

Re-interpreting the Cast Courts at the V&A

Focus Groups with Audiences

December 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Focus groups were conducted with three key audiences prior to the refurbishment of the Cast Courts. The objective was to help guide the interpretation and design of the galleries. The evaluation examined audience motivations for visiting and their experience of the current Cast Courts. It explored the level of knowledge and understanding with respect to casts and the appeal of three possible interpretation strands: 'Historical', 'Pedagogical' and 'Inspirational'. Research was conducted by Susie Fisher in the V&A and included Visiting Public, Art Students and HE/FE Teachers of Art and Design.

The direction for the refurbishing as envisaged by the V&A was largely endorsed by audiences. They were keen to keep the Victorian identity of the Courts and to devote the middle corridor to interpretation.

Arts specialists differed profoundly from the general public in their use and understanding of the Cast Courts. Specialists were aware of casts and used them for drawing and as a route to studying the Canon. All visitors experienced awe and a sense of peace. The general public however, were largely not familiar with casts and casting. Many assumed that the casts in the Courts were original sculptures and were indignant at their neglected state and the lack of respect shown in display.

General visitors were not expecting to see casts and were therefore not set up to take an interest in the objects as casts or in the process of casting. The Museum will need to create a change of **mindset** in the visitor; from object as **sculpture** to object as **cast**. Once this was achieved in the evaluation, audiences found the subject very interesting.

Attitude change appeared to develop through a set of stages, summarised here as visitors see it:

- Stage 1: This is the original. Wow!
- Stage 2: This is only a fake
- Stage 3: Casts are amazing in their own right
- Stage 4: Casts have different stories to tell:
 - Helping you understand the original
 - A window into Victorian Social History
 - Casting techniques

The Cast Court audience, at any one time, will include people at each of these stages. The interpretation should aim to address audience interests at each different level. The casts have a dual role in the display; they embody the sculpture of the Canon and are used as a route to the original. They are also examples of casting and associated skills and stories.

Audience base knowledge was relatively low with respect to identifying icons of sculpture in the Canon and also with respect to the vocabulary associated with sculpture and casting. They will need active help from the V&A.

Current experience of the Cast Courts was ambivalent. Although the Courts promised accessibility and intimacy with great objects, accessibility was often denied in practice. Visitors complained of poor lighting and sight lines, poorly maintained and crowded displays. They also found the layout confusing and cluttered, with no clear structure.

Implications for future action

In terms of physical gallery design, the Museum should ideally:

- Make more even use of gallery space
- Create an airier and less crowded environment, with more sympathetic wall colours
- Illuminate objects adequately, both high and low
- Eradicate dust and neglect

In terms of interpretation, the Museum should ideally:

- Give a clearer structure to the placing of objects, establishing clear general themes, based on sculpture
- Devote the corridor to interpretation, making clear that these are Courts featuring **Casts**

The main interpretation strands should reflect:

- The process of monumental casting
- The character of the Historical V&A, which commissioned the casts
- The dual nature of each cast: significance and context of the original plus the story of the cast itself

Challenges will lie in clearly communicating the monumental nature of casting, in the limited corridor space without creating clutter and overcrowding.

Theming and grouping the casts will be a live issue. This study suggests Academic Tutors could make a further useful contribution to clarifying relevant themes.

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Aims and Objectives

Project Aim

- To extend and design the interpretation of the Cast Courts in line with audience needs.

Evaluation Objectives

- To understand audience motivation and experience in the Cast Courts.
 - Loves and hates
 - Frustrations and barriers
 - Learning opportunities
- To identify the extent of current audience knowledge and understanding with respect to casts
 - The Canon Vocabulary
 - Simulacra
 - Casting process
- To assess the level of interest in each of three proposed interpretation strands
 - Inspirational
 - Historical
 - Pedagogical

Methodology

- Three focus groups with current audiences who use the Cast Courts
 - GROUP 1 • General public, visiting on the day. (Session included gallery visit).
 - GROUP 2 • FE/HE students studying Art and Design
 - GROUP 3 • Academic Tutors and Teachers of Art and Design
- Men and women
- All had recently visited the Cast Courts
- 8 participants per group. 1½ hours.

Date and locations of interviewing • November 2010

Cast Courts plus V&A meeting room

Moderator • Susie Fisher

Stimulus Material

- Photo collages of the Cast Courts (North and South).
- Concept boards (images and content questions) describing the proposed three interpretation strands
 - Inspirational
 - Historical
 - Pedagogical
- Projective material
 - Word association circles
 - Bubble cartoons
 - Same/different sheets
- Laminated A4 photographs of key casts.
- Specialist vocabulary lists.



