

Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design

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‘Interactive Learning in the British Galleries, 1500–1900’

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The new British Galleries at the V&A were opened in November 2001 following a five-year, £31 million project. They cover over 3,000 square metres on two floors, display 3,000 objects and include three discovery areas, two study rooms and two film rooms. Unlike traditional galleries of art and design, the galleries include large numbers of interpretative devices integrated within the displays. The purpose of these interventions is to help visitors look at the objects on display and to understand or enjoy them in a manner that fits the visitors’ needs.

What was the process by which we arrived at these interpretative devices? A concept team for the galleries was set up, consisting of Christopher Wilk, Chief Curator of Furniture and Woodwork, Sarah Medlam, Deputy Curator of Furniture and Woodwork, Gail Durbin, Head of Gallery Education, and John Styles, who runs the V&A/Royal College of Art Design history course. This group formed the ‘editorial board’.

The concept team started to develop the content of the galleries. John Styles wrote the intellectual framework that led to the four themes of the galleries:

- Style
- Who Led Taste?
- What Was New?
- Fashionable Living

Each theme was to have a number of subjects that would either stand alone or meld together with the others to provide a variety of routes through the collections. An early decision was made to display the objects chronologically.

The concept team travelled widely to look at examples of good practice. The importance of this phase cannot be overestimated. It enabled us to get to know each other’s prejudices and aspirations and to share the experience of looking at huge displays with sore feet. It provided a common experience that was often referred to throughout the project. Museums were visited in North America and Europe and, once Casson Mann were appointed as designers, there was further travel with Dinah Casson to share ideas with her.

Eight audiences for the galleries were identified, each group united by their learning needs:

- Independent learners
- Families
- School groups
- Students from further and higher education

- Local audience
- Ethnic minority groups
- Foreign visitors
- Specialists, amateur and professional

This is a large number of audiences to cater for but, since these galleries covered 10% of the V&A's display space, it was felt important to be inclusive in a way that might not have been so necessary in a single gallery.

A literature search was conducted to discover the characteristics and learning needs of each of the nominated audiences (see Anderson 1996, Eckstein and Feist 1991, 1992, Falk and Dierking 1992, and Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Some groups, especially those such as schools and colleges who are driven by the curriculum, have very precise needs in terms of what subjects might be covered by the galleries. For others, such as independent learners, it is impossible to predict what subjects will tie in with their specific interests, but it is possible to say how they learn best and to try to provide facilities that will aid this process. Independent learners will choose their own times to study and learn from networks of other learners, so the ability to e-mail material home and to make contact with and communicate with other learners is important to them. Appendix I shows a working document on the selected audiences and their impact on gallery design.

Different types of learning style were also considered. We worked with four learning styles: analytical learning style, common sense or problem-solving learning style, experiential or dynamic learning style and imaginative learning style. Within each of these groups people learn in different ways. Some people prefer to learn from museums through a practical hands-on approach while others are more interested in starting from a theory and applying it. In her book *Exhibit Labels*, building on work by others over the last 30 years, Beverley Serrell gives the following descriptions (Serrell, 1996, p.51):

- Analytical learners learn by thinking and watching, prefer interpretation that provides facts and sequential ideas, want sound logical theories to consider and look for intellectual comprehension. This is a group for whom, traditional art and design museums with lots of objects and information on labels cater well.
- Common-sense learners learn by thinking and doing, prefer to try out theories and test them for themselves and look for solutions to problems.
- Experiential learners learn by feeling and doing, enjoy imaginative trial and error, prefer hands-on experience and look for hidden meaning.
- Imaginative learners learn by feeling and watching and by listening and sharing ideas, prefer interpretation that encourages social interaction, like to be given opportunities to observe and to gather a wide range of information and to look for personal meaning.

