



## Museums in contemporary society

### *Redefining the V&A*

#### **Christopher Wilk:**

The old displays first of all looked shabby, they looked very old-fashioned, and they reflected one dominant theme, and that was the history of style.

#### **Sarah Medlam:**

And we knew very well that we served very limited audiences rather well, but for wider audiences who might come once or twice in a lifetime to the museum that we rather left them out in the cold.

#### **Christopher Wilk:**

It was if we were showing the history of British design, completely ignoring all the changes in approaches to design history and to history that had been taking place over the last 30-40 years.

The redesigned galleries would be renamed the 'British Galleries'.

#### **Christopher Wilk:**

The British Galleries was the largest thing that the V&A had undertaken since the entire museum had been emptied and re-displayed after the Second World War. With three thousand objects, thirty four hundred square metres. Those galleries alone are bigger than most museums in this country. It was a vast, vast undertaking, and I think that the size of the project was something that was very daunting for everyone who was working on it.

#### **Sarah Medlam:**

They wanted to turn away from the idea of managing such big projects with big committees, and handed the initial thinking over to a triumvirate, if you like, of three people.

#### **Christopher Wilk:**

There would be a concept team that would have editorial control that would consist of, because I was drafted in, myself as a lead curator, someone who was more expert than I was in the history of British design, and an educator.

#### **Sarah Medlam:**

I think I was brought on board because I was a very straightforward, old-fashioned curator and I knew about the kind of objects that were made between 1500 and 1900 in the British Galleries.

#### **Christopher Wilk:**

Now the inclusion of an educator and a historian in a gallery project was completely new, and what it signalled was, first of all, we were not going to ignore the discourses around British history, that we wanted to have an overall narrative, a grand narrative, a grand narrative, a simple story for the galleries. The inclusion of an educator meant that we were going to be very audience-focused.

#### **David Birley:**

This is one of my favourite rooms, the 18th century one, and it's interesting because we have so many things of the same period and we can see them together. There's silver, there's furniture, there's tapestry, and then of course my particular interest is early English porcelain, and we have some wonderful things here. There's Beau, there's Vauxhall and of course Chelsea, and here if I'm right I think is one of my favourite things, number 39, here we are –

Goat and Bee jug, yes made in Vauxhall and it's a direct copy of the Chelsea version of it, and I think that is superb.

**Sarah Medlam:**

The initial thinking had to be gone through fairly quickly and a vision for the galleries established.

Low culture, as well as high culture, was to be included in the mix.

**Christopher Wilk:**

We said that there would be different things for different visitors, and often at different times, in the galleries. So that the activity areas weren't for all visitors, but some visitors would find them very meaningful. Having objects displayed at low level, obviously aimed at children, was not something for all visitors but children might find that very meaningful. Writing labels in a way that you could visually scan them very quickly wasn't necessary for all visitors but it would be for a parent whose job is to interpret what they're seeing or answer the question – what is that thing? So this idea of having different strategies and different approaches for different kinds of visitors was absolutely essential to the gallery and we even, when it came to things like interpretative devices, frequently looked at a ground plan of the gallery and physically plotted how often something occurred. How often were the needs of specialist visitors addressed? How often were the needs of children addressed? And we made sure that this was evenly spread.

**Child:**

Look at that, did you see that?

**Child:**

Look at it. It kicks up!

**Child:**

With the keyhole!

**Child:**

Oi, let me see that.

**Children:**

Aaaah!

Squeaky floorboards in whole room displays allow multi-sensory learning.

**Sarah Medlam:**

I think in the course of it I learnt a great deal about the different ways in which people learn, and I learnt fairly early on that the fact that I liked or disliked one form of interpretation did not mean that it was good or bad in the galleries.

**Christopher Wilk:**

The interactive devices that we have in the gallery, whether they be low-tech handling objects, or high-tech films, are about getting people to make connections, getting them to look at the objects that we have on display. So, for an example, if a visitor can touch cut glass or etched glass they get a real sense of the materiality, and that's very important for people because the museum case is a real boundary, it's a real barrier for many visitors. Some people are very used to looking at cases and they don't mind so much, but a lot of our visitors find it very off-putting and that's why we try to give them things that they can touch.

**Sarah Medlam:**

Most of the surprises that came at the late stage of the project were moments of great enjoyment, for instance when we were working on the Norfolk House Music Room, which is one of the most complex objects in the gallery, in fact perhaps the most complex object, we'd been biting our nails about how we might light that room, not at all sure that the original wall lights if we put fake candles in them would give sufficient light, and when it was very first re-

erected we did a trial with sort of Neptune-like tridents of lights round it and realised that, with a great sigh of relief, that it was just going to look wonderful.

**Christopher Wilk:**

Many of our visitors want to participate in something. They want an activity. They want to do something so in the British Galleries, for example, we have activity areas, where people can put together a chair, or they can draw, where they can try on a piece of armour, and what's interesting is some people, some of our more snobbish visitors, will refer to those areas as the children's areas. But in fact adults are the biggest users of those kinds of areas in the museum. I think what's most successful about the British Galleries is that using a wide range of interpretation to try to address a wide range of audiences really worked.

**Sarah Medlam:**

Looking back on the British Galleries with six, seven years' hindsight one of the things that pleases me is that it has stood up quite well to public use which is quite a difficult thing to achieve with a very high number of visitors; it continues to please many visitors.

**Christopher Wilk:**

I think for some of my colleagues one of the failures of the Galleries was that it didn't attract a different audience demographically. We didn't anticipate that it would change the profile of the V&A visitor. I mean we know for a fact that if you do fashion exhibitions, or contemporary design exhibitions you get a much younger audience. If you do things to do with history you get an older audience which is predominantly female and that's remained the case.

**Sarah Medlam:**

We have learned lessons from it and our next project, which will be the new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries; we will be carrying over a number of those lessons into the new galleries.

**Christopher Wilk:**

The British Galleries was obviously a critical success and we were very happy about that here in the museum collectively but what I was most happy about was that it actually changed the culture of doing galleries in the V&A so that all subsequent gallery projects in the museum have taken on board issues of audience in a very dramatic way, but the baseline, the place from where we start in the museum and doing a gallery became the British Galleries, not that subsequent galleries should be like the British Galleries, but that they should start from a very different place.