Overview

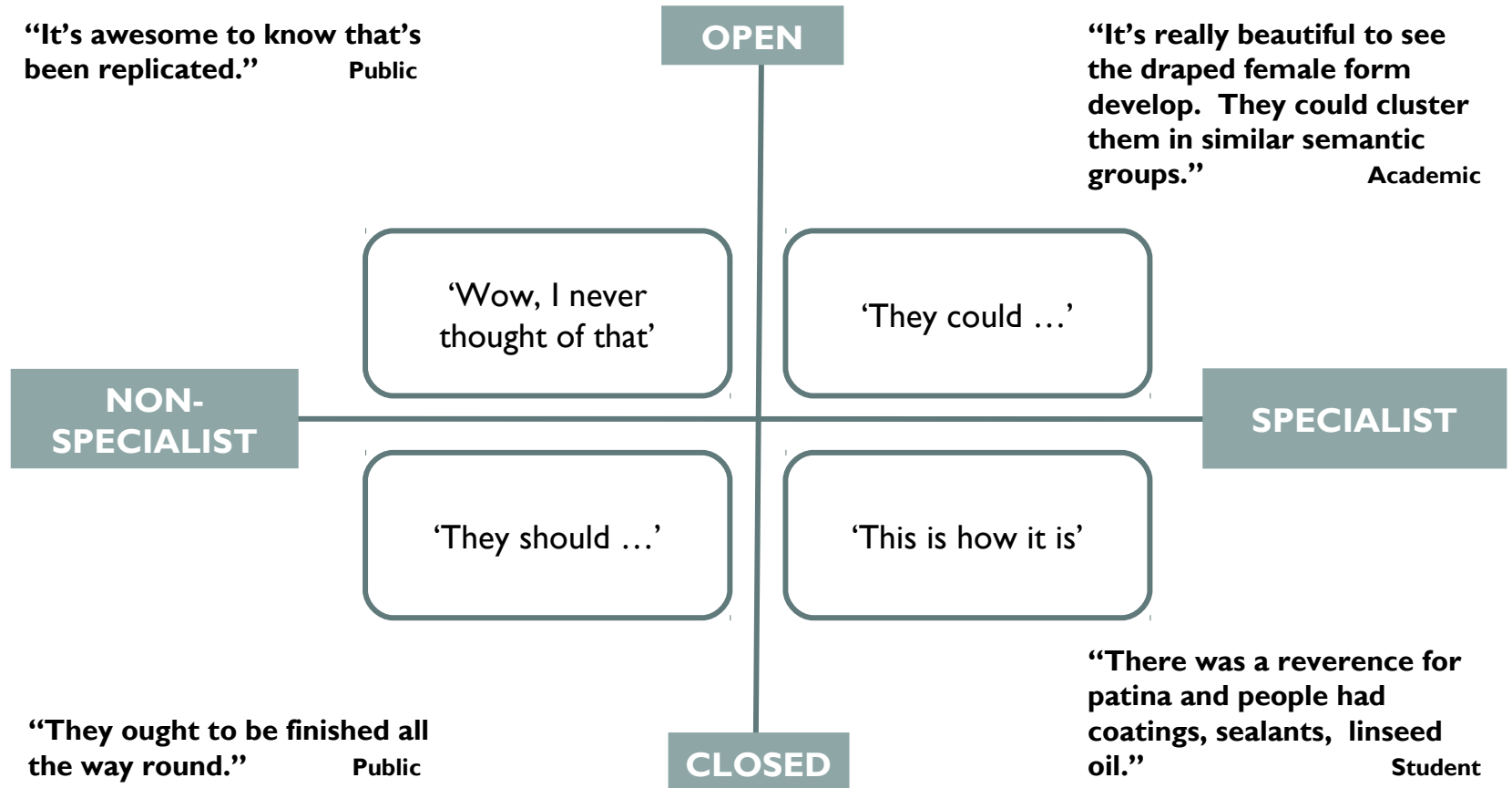


- The direction for refurbishing, envisaged by the V&A, is largely endorsed by audiences.
 - Keep the Victorian identity of the Courts.
 - Interpret clearly and generously in the corridor.
- Arts specialists use the Cast Courts to study the canon of European Sculpture in 3D and to draw the objects. People commonly experience awe and peace. General audiences treat the Casts as sculptures in their own right and are indignant with their neglected state and the lack of respect shown in display.
- Only Arts specialists arrive in a frame of mind ready to take an interest in the objects as **casts**. Very few know anything about casting.
- Casting turns out to be a hugely fertile subject but visitors have to be guided sympathetically through a change of mindset, from sculpture to cast. The way is then open to explore
 - Casting processes and the enormity of it all.
 - Casts as a way of understanding the originals.
 - Casts as a window into the Victorian V&A and the society it served.
- These three themes were summed up within the interpretation strands, Historical and Pedagogical. The Inspiration strand was felt to be a given and needed less interpretation.
- Audiences highlighted the improvements they would like to see in gallery.

Lighting	Scrutiny, high and low	Décor (better colours)	Less clutter
Sightlines	More space, airier	Clean	More structure



What Were Our Audience Like? A Map



COMMENT

- **ON THE WHOLE, NON-SPECIALISTS TREATED THE CASTS AS ORIGINALS WHEREAS SPECIALISTS ALREADY POSSESSED A DISCOURSE RELATING TO CASTS.**
- **THE MUSEUM WILL NEED TO TEMPT AND PROVOKE THE MORE CLOSED AUDIENCES. BUT THIS WILL NOT BE HARD BECAUSE THE SUBJECT IS ACCESSIBLE AND INTERESTING.**

The Audience Segments Had Their Own Distinctive Characters



GENERAL PUBLIC

- Art and Cultural tourism are part of a much broader agenda
 - Travel
 - Careers
- Quite reverential about Art and Sculpture and inclined to defer to the experts.
- Intolerant of shabbiness, clutter, ambiguity.
- Looking for clarity, by and large.

“You’re supposed to see it as a fabulous piece of art. As much as it can possibly be.” Public

STUDENTS

- Enjoy flashing their new Arts expertise, vocabulary and concepts.
- Want to celebrate the canon and the V&A as members of an inner circle.
- Know less about casts than about other subjects and keen to learn more.
- Traditional. Don’t spoil the atmosphere.

“Bernini polished certain bits (of his sculpture) to complement the light. Chiaroscuro.” Student

ACADEMICS

- Confident about history of art, education and the role of the V&A.
- Humble about how little they know about casting, electro typing, etc. and interested.
- Want a working, useful, revealing gallery, with theming, structure and clarity.
- Creative, constructive, applied.

“This Altar piece, the mould would be fascinating to see. They should make a reproduction mould or film of the casting.” Academic

What Motivates Audiences to Visit the Cast Courts?

Public

- Many just wander in. Amazed by the scale and volume of objects. Many just assume they are original sculptures. They don't much mind either way.

"I wasn't sure if they were real or not." Public

- Some like the atmosphere of huge dreaming, peaceful objects. It is a favourite place.

"It's awesome. You can come and look. The two columns are spectacular and they're in a building." Public

Students

- Students primarily visit to draw. This stands without challenge. Apart from the Casting specialists, students would otherwise go in to check out particular sculptures as part of their courses.

"It's for access. Drawing is number one too." Student

"It's the physicality of the display. You get this full picture close up. It's 3D." Student

Academics

- Part of their basic equipment for teaching. They may visit in order to check that certain pieces are in the gallery before recommending it to students.