An interpretative brief was written for the galleries, listing the series of devices that might be included. An important principle was that the interpretation should be next

to the object it was interpreting, as visitors need help when questions occur to them. Projects such as these are, however, full of compromises. It was decided to place some of the ‘messier’ activities, such as dressing up, in separate discovery areas. Where possible, however, interpretation was included in the main run of the galleries. Appendix II is an adaptation of the interpretative brief to show the series and individual interactives that were eventually placed in the galleries.

To implement the plans three period teams were set up, covering the Tudors and Stuarts, the Georgians and the Victorians. Each team included a team co-ordinator, an assistant curator, a researcher and an educator, as well as one or two senior subject specialists who could bring their expertise to the project and guide more junior staff. The teams worked on the proposed content, investigating whether the museum held enough objects to cover some subjects or whether other subjects might be better displayed. Every subject had a purpose statement saying why the objects had been chosen and what points the objects were there to make. The teams also came up with interpretative ideas to make those points clearer. The educators met regularly and conducted audits to ensure that throughout the galleries anyone from one of our target groups or favouring a particular learning style would find plenty to interest and engage them.

What research was done to guide the development of interpretation? In the course of establishing the British Galleries a considerable amount of audience research and prototyping was carried out and over the coming year more work evaluating the finished gallery is planned.

An initial quantitative survey provided baseline information about who was using the galleries, how they used them and what their attitudes to the previous galleries were. We discovered 50% of visitors had left the lower galleries within 11 minutes, a shocking figure for anyone who imagined visitors would work their way through sequential text. Visitors reported that they liked the tranquillity of the galleries and appeared resistant to high-tech solutions. Subsequent research in the Discovery Area in the Silver Galleries showed people were more positive about high-tech solutions when they were able to see them *in situ*.

Once plans for the layout and interpretation of the galleries were advanced, more detailed audience research became possible. Focus groups were set up to test proposals with people from each of the target audiences plus two groups of non-users. Key points from this research were that people wanted to know more about the lives of the rich and the poor, they were interested in human stories and they found costume and architecture helped locate them in time. The subject of style was difficult because of its specialist vocabulary, but people wanted to learn about it. Non-specialists felt they needed the social and historical background first but, once they had grasped that, then they wanted to come away with a better understanding of style because, among other things, a knowledge of this was felt to confer status.

The next phase of research was extensive testing and prototyping of the text and interpretative devices. Now the galleries have opened we have conducted a further phase of quantitative research asking some of the same questions as in the initial survey, to see how attitudes have changed. This will be followed by some smaller studies to answer specific questions, such as how are individual interactive devices

used and whether people who indicate they have certain learning styles prefer particular sorts of device.

How do people respond to new media in the V&A galleries? A surprisingly high number of people have chosen to use it: 26% of visitors report using a computer, and 44% said they had used a video. Of the people who had used the high-tech interactives 94% report their understanding of the objects on display had increased. Observation shows that the use of new media can increase the amount of time people spend looking at objects. When a prototype was tested we found the introduction of the video into the gallery doubled the amount of time the visitors spent looking at the related object. In general, interactivity contributes towards increasing the amount of time people stay in a gallery. Now instead of 50% of visitors leaving after 11 minutes 83% of visitors spend more than an hour in the galleries.

Empirical observation shows there is an increase in conversation in the galleries to which interpretative interventions contribute, and visitors are sharing information and experiences with each other to a surprising degree. Interactives that ask for personal responses are giving museum professionals a better idea of what is going on in the minds of visitors. This is not always what exhibition designers might expect.

The use of new media in the British Galleries has proved one point beyond doubt. It is unnecessary to conduct a research project on this because it can be observed any day of the week. Interactivity is not just for children. Those involved with education know this, but for others a brief walk through the galleries will show adults trying on costume, using building bricks, testing their knowledge of style on a computer or having a go at tapestry weaving. Our task is now to find out what they are learning.

