comprising primarily V&A objects with six loans from the British Museum.

Nevertheless, but equally significantly, galleries (like an exhibition) are not the same as a book. Here, scholarship has to be worn lightly – presented in a way that is accessible to those who are new to the subject primarily through visual means and in three dimensions. A fifty-word label text can make only one or two points, so it is important to provide opportunities for further exploration and discovery, including high- and low-tech interpretation, such as films, interactives and gallery books. New approaches supplemented previous templates, including a collaboration with the Royal College of Music to transcribe and record music specific to some of the objects, funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Knowledge Transfer Grant.²⁰ Specific objects, replicas and materials can be handled and there are two discovery areas and a study zone.

However, gallery texts remain the primary source of information, and it was therefore crucial to ensure that these were as widely accessible as possible. Two currents emerged as running throughout the galleries – the constant reference to the past, especially the classical past, and the developing attitudes of the Church and devotional practice. These issues can seem remote today and the latter raised the issue of how people would respond in what is seen by many as an increasingly secular society. Among those consulted were different faith groups, including those that had no specific faith, to discover their attitudes both to the imagery and to the manner in which Christian doctrine and beliefs were expressed in the interpretative texts. Roman Catholics, for example, did not like the use of the past tense when referring to beliefs that are still held, and they pointed out, for

20. As with all the gallery content, this is available online. For the RCM project website, see www.ListeningGallery.rcm.ac.uk

instance, that Mass is celebrated not performed. Those from non-Christian backgrounds did not automatically understand the imagery or the practices in which the objects played a part. Their comments were all taken on board and, where appropriate, texts were adjusted. Some rituals, like the Mass, are explained in separate gallery books. Religious texts were checked by a Roman Catholic priest to ensure they were both historically correct and appropriate for today's audiences.

How successful, then, have these galleries been in meeting the aims to address the various issues and challenge many popular misconceptions about the period? Does this fresh view inspire, engage, connect and even transform our visitors? Do the displays meet that balance between content, interpretation and design – so important in any museum but crucial for the national museum of art and design? One way to measure this is through press and visitor response, together with nomination for awards.

At the time of writing, the galleries have won several awards and been short-listed for additional awards from different disciplines, notably design innovation and sustainability.²¹ The response of the press, peer groups and

21. Awards won to date include: RIBA 2010 Arts & Leisure Award and Design for London Client of the Year Award; D&AD Award 2010, Yellow Pencil; British Construction Industry Awards 2010, High Commendation for the Building Project Award £3m-£50m and winner Conservation Award; Museum and Heritage Awards for Excellence, Restoration and Conservation for the Master Bertram Altarpiece. Since writing key awards have included the Visit London Award 2010, Gold Award for Best New Tourism experience, Design Week Award 2011, joint winner for Exhibition Design, Civic Trust Award 2011 and Special Award for Sustainability. The awards for which the galleries have been shortlisted include the European Museum of the Year Award 2010.

audiences has been overwhelmingly positive.²² For example, Richard Dormont in *The Telegraph* gave a five star rating and found it 'a joy to report a complete success with the museum's new medieval and Renaissance galleries... where every effort is made to give a feel for a church interior or Renaissance study without turning the galleries into a succession of stage sets'.²³ Waldemar Januszczak in *The Sunday Times* was excited by what he called the 'brave' approach of challenging preconceptions about 'medieval' and 'Renaissance'.²⁴ He proclaimed that the galleries 'are not only beautiful, they completely rewrite the history books', in addition to being 'Stunning. Spectacular. And even awesome'.

The initial response of visitors has been equally encouraging. By March 2010, the galleries had an estimated 359,900 visits, representing 44% of total visits to the Museum during this period (826,900). Summative research supports a strong measure of successfully achieving the aims, with high percentages of visitors agreeing that the galleries 'provided a framework to view and learn more about the medieval and Renaissance period', that they 'illustrated what the art and objects of the period meant to the people of the

22. Brian Sewell was an exception. For his contrasting reviews, see the *Evening Standard*, 17 December 2009 (www.thisislondon.co.uk/arts/article-23785400-the-great-gallery-gallop.do) and 14 January 2010 (www.thisislondon.co.uk/arts/review-23795201-antique-roadshow-at-v-and-as-medieval-and-renaissance-galleries.do). The latter review unfortunately contained a number of inaccuracies.

23. Richard Dormont, *The Telegraph*, 30 November 2009: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/6693546/The-VandAs-Medieval-and-Renaissance-Galleries-review.html>

24. Waldemar Januszczak, *The Sunday Times*, 6 December 2009: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article6941409.ece

time', and to a lesser extent 'illustrated the interconnectivity between the medieval and Renaissance periods'.²⁵ In addition and significantly, numerous visitors have chosen to offer independent feedback to express their enjoyment of the beauty and content of the exhibition. In acknowledging the complexities of the narrative, some suggested that audio guides and curator tours would enhance their visit. These will shortly be provided via the internet to download to portable devices in the gallery. However, even visitors who were delighted with the displays were unhappy with aspects of the labelling which, despite the care that went into their design, required rethinking to improve on their placement and legibility.²⁶

While sharing not only the basic organisational approach, but also many of the aspirations of other gallery teams – such as 'less is more', listening to the visitor – these galleries have their own feel. The team was able to look with a critical eye and to discover not only the triumphs of other displays at the V&A and elsewhere, but also their shortcomings. It is essential that future curators do the same, just as we can now look back on the Medieval &

25. Fusion Research + Analytics LLC, Case Study Evaluation of FuturePlan, Interim Medieval & Renaissance Gallery Executive Summary, May 2010, p.8. When given a choice of adjectives to describe the galleries, those most commonly chosen were 'beautiful', 'historic', 'informative' and 'stimulating'.

26. New labelling is now in place.

27. An extensive publication programme accompanied the galleries, including Glyn Davies and Kirstin Kennedy, *Medieval and Renaissance Art. People and Possessions*, London: V&A Publishing, 2009, several other books, special issues of *Renaissance Studies* and the *Conservation Journal*, and various articles. Details of the events programme and V&A publications are available on the V&A website.

Renaissance Galleries and acknowledge where we would, in an ideal world, have done things differently. Each gallery demands its own approach and while a certain consistency is helpful to the visitor, variety, individuality and a sense of discovery are essential. The Museum has already embarked on planning for the new galleries devoted to Europe 1600-1800, the next in line of the Art and Design (or, in one sense, 'cultural') galleries. It will continue to be essential to follow the general principles of uniting intellectual rationale with design and interpretation, and today those go beyond the gallery itself, via the website, the events programme and a variety of publications.²⁷ In this way visitors can continue to play an active role in the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries, contributing to films for the web, the blog (which has tracked the progress of the project) and via social networking sites. The challenge for future historic galleries is to develop new ways of inspiring us to engage with the past and its art and to highlight its relevance for our lives in the 21st century.

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