"It's brilliant for kids who can't go to Florence. You can do the whole A' Level in one Museum, walk round it." Academic

"There should be a dialogue with the original. Show it in its original context. Think around it. Have fun." Academic

COMMENT

ALMOST NO-ONE VISITS THE GALLERY TO EXAMINE THE CASTS AS CASTS. THE CASTS ARE PROXY FOR THE ORIGINALS ELSEWHERE.

The Cast Court Experience is Hugely Ambivalent



Intimate
Close up
Accessible
Awesome
3D
Almost the real thing
Comprehensive
Wonder

“I feel transported to a strange and wonderful place; mystery and history, foreign and familiar. It’s elevating.” Student

Dusty
Cluttered
Confused
Crowded
Not reverential
Not the real thing
Badly lit
Bewildering

“I’m disappointed at the state the Casts are in. The displays are not that good. They’re confusing in terms of ordering and jumbled up.” Student



There Are Two Deep Contradictions

- The casts are meant to be **accessible** but, in practice, they are not.
- Are they **objects of beauty** requiring context and reverence or are they not?

The accessibility question

In London
All in one place
Can study up close
3D



Confused display, cluttered
No structure, chronology, theming
Poor lighting
Interrupted sightlines
Too high to see the detail
Badly signposted
No interpretation, explanation
Can't be touched

“We still need a chronology. Visitors like to see what came first.” Academic

“We don't get what we're looking at. It's too diverse.” Academic

“The lighting is a bit flat. It needs to show some relief.” Public

“There's elaboration at a high level. But you can't see it.” Public

“You can't focus on the object, it's lost. You can't see the object to draw.”
Student

“It's contextually dysjunctive. There's no context.” Student

IMPLICATION

**THERE IS A NEED FOR IMPROVED LIGHTING AND POSITIONING.
HOW MUCH EXPLICIT THEMING AND INTERPRETATION WILL THERE
NEED TO BE?**

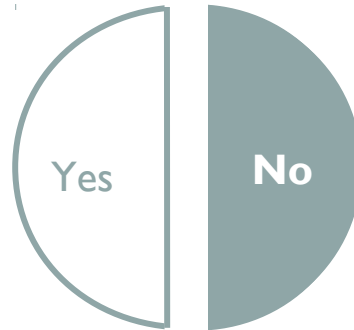


Are the Casts Objects of Beauty, High Art?

Have the form, scale, perspectives of the original. The sculptures are iconic and comprise the European canon.



Their reason for being there is as representatives of objects of beauty



They are facsimiles. Sited on scuffed plinths. Crowded together. Deprived of respectful context. Allowed to get dusty, neglected. Revealing the struts and rough plaster at the back.



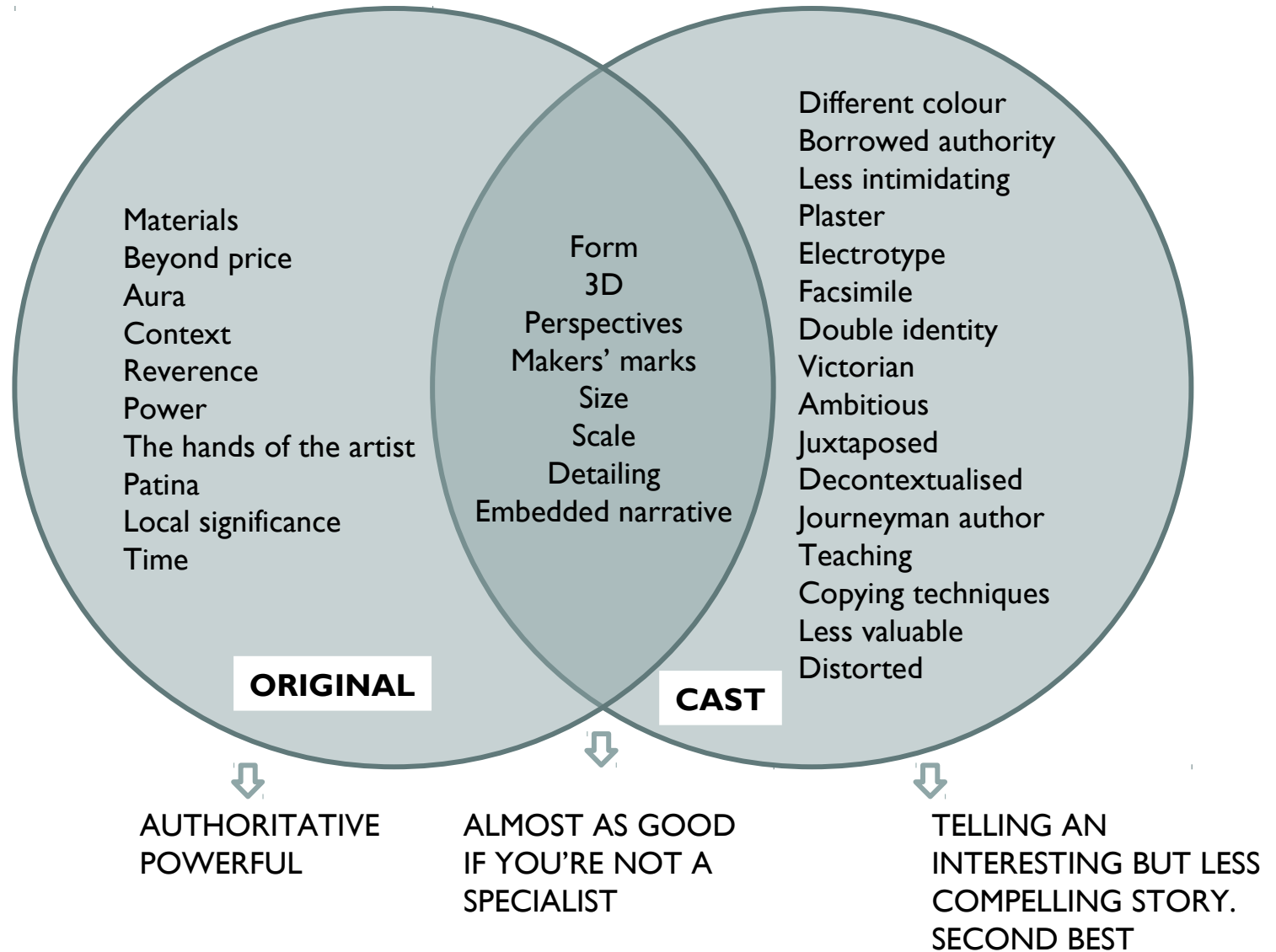
The casts are **not treated** as objects of beauty