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Appendix I

‘Target Audiences For The British Galleries’

Audience	Characteristics	Implications for gallery content and design
<p>Independent Learners</p> <p>Covers a wide range of people, including the casual visitor</p>	<p>Self-directed learning is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • managed as far as is possible by the learner • draws on the learner’s own experiences, cultural background and interests • is problem-centred • is motivated by internal incentives and curiosity. 	<p>We need to review normal museum practice, which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is expert-directed and creates dependence on the expert • takes no account of differences in prior knowledge and experience of the visitors • designs displays that take no account of interest that is for a practical purpose related to the rest of their lives.
	<p>Learners see their fields of interest as unending intellectual voyages, not restricted by museum subject boundaries.</p>	<p>We cannot say ‘We are not a social history museum’ or ‘We are not a fine art museum’, because to the learner we are whatever he/she chooses to make us.</p>
	<p>Learners may look for breadth as well as depth in the additional information provided.</p>	<p>We need a choice of routes through the information, including leading learners to ideas and information elsewhere inside and outside the institution.</p>
		<p>We may need study areas.</p> <p>We need staff in the galleries with an understanding of learning needs and of how to access further information.</p>
	<p>Learners see themselves as part of a larger learning community, where independent learning does not mean isolation. Word of mouth and networks form an important source for these people.</p>	<p>We could develop the concept of a notice board (virtual or actual) for the sharing of information and ideas stimulated by the displays.</p>
<p>Families</p>	<p>Families arrive in groups of 2–6 people. Children are generally in the 0–13 age range, with older ones preferring to go off on their own. Accompanying adults may be grandparents rather than parents. At the Science Museum typically a family group is 1:1.</p>	<p>We need to include objects and interpretative methods that appeal to children.</p>
		<p>We need to design galleries to allow access for pushchairs.</p>

	<p>We need to present some displays at a very low level. We could include items that can be discovered by opening doors or peering through small spaces. Low-level technology and low-cost interactives do not necessarily mean low-level learning.</p>
<p>Families value the opportunity for social interaction and for active participation and appreciate being in comfortable surroundings. They want to spend leisure time together on a worthwhile pursuit. Adults articulate a need for children to be occupied all the time.</p>	<p>We need displays that encourage conversation between adult and child.</p>
<p>The parking, café and shop will be as important as displays in contributing to a good family experience.</p>	<p>We need to ensure that promotional literature on the galleries stresses all the ancillary facilities.</p>
<p>Children from early years learn principally through direct experience, physical action and play.</p>	<p>We need displays that encourage activity and participation.</p>
<p>The needs of the child to explore a new place takes precedence over any chance to indulge a sustained interest of the part of the adults. The child generally drives the visit, going from one object that attracts him/her to another in a random manner. The adult uses the displays and labels to ask and answer questions.</p>	<p>We should use simple text that allows adults to scan text quickly for information and ideas to be assimilated rapidly for use in conversation. We need to include labels that ask questions.</p>
<p>Adults like being provided with ideas and suggestions for activities or discussion with their children. If adults do not know the answers, they are liable to make them up.</p>	<p>We should avoid labels that contain isolated facts about individual objects and seek instead to encourage visitors to respond to displays, to find relationships between objects and to create their own meanings, related to their own lives and experiences.</p>
<p>Complex, overarching conceptual structures are likely to be missed.</p>	