- “You focus on one extraordinary object, David. It’s a pure sight.” Student
- “This is a Victorian theme park.” Student
- “It’s depressing, you can see the hardboard behind it. It should be authentic from all angles.” Public
- “If it stood on crystal, it would be more special. It looks like a warehouse.” Public
- “No, it’s not art. I saw the real one three days ago. This is too crowded, dirty. It has a lot of dust.” Public
- “They’re all jammed together.” Academic
- “It’s a copy but the copy still satisfies. You’re still moved by it, it’s a proper facsimile.” Academic

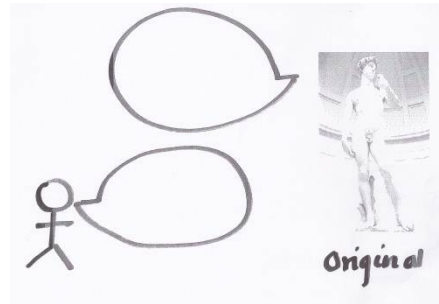
IMPLICATION

MANY PEOPLE WANT THE CASTS TO BE TREATED WITH MORE RESPECT. AT LEAST SOME SHOULD BE GIVEN THE CONTEXT AND UPKEEP OF PRECIOUS OBJECTS. THE ILLUSION IS VALUED.

Let's Analyse What Belongs to the Cast and What Belongs to the Original



Consider a Dialogue Between Visitor and the Original



Me

“Thank you, sir. Very sorry to trouble you.”

“You’re amazing.”

“You’re totally amazing to view in person.”

“Why are you so difficult to draw?”

“Wow, you have been made by the hand of Michelangelo.”

PUBLIC

Original

“Would you like some help? I know everything around here.”

“I know.”

“I am angry because I am the major David.”

STUDENT

“Because I was so difficult to make.”

TUTORS

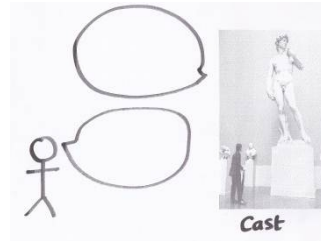
“I know, I have aura, so I’m better than the repros.”

IMPLICATION

THE ORIGINAL SCULPTURE ASSUMES THE PERSONALITY OF AN ANGRY GOD. THE VIEWER IS ABASHED, AWED, HUMBLED.



Consider a Dialogue Between Visitor and the Cast



Me

“Hey, you look a bit lost and out of sorts.”

“You look surreal.”

“What are you doing in this forgotten corner amidst many less important pieces of art?”

“David, you are not the star here. You’re lost in this clutter.”

“David, you are a good copy, but I am so mad at the place you are standing.”

“Who are you? Why are you in London?”

“Are you any better than the little copies that can be bought for the garden or the fish tank?”

“How long did that take? How did they get it in here?”

PUBLIC

Cast

“Um, I am. I’m a bit confused.”

“I am real. I’m a real cast.”

“No other spaces.”

“It makes no difference. Enjoy me for what I am.”

“Well, thanks for trying to help.”

TUTORS

“I’m David, I’ve lived here all my life.”

“Yes, because my Victorian aura is now established. I’m the real copy.”

“I look bigger in real life.”

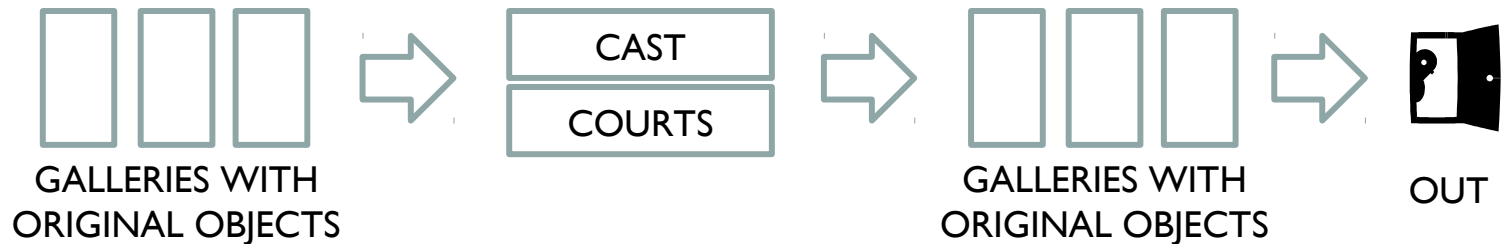
IMPLICATION

THE CAST IS SOMEHOW IN THE WRONG, PROTESTING ITS INNOCENCE. THE POWER BALANCE HAS CHANGED, THE VIEWER FEELS WARM TOWARDS THE CAST, READY TO DEFEND IT AND DEMAND MORE RESPECTFUL TREATMENT.



A Change of Mindset

- The non-specialist visitor is not remotely prepared for thinking about Victorian casts and the issues these raise for the world of sculpture.



- As a rule, people's heads are in the same place (same expectations, same concentration) whichever galleries they are wandering through. Often they look at the Cast Courts with the same eyes as the rest of the galleries. They are not expecting replicas in the V&A.

“Would people have thought it was all made of marble and stone?” Public

“It's a fabulous bit of art, on a painted bit of wood.” Public

- In order to get people to notice and take an interest in Casts, the Museum would ideally trigger a change of mindset in the visitor.

“It needs a different set of mind.” Public

- From the **ART** as centre of the display to **CAST** as centre of display.

IMPLICATION

THE V&A WILL NEED ACTIVELY TO MANAGE THE NON-SPECIALIST VISITOR'S EXPECTATIONS IN ORDER TO AFFECT WHAT WILL BE SEEN AND PERCEIVED IN THE CAST COURTS.

People Seem to Follow a Predictable Path in Learning to Appreciate the Cast Courts

ARTS SPECIALISTS

Casts help you understand the original

4A

Casts are part of Victorian social history

4B

Casting techniques are highly specialised

4C

NON SPECIALISTS

④ Casts are amazing in their own right

③ This is only a fake

② This is the original. Wow!

IMPLICATION

THERE WILL BE SOME PEOPLE IN EACH ONE OF THESE CATEGORIES AMONGST THE CAST COURT AUDIENCES. EACH WANTS SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT FROM THE DISPLAY. THE CHALLENGE IS NOT TO LET PEOPLE SETTLE IN BOX ③



At the Simplest Level • Stages ② and ③

Stage ②

State of mind

- What wonderful sculptures. I didn't know all this was in here.

Current gallery

- Offends and mystifies. Why are the objects not treated like treasures?
Shabby plinths Dusty, neglected
Crowded together No proper sightlines

What they'd like

- Each object given its rightful space and placed in a gallery context befitting a beautiful, treasured object.

“There should be visitor sightlines and links.” Academic

“It's an afterthought, embarrassing, neglected.” Student

“Its aura comes from how it's treated in location.” Student

“Think about the wall colour and the lighting.” Student

“The statues are all huddled in a corner together. There are many stars and they are too mixed up.” Public

Stage ③

State of mind

- Cheated, disappointed. None of it is real after all.

Current gallery

- Allows you carelessly to see the messy bits at the back. Doesn't even try to keep up the pretence.

What they'd like

- This is neither fish nor fowl. Either treat the objects respectfully or make a proper exhibition about casting. Are these galleries about Casts or about sculpture?

“Everything is a replica, nothing is real.” Public

“It's supposed to be antique and you can see it's fake.” Public

“You wouldn't have something beautiful in your home and see ‘Made in China’ on it.” Public

“The backboarding, I felt disappointed. The illusion is shattered. I don't want to come round something brilliant and see a bit of hardboard. It's like Disney.”

Public

IMPLICATION

DO AT LEAST SOME OF THE CASTS NEED TO BE GIVEN THE CONTEXT AND RESPECT DUE TO THE ORIGINALS?

Casts Are Amazing in their Own Right • Stage ④

State of mind

- I've been aware of casts but never thought about how they make them. It must be an incredible challenge, I wonder how they do it.

Current gallery

- Doesn't really confront the issue of casts and casting. More a haphazard picking up that these are casts. There's, a tiny showcase, mostly words, in the North European gallery if you know where to look for it and a bit upstairs. The backs of certain casts reveal how they are constructed but these appear to have been revealed by accident and oversight.

What they'd like

- A detailed physical demonstration of how an ambitious cast (say Trajan's Column) is approached and put together. What does it take?
- A celebration of what a skilled business it is.

Problems to be overcome

Methods

Finishing surfaces

Physical size

Erecting and displaying

- Permission to believe that casts are valuable and interesting objects in their own right.

“They're objects in their own right. Is it a fake? No, it's not a fake.” Student

“What is the process? The mould plus the original. It's a phenomenal skill, lining it up, getting the right mix. Don't underestimate and simplify the process.” Student

“How the pieces were made. I'd prefer to know they're copies and how they're made.”
Public

“I respect the way they were made originally.” Public

“They should have an explanation of the replicas, how they were made and when they were made.” Public

“How was that cast made? How did they get it to London? It wasn't cast in one” Tutor

“It's the phenomenon of Victorian casting. It's extraordinary that they did it.” Tutor

IMPLICATION

A SENSE OF THE PHYSICAL SCALE OF THE JOB AND THE PHYSICAL NATURE OF THE PROCESSES WILL FUEL RESPECT AND INTEREST.

Key Thought

**“Your father is also your mother’s lover.
A thing can have two roles.”
Student**

The challenge will be to create a gallery which can exploit the two roles

- Immaculate sculpture within the Canon.
- Hugely skilful, ambitious casts, redolent of the Victorian age.



Arts Specialists are Intrigued and Demanding

- For all but a few, casting is a secondary interest. That said, they are already familiar with some of the issues raised by casting.
 - “It’s a history of education and a history of art. This altar piece, the mould would be fascinating to see.” Tutor
 - “A cast is art historical. Why do you look as you are? How were you made? It’s an artistic question.” Student
- Where better than the V&A to learn a bit more about it?
 - “Why were the casts taken? Why did they have the models and the originals alongside?” Student
 - “Acknowledge the role of the cast, not the original.” Student
 - “The Victorians were not squeamish about copies.” Tutor
 - “Research. The movement to do these casts is really interesting.” Tutor
- For many arts specialists, casting is a useful box to tick, alongside their chosen specialisations. They will be looking to see how the lessons learnt from casting link across to more general issues, e.g.
 - development of styles in sculpture and architecture
 - religious sensibilities over time
 - Victorian aestheticism.
 - “It’s valid and interesting historically. To deny the origins of the Cast Court would be an intellectual slip.” Student

COMMENT

THIS IS THE CONTENT AREA ABOVE THE GLASS CEILING. IT WILL INTEREST SPECIALISTS BUT MAY BE TOO MUCH FOR THE PUBLIC. THE CHALLENGE WILL BE TO SATISFY BOTH AUDIENCES.

Three Main Themes for the Arts Specialist

Casts help you understand the original

Casts are part of Victorian social history

Casting techniques are highly specialised

Casting techniques are highly specialised

“Back in the day, this is what was done. We’ve got something of a unique quality.”

Student

- Lost wax, gelatine, electro typing, etc., etc.
- Finishing, patina, distortions.