	Different activities sometimes require different behaviours.	We should consider which activities should be integrated with the displays and which should be separated.
Foreign visitors There is a lack of research in this area.	Look for a pleasurable and entertaining activity and share some of characteristics of independent learners.	
	Want to see examples of British culture	
	May want to go round quickly and want some guidance on key items.	We should find a way of offering a rapid tour of the highlights.
	May have sore feet and be tired from seeing too many sights.	We should provide seating.
	May have a limited grasp of English.	Every message should as far as possible be presented through the objects.
		We should ensure that text is simple with one idea in each sentence and no complex clauses or obscure vocabulary.
	May have little knowledge of British history and will be unable to name monarchs or periods in history.	We should avoid terms such as Hanoverian or Victorian.
May have an entirely different educational and cultural background, which could lead them to draw unintended conclusions from the display. May be offended by some ideas/items.	We need to consult and look for cultural differences that may lead to misunderstandings and adapt plans as necessary.	
Local community	Want to make repeat visits.	We need to include elements that encourage repeat visits; these could be temporary exhibits or changing elements built into permanent displays.
	May make short visits.	We should provide ways of focusing on single objects or groups of objects.
	May make visits with family or guests. If guests, then much of their energy on visit may be devoted to maintaining social relations and little to the displays.	We should think about designing the space to encourage the social elements of visits.
Specialists and collectors, amateur and professional	Want to see items close up, and from every angle.	We should consider display techniques or the use of video.
	Want to handle objects.	Any handling of material in the gallery is likely to be inadequate for these purposes. We should offer this service away from the gallery.

		We could relate service to open storage.
	Want to see masterpieces.	
	Wants to see many variants of the same object.	We should consider typological displays of some objects. We could refer visitors to the Materials and Techniques Galleries.
	Do not need general background information, but need specific information about individual objects.	We could provide access to the computer database of collections.
Minority communities	Visitors from Hong Kong, the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean will be the most significant groups.	We should consider grouping objects from, or designs influenced by, China and India rather than scattering them throughout the galleries, in order to make more impact and to facilitate guided tours.
	May not speak English as their first language.	We need to ensure that text is simple, with one idea in each sentence and no complex clauses or obscure vocabulary.
		Meanings should as far as possible be presented through the objects themselves.
	May not share the cultural assumptions of the majority population.	There is a risk that that the gallery is seen as too Eurocentric. Consultation is needed in this area.
Further/higher education	Arrive in groups but may not stay together.	We need to provide space for groups, guided tours, sitting and talking.
		We need space for drawing.
	Curriculum-led (art colleges, theatre studies course, vocational courses, design history, social history, English literature). The boundary between FE and HE is no longer so rigid, and numbers from FE are significantly larger than from HE.	<i>We need to research courses.</i>
	But the range of ability levels is now very great in a period of mass higher education, so that those following highly academic courses a smaller proportion than previously. Some 16-year-olds in FE may not be very literate.	We need to provide information at a variety of levels and easy access to other resources such as databases, catalogues etc. Some of this will need to be in great depth and some will need to be wide-ranging.

	Stress on coursework rather than exams leads to requests for access to objects other than those exhibited in cases.	This may be better dealt with in study rooms and stores.
	Tutors (other than those in design history) often lack an understanding of the role of objects in teaching.	We need to make explicit what can be understood from objects.
Schools 5 million school visits to museums a year nationally	Arrive in groups of 30 or more.	We need to ensure there are appropriate spaces in the relevant galleries for work and for social gathering.
	School groups are the most democratic groups in museums because they represent all sectors of the community	
	Schools choose carefully where to go, matching museum provision with their own needs.	
	Driven by the National Curriculum in England and Wales and the National Curriculum for Northern Ireland (up to 16), and the 5–14 National Guidelines in Scotland. Public examinations drive work from 16–18.	
	Increasing stress on coursework rather than simply exams reinforces the need for resources such as museums and objects.	We need to offer help in studying objects.
	The curriculum requires both the acquisition of knowledge and an understanding of the nature of the subject discipline.	We need to place emphasis on objects as sources of historical understanding.
	National Curriculum topics of particular interest to schools in the British Galleries are: <u>History</u> The Tudors; The Victorians (History Key Stage 2 [7–11 years]) The Galleries were not used much for the Civil War (Key Stage 3 [11–14 years]) as there are other more relevant museums elsewhere. . .	It is important that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Tudor and Victorian galleries include objects and ideas that relate to the curriculum and that are accessible to people from age 8 years upwards • we include points about using objects as evidence; what can and cannot be learned from them; about bias in collections, or in the interpretation of objects or collections by museums. <p>Because of group sizes, it is better if some of the key objects and displays are spread out in a gallery.</p>