“Have it as a working space, not just a historical theme park.” Student

“There was a reverence for patina. People had coatings, sealants, linseed oil ...”

Student

- Maybe casting should be brought up to date; new methods discussed, new casts commissioned.

“They could make new casts, make a mould of the mould. What would we add to the current collection?” Tutor

“Should it be added to? Like Eric Gill?” Tutor

“Commission new reproductions, stop the 19th Century being static. It’s still a living dialogue.” Student

IMPLICATION

THIS IS AN AUTHORITATIVE BRIEFING ON CASTING IN THE ARTS WORLD, BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE V&A WHO CAN CLAIM TO BE THE WORLD AUTHORITY ON THE SUBJECT.



Casts Help You Understand the Original • Like a Fingerprint

“There’s the same immediacy. There are all the working marks. It carries the artist’s intention through, the details, stories. Like a fingerprint.”
Student

- It is the cast as route to the original which is a majority interest

- Study and draw form
- Look at trends within a period and over time
- Scale and proportion

But the challenge here is to supply clues to the sculpture’s original context

- Examine details close to; play of light, materials, surfaces
- Compare with original sculptures. Juxtaposing.

“You almost appreciate the formal qualities more because it is decontextualised.” Student

“You could compare the casts to the Marble Hall.” Tutor

“It’s nice to compare Romanesque to the later versions. People assumed that stylisation developed later.” Tutor

“You can see how light falls on plaster a lot better (than bronze). Plaster is a more regular surface.” Tutor

- Themes (in the manner of gallery trails) were popular with the Tutors, e.g.

Architectural styles • Romanesque, realist, naïve, stylised

Sculpture icons

Drapery in sculpture, the female form.

“Trajan’s Column is so post-modern. It’s inspiring.” Student

IMPLICATION

IT IS NOT THE OBJECT’S IDENTITY AS A CAST WHICH IS IMPORTANT HERE. THE OBJECT IS A MEANS OF ANALYSING FORM, SCALE, PATINA, STYLE. TO INSIST ON THE HISTORY OF THE CAST ITSELF WOULD OBTRUDE.

Casts Are Part of Victorian Social History

- The Cast Courts at the V&A bear eloquent testimony to the values of Victorian Society.
 - Aesthetics
 - Vision and ambition
 - Attitudes to reproductions
 - Religious sensibilities

“David’s fig leaf!” Student

“It’s a historical benchmark.” Tutor

“It’s the cultural history of the Museum, the relation to Colonialism, I think.” Tutor

“It helps you see the Victorians. All you need is the narrative.” Tutor

“The Victorians thought this was the Canon.” Tutor

“It’s the ambition of the Victorians. Doing a plaster cast of Trajan’s Column.” Student
- Many academics teach Art History and therefore support the idea of keeping the Cast Courts close to their original state.

“You’re walking into something different from now. You feel the time capsule. I’d love it to be kept.” Tutor
- This is yet another mental flip; gallery as object. The Museum may have to indicate to the visitor that they are being asked to think on three levels
 - Objects as originals
 - Objects as casts
 - Gallery as object

Visitors will need some help in identifying the social history narratives embodied by the Cast Courts.

“Why were they made in the first place at the V&A.” Tutor

QUESTION

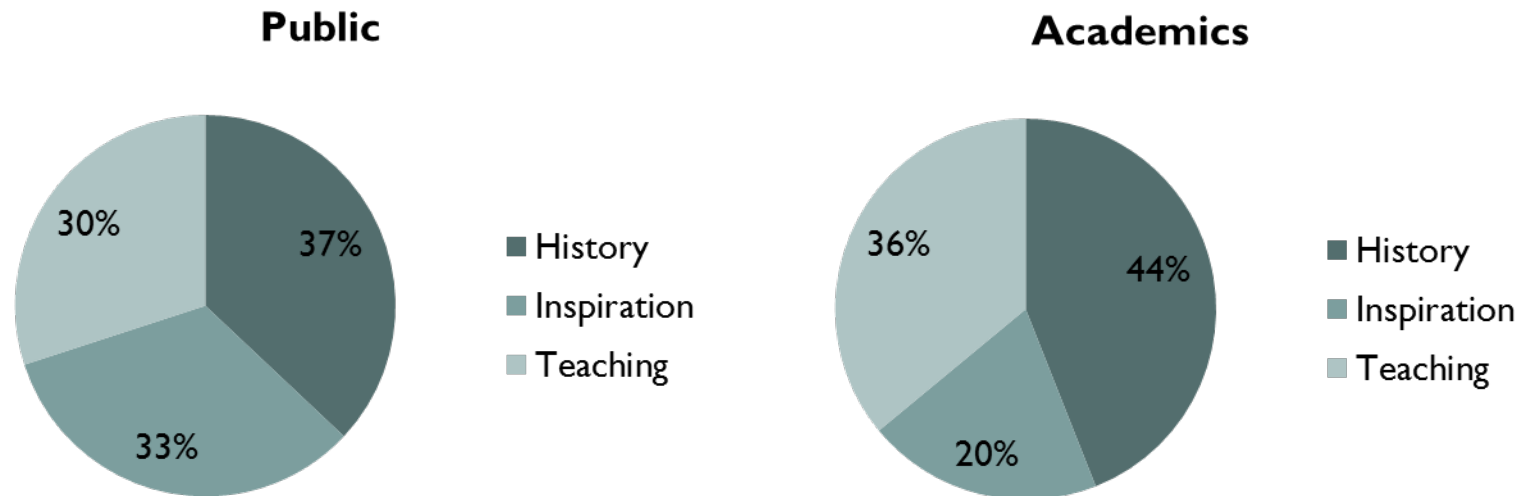
CAN THE CAST COURTS KEEP THEIR ORIGINAL DESIGN AND STILL RESPOND TO THE WIDE ARRAY OF AUDIENCE NEEDS?

How Did the Audience Respond to the Three Interpretation Schemes, in Principle?

Inspirational
Historical
Pedagogical

Public and Academics rated History as the most important theme.
Academics gave far more weight to teaching than to Inspiration.
Public audiences rated teaching and inspiration more or less equally.

Question • How much weight would you give to each of the three strands?



COMMENT

AUDIENCES ATTRIBUTED MUCH OF THEIR SPONTANEOUS DISCUSSION TO THE CATEGORY OF 'HISTORY'.

What Were the Areas of Interest? Historical Theme

Appealing

- Link to V&A's founding purpose.
- Casts displayed alongside originals.
- Why were the sculptures chosen?
- A true record of the original?
- Shobdon comparison – the cast is in better condition than the original.
- 19th Century appearance and use of the Cast Courts.
- Henry Cole and John Charles Robinson, the selectors.

Not sure

- Unique to the Cast Courts.
- Drawing was important in the 18th/19th Centuries (this seems self-evident).

“Do the Cast Courts relate to a list of European Masterpieces? It’s a hotch potch Canon.”

Student

“How casts are made, how the Collections came to be, why there is a debate about authenticity. Why they are still here.”

Tutor

“They need to say, ‘This is the original look of the gallery and it’s interesting in its own right.’”

Public

IMPLICATION

BRINGING THE HISTORY TO PEOPLE’S ATTENTION AND MAKING IT MEANINGFUL BRINGS DEPTH AND INSIGHT TO THE CAST COURTS.

What Were the Areas of Interest? Teaching Theme

Appealing

- Learning about sculpture by looking at casts
 - History
 - Materials
 - Techniques
- Useful in comparing sculptures.
- What is a cast and how do you make it?
- Hands-on materials. Physical.
- Objects at different stages of casting.
- David in Accademia and Palazzo Vecchio (original context).
- Cast survives, original destroyed

Not sure

- Better studied in a photograph or film? (No, 3D seems self evidently better).
- What is an electrotype and how do you make one? (Almost no-one knows what this is).
- Videos – opinion is split. Good for showing processes but out of keeping with the Victorian galleries.
- Science textbook diagram of electroforming (wrong idiom).

“As a teaching resource, they have a cast to feel in 3D. It would mean more if we knew all that. If we could learn all about casting.”

Public

“‘Materials and processing’ is an A’ Level requirement and it’s good to have 3D reference material.”

Tutor

“It was difficult to see and visually explain the practice. They should have objects, old moulds.”

Student

“It’s peaceful. Keep the video separate.”

Student

IMPLICATION

THIS IS, IN FACT, THE HEART OF THE INFORMATION WHICH PEOPLE SPONTANEOUSLY WANT TO KNOW, INSIGHT INTO SCULPTURE AND HOW CASTS ARE MADE.

What Were the Areas of Interest? Inspiration Theme

Appealing

- Triggering creative ideas from the Casts
 - installations
 - photography
 - drawing
- This worked best if they were collected and valued by the V&A itself.
- Tracking down the originals, e.g. Norwegian Church Doorway.

Not sure

- Transition to words
 - novels and poetry
 - (although this is cross-curricular)

COMMENT

THIS IDEA WAS LARGELY TAKEN UP BY TEACHERS. WISHFUL THINKING?

“Throw out a creative gauntlet, it's of huge value.”

Tutor

“Boost creativity, seeing how casts are used. Rachel Whiteread and so on.”

Tutor

“Send them to the V&A once a year.”

Tutor

- Students were lukewarm and public uninvolved.

“Concentrate on the display and the feeling you get.”

Student

IMPLICATION

IS THIS IDEA MORE ABOUT SEEDING THE CAST COURTS WITH UNEXPECTED CREATIVE EXAMPLES, THAN IT IS ABOUT PROVIDING A FORMAL INTERPRETATION THEME?

How Much Do Audiences Know Already?

Key objects

Everybody knows

Michelangelo's David
Donatello's David
Santiago de Compostela
Trajan's Column

Vaguely recognise but can't name

Pisano Pulpit
Liege Font
Prague, George and Dragon

Nobody knows

Lunette Nymph
Mercury and Psyche

Florence Sacrifice of Isaac
(tutors only)

- Almost no-one knows the iconic casts by name. Several were misattributed.
- The Cast Courts are so crowded and poorly signed, that visitors describe feeling overwhelmed by the press of objects.
The response seems to be to pick up styles and themes rather than to identify the iconic originals individually.
- Nevertheless, they do feel embarrassed (especially Tutors) at not knowing their stuff!

IMPLICATION

THE INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY OF THE CASTS NEEDS TO BE MADE MORE MEANINGFUL TO THE VISITOR. THIS WILL INVOLVE SHOWING THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT AND THE ARTISTIC CREDENTIALS OF THE ORIGINAL PIECE.

How Much Vocabulary Do They Know?

Understand (✓)

Armature
Canon
Definition
Gelatine
Gothic
Early and High
Renaissance
Latex
Model
Patination
Plaster
Pulpit
Relief
Romanesque
Silicone

Think they know but may not (?)

Bas relief
Mother mould
Mould lines
Piece mould
Plaster of Paris
Tympanum
Type cast

Don't know and don't expect to (x)

Cantoria
Electroplate
Electrotype
Flash lines
Formatore
Insular art
Mandrel
Mannerist

- Visitors don't know and don't expect to know the technical terms involved in casting.
- It may be that some terms sound familiar, like everyday English, but in fact have a technical meaning that visitors would not be sure about, if challenged.

What Changes Would Visitors Like to See in the Cast Courts?

- Against the background of keeping a High Victorian feel
 - More even use of space. If possible, airier and less crowded together.
 - Effective sight lines. To be able to see iconic objects from a distance and also from close to.
 - More harmonious and pleasing wall colours.
 - Better lighting. Illuminating all objects adequately and displaying particular objects with the direction of light, which would have been enjoyed by the original.
 - Logical theming, to give structure, so the collection is easier to grasp and teach.
 - Shining, respectfully displayed objects; no more dust or neglect.
 - Greater use of the balconies.
 - Better information on the identity and context of the originals.
- Audiences are happy to accept the corridor as a location for more modern interpretative techniques, dealing with casting.