<p><u>Art</u> Many pupils aged 7–16 are brought to the V&A to look at the art and design of other cultures as well as the influence of art from our own past.</p>	<p>It is important that relationships between Britain and the rest of the world are made explicit and that objects from other countries are displayed in the gallery for comparative purposes. We should avoid simply pointing people in the direction of other galleries and hoping they will: a) get there; and b) retain key images in their minds.</p>
<p><u>Technology</u> Pupils aged 7–16 use the museum to look at a wide range of ways in which design problems have been solved</p>	<p>We need to relate design problems to design methodology.</p>

Appendix II

‘Interpretative Devices’

The document that follows has been adapted from the project’s interpretative brief. It combines some general principles, information about each interpretative device series and a list of individual devices. It has been adapted to show the items that are now in the galleries rather than any intermediate plan.

Interpretation is the means by which we will mediate the objects and help visitors to understand and enjoy the displays. We aim to be inclusive rather than exclusive. During the planning of this project we will constantly check the balance of our interpretative ideas to make sure that we are dealing with the needs of all our audiences and the variety of their learning styles. We accept that not every display will appeal to every visitor, but we intend that whatever a visitor’s learning style and reason for visiting, he/she will find something in most galleries that relates to his/her needs and interests.

Some methods of interpretation will be used more than once throughout the galleries. We would generally expect the interpretative device to be placed near the objects concerned as an integrated part of the display, but some of the more messy activities have been grouped together and put in Discovery Areas designed specifically for families and experiential learners.

Videos

‘Object in Focus’ videos

These short videos show visitors what can be learned from a single object by close observation. They are used for objects with significant features that can only be seen through close observation or by opening, turning or working the object. Where appropriate, they show evidence of faking or of original colours visible only in obscure spots. They are shown on small screens next to the object being featured, thus creating a sense of intimacy or even the feel of an animated label. There will be no soundtrack (with the single exception of the clock ticking). The videos will last no more than three minutes.

The subjects are:

- A royal writing box
- The Great Bed of Ware
- The Wilkes detector lock
- Martha Edlin’s casket
- A Rococo writing table
- A Chippendale chair
- A mechanical clock
- William Burges’ washstand

‘How Was it Made?’ videos

This series is similar to the above but focuses on the way things were made.

The subjects are:

- An early printed book
- Miniature painting
- Water gilding
- An enamel box
- Jacquard weaving
- Block-printed wallpaper

Short gallery AVs

This miscellaneous series of AVs last up to 5 minutes and are shown in the galleries rather than in a Film Room.

The subjects are:

- Rebuilding the Melville bed
- An evening at Vauxhall Gardens
- Taking tea
- The Adam interior
- The construction of the Crystal Palace
- Scenes from the life of Queen Victoria

Major AVs

The purpose of these AVs is to cover very large topics that pull the subject matter of the galleries together in an entertaining and accessible manner. They cover a broad chronological sweep and cut across the collections in a different way from the themes of the galleries. These AVs use a wide range of techniques to convey their message and each will have a soundtrack. They will be shown in a Film Room, where people can sit down comfortably to watch.

The subjects are:

- A day at the Great Exhibition
- Country houses
- Art, design and empire

Computer-interactives

British Galleries Online

This object database is located in the Study Areas and covers all the objects displayed in the galleries. Rather than present the full database to inexperienced users, an easier front-end was developed. This provides a step-by-step guide to gathering information, allows the visitor to approach individual objects through person, place, time or object type. They can also select stories that introduce a collection of objects. There is a free text search. The database will be driven largely by images.

‘Registration Marks’

This interactive shows visitors that it is possible to date a design through a registration mark and will introduce them to the additional information that is obtainable from the

Public Record Office. The display 'Understanding Objects' shows how manufacturers in the nineteenth century began to protect themselves from plagiarism through the registration of designs. Some objects with registration marks are placed on open display next to the terminal.