IMPLICATION

AUDIENCES ARE LARGELY IN LINE WITH THE PROPOSED PLANS OF THE MUSEUM.

Quotes • What Improvements Would You Like to See?

Public

- “It’s a little dark, it needs to be airier and there’s a lot of dust.” Public
- “It’s higgledy-piggledy, you don’t get clear views.” Public
- “There’s fantastic detail but you’re too close to see it. You can’t get away to appreciate it. You lose the impact.” Public
- “They’re too close and there’s a combination of too many styles.” Public
- “They’re not positioned properly. They’re stuck in a corner with a load of others.” Public

Students

- “They’re dusty and dingy. The lighting’s terrible and the cross lighting is difficult.” Student
- “The colour of the walls is horrible, depressing.” Student
- “The interpretation labels are really dense, academic and small. They could bring out different narratives.” Student
- “Sunny, airy spaces. Go back to an earlier form.” Student
- “Even out the use of space, don’t make them too high.” Student
- “Concentrate on stories.” Student

Tutors

- “I’m overwhelmed by the way it’s set out. Cluttered. It’s difficult to pick out certain styles.” Tutor
- “It could be Art Historical; this style led to that style.” Tutor
- “Vistas and sight lines and links.” Tutor
- “There are multiple shadows, you can’t see the surface.” Tutor
- “You want to view high up and up close.” Tutor
- “They could have multiple trails, like chronology ...” Tutor
- “Keep it clear and simple, signposting what they are, where they’re from and what the Cast Courts are so that it’s not obscure.” Tutor

How Do Audiences Feel About Using the Corridor?

- The corridor is a good solution to the conundrum of how to introduce interpretation without compromising the High Victorian character of the two Cast Courts.
- **Advantages**
 - Separate space to display hands-on casting materials.
 - Modern display materials, such as screens, process videos, animation, chemical demonstrations do not detract from Victorian casts.
 - Prepares the visitor to appreciate the skill and ambition of the Casts and lets the visitor know, unambiguously, that these **are** casts.
- **Potential Problems**
 - Will the space be big enough to show all the hoped for aspects of the interpretation? Size, awe, superhuman, will all be issues of interest.
 - Audiences would prefer to see clarity, space, structure, in the interpretation in order to counterbalance the confusion of the Courts themselves. They are apprehensive about the BM/Soane, object-dense approach.
 - Will there still be a clear, pleasing through route?
 - Will the sightlines between the two courts be compromised?

IMPLICATION

THERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF INTERESTING MATERIAL TO ADDRESS IN INTERPRETING THE CAST COURTS AND THE CORRIDOR, ALTHOUGH IN A PERFECT POSITION, MAY OFFER TOO LIMITED A SPACE. WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE MORE CLOSELY TO INTEGRATE THE BALCONY DISPLAY?



Quotes • The Corridor as Interpretation Area

Public

“If the corridor explained and showed them in context ... It’s mainly the Victorian-ness and how casts were made.” Public

“The history of the V&A needs mentioning. They could lead you through the corridor first.” Public

“The corridor – not more of the same. More clarity, more modern, more space and colour.” Public

“They can have an interactive showing how replicas are made and the original in context. And, perhaps, a trail through.. Go and find.”

Public

Students

“It’s a really nice story, the fig leaf. They should include it.” Student

“They should have objects; old moulds, old and big.” Student

“Eye-catching is good, lots of stuff but they should keep the views through to the Courts.” Student

“They should put interpretation in the galleries as well, but no videos.”

Student

Tutors

“Don’t make it too busy or you’ll just glaze over.” Tutor

“Pace it, chunks of interest. You do need floor space.” Tutor

“Videos are useful to know how it’s done. A video is ok for the corridor.” Tutor

“They could have the Casts next to the maker, a photo, their history.” Tutor

What Are the Essential Themes for the Interpretation? In Summary

- Give a strong physical sense of the process of monumental casting; drawing on hands-on objects, materials and video demonstrations.
- Give a strong sense of the historical V&A, its aims, its character, its appearance, its personalities, its scope, its stories and the society it served.
- Provide access to a parallel history for each cast
 - the importance of the original sculpture within the canon and the context in which it sits.
 - the story behind the making of the Cast itself.
- Demonstrate some of the different, clear and interesting themes which can be followed and evidenced in the galleries themselves.
 - e.g. Chronology Geography
 - Style Religious sensibilities
 - Drapery

Plus

Audiences also talk about practical innovations

- Casting courses Creating links with the wider galleries
- Loans to schools Ad hoc drawing seminars
- Audio guides Making new casts and adding to the Canon
- Collecting the creative output inspired by the Casts

The Way Forward for Audiences

- Develop the Cast Courts broadly, as planned, keeping the Victorian identity of the two courts and using the corridor for interpretation.
- Leave visitors in no doubt at the outset that these are displays of casts. But keep in mind that most visitors are using the casts as their best route to the originals, and would like to see them displayed and respected as the originals might have been.
- Audiences would like to see improvements in
 - Lighting Space Capacity for close examination Décor
 - Cleanliness Sightlines Clutter
- Visitors are asking for more guidance in making sense of the Cast Courts. Tutors, in particular, want structure and theming to help them to teach particular curriculum content and particular themes. The sense of clutter and hugger mugger does not work as a liberating influence unless the visitor is very familiar indeed with the Courts.
- Lay open the techniques of casting, without losing the sense of the monumental and the audacity of the society which generated the casts in the first place.

Challenges

- How to condense the wealth and physical size of the interpretation into the corridor without creating more clutter.
- How to provide meaningful individual identities and parallel stories (as cast and as original) for the crowded objects in the Courts.
- How to make the scientific processes meaningful to non-scientists without destroying the atmosphere and idiom of the Victorian Courts.
- How to achieve access to scrutiny for casts high and low.
- How to use the very differences in the nature of casts to illuminate the viewer's understanding of the original.