'Style' terminals

The style terminals act as a reference point providing visitors understand with a simple description of a style supported by visual examples. They are shown what motifs and other details to look for in order to identify a style, and examples of the style used in a room settings. Links to other styles are given. Visitors who want to test their ability to identify styles can opt for a quiz, timed or otherwise.

Nine terminals are placed round the galleries in Style subjects, and on each terminal the styles near the terminal is be offered as the first choice to explore. The programme is also to be available in the Study Areas, where any style can be selected.

The styles are:

- Renaissance
- Jacobean
- Restoration
- Baroque
- Palladianism
- Rococo
- Chinoiserie
- Neo-Classicism
- Regency Classicism
- Chinese and Indian Styles
- Medieval Revival
- Gothic Revival
- French Style
- Classical and Renaissance
- Aestheticism
- Influence of Indian
- Influence of China
- Influence of Islam
- Influence of Japan
- Arts and Crafts
- The Scottish School

'Explore' terminals

Using touch-screen technology, visitors are able to explore not only the pictorial content of paintings but also the cultural context in which they were produced. Visitors can select features in the paintings that interest them, and are given close-up views and further information or pictures of other related objects in the collection.

The subjects are:

- The More family portrait
- The opening of the Great Exhibition

‘Design’ terminals

These computer programmes allow visitors to make their own designs and e-mail their work back home. Those programmes that are in Discovery Areas are be linked so that a monogram could, for example, be added to a bookplate.

The subjects are:

- Design a textile
- Design a coat of arms
- Design a monogram
- Design a bookplate

‘Visitor Response’ terminals

These create a dialogue between the museum and its visitors as well as between visitor and visitor. There are three elements to these activities: a visitors’ book, a debate and a history project. For the debate a guest critic is invited to start a new thread. An art historian may be asked to review a theme shown in the galleries, or a design history lecturer may critique the galleries. The debates are moderated and as time passes the number of threads that visitors can tap in will increase. The history project is currently based on visitors’ experience of buying furniture and is building an archive of information that will in future become a research source.

Audio

‘Talking about Design or Art’

These audio programmes, delivered by a device next to the object(s) rather than through a device carried by the visitor, give visitors the subjective views of named individuals about the design of a specific object or group of objects. There are two types:

- Historical writing by designers, critics, makers and owners about specific objects or groups of objects on display. These refer to observable features of the object(s).
- Comments by present-day designers, artists or craftspeople about the way the objects have influenced their own work, or comments by critics or curators with a stimulating viewpoint. The comments are spoken by the individuals concerned.

Both types of programme last up to 90 seconds.

The subjects are:

- Theatre designer Jenny Tiramani on early seventeenth-century costume
- Writer and gardener Anna Pavord on the Stoke Edith embroidery
- Designer David Mlinaric on the Henrietta Street room
- Poet and musician Benjamin Zephaniah on the portrait of Francis Williams
- The rivalry between Robert Adam and William Chambers
- The Three Graces
- The sculpture of Bashaw
- Horace Walpole on Lee Priory
- Church design and decoration
- Designer Tom Dixon on Christopher Dresser
- The St George’s cabinet

‘Telling tales’

At certain points in the displays storytelling is used to explain the objects. Normally this method illuminates objects decorated with scenes from classical and biblical stories that are no longer familiar; but it is also used when there is a good story behind an object or an important figure. These audio programmes are delivered by a device next to the object(s) rather than through a device carried by the visitor.

The stories are:

- Vulcan and Venus
- Aeneas’ escape from Troy
- The Boscobel oak
- Achilles and Patroclus
- Cupid and Psyche
- The willow pattern
- The Eglinton tournament
- The judgement of Paris
- Alma-Tadema and the Epps family
- St George and the dragon

Music

Visitors who wish, can use a fixed handset to listen to appropriate music or sounds, to create a period atmosphere. A list of the pieces included in the compilation is available and where songs are included the words are made available.

The subjects are:

- Music contemporary with the Bromley-by-Bow Room
- Music played on Queen Elizabeth’s virginals
- Music from the late Stuart period
- Music from Vauxhall Gardens
- Music in the home
- Victorian church music
- Music of the Great Exhibition
- Music by Gilbert and Sullivan

Objects to touch and provision for visually impaired people

Handling collections

Small handling collections are included in the displays for people to use independently. These collections are used especially in the ‘What was New?’ sections to introduce newly produced materials. In many cases fragments, such as pottery shards, will be used. They are particularly useful for visitors with visual impairments and in all cases they have a Braille label.

The subjects are:

- Dressing the Great Bed of Ware
- Woods and veneers 1603–1714
- Ceramics 1600–1714
- Pottery and porcelain fragments 1700–1800

- Encaustic tiles
- Victorian materials and techniques
- Objects with registration marks
- Victorian textiles

‘Touch’ objects

A single object has been chosen to illustrate many of the ‘Style’ subjects for people with visual impairments. ‘Style’ has been chosen as the focus of this series because of all of our themes it is the one that is the most visual and difficult for people with poor or no sight. The ‘Touch’ objects may be larger than the objects in the handling collections and they will always be fixed down. They all have a Braille label.

The subjects are:

- Renaissance wooden panel
- Jacobean carved panel
- Spiral-turned woodwork
- Baroque baluster
- Carved wood Palladian capital
- Rococo carving
- Mould of Neo-Classical motif
- Regency furniture mounts
- Medieval Revival pew ornament
- French-style furniture mount
- Arts and Crafts ceiling rose

‘Touch’ plates

Raised drawings are installed for visitors with visual impairments to explore architectural models and large architectural features. Architecture is particularly difficult for people with visual impairments to understand by sight alone.

The subjects are:

- Haynes Grange Room
- Nicholls wall tomb
- Chiswick House
- The Crystal Palace
- The model of the Albert Memorial

Facsimiles

Occasionally facsimiles of books are placed in galleries for visitors to leaf through. This is done where the book is intrinsically interesting and relevant to the objects on display. Sometimes only a few pages are provided.

The subjects are:

- The herbal or general history of plants, John Gerard, 1597
- The Almain Armourers' Album, designed by Jacob Halder, painted 1559 to 1587
- The four books of architecture, Andrea Palladio, 1570
- The rudiments of genteel behavior, F.Nivelon, 1737
- Anna Maria Garthwaite textile designs

- The works in architecture of Robert and James Adam, 3 vols, 1773-1822
- The gentleman's and cabinet-maker's director, Thomas Chippendale, 1752
- Household furniture and interior decoration, Thomas Hope, 1807
- Catalogue of English art-manufactures, 1853
- Designs for furniture and decorations for complete house furnishing, Hampton & Son, 1894

Other low-tech activities and devices

Constructing furniture

The component parts of furniture have been made for visitors to assemble. Certain joints have been marked to make the process easier:

- Three-legged armchair
- Assemble an eighteenth-century chair

Drawing activities

Some drawing activities have been placed throughout the galleries, focusing on the type of drawing that would have been practised at the time as part of design education. Appropriate instructions or replica period equipment is supplied.

The subjects are:

- Scaling up
- Try an eighteenth-century drawing book
- Try a copybook
- The polygraph

'Dress a Figure' series

These activities have been designed for young children. A cut-out figure has cloth of an appropriate type arranged over it and a hinged cover with the figure shape cut from it is pulled down over the figure to stretch the cloth across the figure.

- Dress a Tudor woman
- Dress a Tudor man
- Dress an eighteenth-century woman
- Dress an eighteenth-century man
- Dress a Victorian woman
- Dress a Victorian man

'Dressing up' activities

'These give people an opportunity to experience what it was like to wear dress from the periods covered by the British Galleries. The replica dress and accessories are as accurate as possible, balanced with the need for garments to be sturdy and practical.

The subjects are:

- Wear a ruff

- Armour gauntlet
- Tie a cravat
- Try on a hoop and petticoat
- Corset and crinoline
- Inverness cape

‘Lift the Label’ activities

In these the visitor is asked a specific question, the answer to which should not be revealed until he/she has had time to look and think.

The subjects are:

- The Bacon family
- Shepherd Buss embroidery
- ‘Taking down a peg’
- The Walpole salver
- The Bullock cabinet
- True or false principles?
- How much did it cost?

‘Mystery Object’ displays

These displays present unusual objects and ask visitors to try to puzzle out their function. They are appropriate for families, and some objects have been placed low, at child’s eye level. These displays are placed in the Tudor and Stuart, the Georgian and the Victorian Discovery areas.

‘Questions of Design’ books

These invite visitors to form an opinion about an issue raised by a display. They are laminated, large-format and 4–8 pages long, and they are left in relevant galleries next to comfortable seating, for visitors to leaf through. They generally ask a provocative question or present a problem for the visitor to consider. Answers and opinions can be reached by reference to both the objects on display and the contents of the book. The contents of the book might include contemporary quotations or illustrations, opinions from curators, conservators and others, cartoons and any other relevant material. If the contents of the book can be used in isolation from the objects, then the book will have failed. The ‘Questions of Design’ books will be most appropriate for the independent learner and will appeal most to analytical and common-sense learners.

The subjects are:

- Did British designers understand the Italian Renaissance style?
- Did the Civil War affect design?
- How Chinese was Chinoiserie?
- Can all design styles be used for any type of object?
- Did the V&A influence design?
- What was the Arts and Crafts style?

‘Rubbing’ activities

Some design motifs have been cast in resin for visitors to make rubbings. This provides an activity suitable for young children.

Subjects include:

- Tudor motifs
- Classical motifs
- Victorian medals

‘Spot the Difference’ activities

Objects are grouped to demonstrate particular differences (for example European copies of Asian products) and visitors are invited to decide which objects fall into which categories. This form of interpretation is essentially an enhanced labelling device beside displays of comparable objects.

The subjects are:

- Flemish or English tapestry?
- Chinese or English ceramics?
- Meissen or Bow?
- Ancient Greek or Wedgwood?
- Indian or English printed cotton textile?
- Turkish or English pottery?

Visitor response

At points in the gallery we encourage visitors to respond to particular displays through writing and drawing. Questions are open-ended and simple. We provide paper and pencil and a slot through which to post the response. We edit and type up the responses, laminate them and put them in a binder, which is displayed next to the question, for other visitors to read and enjoy.

The subjects are:

- Mini-saga
- What do you value?
- Making a statement
- Objects of commemoration
- Are you a collector?

Miscellaneous

Some objects fit into no category. Many of these are in the discovery areas:

- Classical orders (matching activity)
- The Great Exhibition maze game
- Stereoscope (replica)
- Mutoscope (replica)
- Examining a Victorian chest of drawers
- Using ultraviolet light to show repairs
- ‘Build the Crystal Palace’ construction bricks
- Tapestry weaving

- Making plaited cords
- ‘Design a frame’ magnetic board
- Examining Objects flip book
- What makes a fake?
- Replica cloth of James II’s wedding suit
- Book collection for ‘Understanding Objects’

Gail Durbin

Gail Durbin has recently been appointed as Head of the V&A Online Museum. She is also Deputy Director of Learning and Visitor Services. She started her career as a secondary history teacher and then worked in the education departments of Norfolk Museums Service and English Heritage. In 1991 she joined the staff of the Victoria and Albert Museum to establish the schools section and subsequently managed learning services. For the last five years she has been the educator on the concept team of the British Galleries project. She is joint author of *A teacher’s guide to learning from objects* and edited *Developing museum exhibitions for lifelong learning*, an anthology produced by the Group for Education in Museums.