



Museums in contemporary society

Secrets of the V&A

Mark Jones:

The V&A has very large collections, which derive primarily from Europe, and from the great cultures of Asia. They were collected initially because it was believed they provided the best examples of design in the past.

Vox pop Woman:

I've seen sculptures; I've seen oil paintings, wonderful old beds.

Vox pop Man:

We came specifically to see the jewellery collection.

Vox pop Woman:

We've been into backstage areas to go and have a look-see what the dress collection holds backstage.

Sarah Medlam:

The V&A was founded in the nineteenth century with a very strong aim, which was to support British Industry by the education of designers, and I also think we have a very strong role in terms of bringing awareness of design and the importance of design to a much wider audience.

Christopher Wilk:

At the V&A we reach out to a very broad spectrum of visitors. We're interested in many different diverse audiences with different kinds of needs and expectations.

A diverse audience requires a range of different display styles.

Mark Jones:

There are two things that we broadly try and do. One is to present our collections in a broad cultural context, that's to enable people to understand why things look as they do, what the culture that produced them was, who the leaders of taste were, what we mean by terms like style.

Tim Benton:

I think it's really interesting because this display is challenging me to decide whether this object here is a real piece of Chippendale furniture or not, and that's something that museums don't normally do. So it's making me look really hard and it's also giving me archival information, so I can tell for myself what I think is the answer.

Mark Jones:

And the other thing that we do is to try and explain to people what things are made of, and how they are made. That's what we call our materials and techniques galleries, and they focus much more than would be the case in most museums on the "how" of the manufacture of objects, as well as their appearance.

Christopher Wilk:

Ironwork, silver. People within the museum approached creating them in very different ways. So if you go to the ironwork gallery you see the concept of the museum as an encyclopaedia. It's like opening an encyclopaedia on the history of ironwork. Things are put up very simply, they're labelled very simply, and that's a mode of display that's actually been around the museum almost since it's founding, although that gallery was done in the post-war period.

Prue Richardson:

This object's really helpful for me because I'm doing a PhD on window grills in Renaissance Venice and to be able to get close to an object like this and see how it's made is really, really important for my research.

The displays provide clues about how the museum perceives its wider role.

Mark Jones:

Society in general wishes to see objects, as it were, saved from the wreck of time so there is this sense as museums as agents for the preservation of what is important from the past.

Child: (reading)

Four-poster beds are like rooms enclosed by curtains.

Teacher:

This bed is over 400 years old. Now if something is kept for over 400 years, do you think it's going to be in perfect condition?

Children:

No.

Mark Jones:

Museums can also be effective educational institutions, that using these collections they can engage people in thinking about issues which they wouldn't really tackle if those collections weren't available to them.

Child:

That's really nice. That's gold isn't it?

Child:

How much do you think that gold is, like how much money would it be?

Child:

Nine hundred million pounds or something?

Child:

More than that!

Child:

Most museums you just look at things...

Child:

I wanna be able to touch them.

Mark Jones:

Museums can be powerful agents for making people feel that they belong in society. The fact that they are open, available, free to all, safe, welcoming, and full of interesting, sometimes beautiful, objects creates a kind of sense of belonging to society which, of course, museums only contribute to in a small way, but perhaps in a significant way.

Christopher Wilk:

I think one of the fundamental changes that has taken place, certainly in the way that the museum looks at its visitors is that we don't regard ourselves as the sole source of authority. It used to be that curators would say, right, I know my collection, I know the history, I will tell the public what they have to know, they will come into the museum, they will follow my story, and they will leave enlightened. We now know, maybe a bit later than we should have, that the most important thing that happens in a museum is that it's an experience; it's what the visitor brings with them.

Sarah Medlam:

What do they want? They may want to sit down and draw, so we provide stools. They may want to follow up something in great detail and that's where, of course, the rise of IT has helped.

David Birley:

Now I enjoy coming to the V&A because I'm interested in glass. These particularly interest me because these are 18th century, and although they're glass they're painted to resemble porcelain. This one here particularly interests me – Lamoen and Sapp – and in fact there are some that I would like to find out more about.

Sarah Medlam:

Despite all our aspirations I think we probably do still offer very much our own view of our collections to visitors, but what is very interesting is that if you offer them the opportunity to engage, you very often learn a great deal from visitors, and I think one of the things that increasing use of IT will allow us to do is to offer visitors the chance to respond to our objects very directly which, in turn, may lead us to look at them in a new light.

David Birley:

Right, this says it's a cruet bottle and made circa 1765, enamelled glass, and what's interesting is it says here decorated by the painter, signing himself PP or PF. Now that I haven't seen before.

Christopher Wilk:

When you start to talk about visitors you have to consider why they come to the museum, and although there are lots explanations – people want a day out, they might want to get out of the rain, they might want to learn about silver or ceramics – in fact, if you really talk to people, and you get to the core of the matter, most people come to the V&A to learn.

Prue Richardson:

One of the advantages of being in the V&A is that I can see objects that have had similar uses but are made in different ways in a nice, small context, so I can turn from one object to another. Here what we've got is a panel, which it's thought to have been a window grill. Clearly this would have come from a fairly large house so we're very lucky to have it in the collection. It gives me an idea of what rich people in larger houses would have been using to decorate their homes.

Christopher Wilk:

We can give them opportunities for learning and looking but the chances are that most visitors, unless they're in an exhibition where they must follow a route, that they will choose their route, they will decide in what order they will look at things, they will decide whether they will look at three things or twelve things, they will decide whether they even bother to read the labels. Some of them will decide whether to even really take in which gallery that they're in, but what we have to do is provide them with opportunities. We have to provide them with the tools that they might need to engage with our collections.

Vox pop Man:

What did I learn? Well, bits and pieces I guess.

Vox pop Man:

The craftsmen of years ago were superior to the craftsmen of today.

Vox pop Man:

I'm very interested in Islamic art and calligraphy that sort of thing so I do tend to wander around there.

The newer displays give the visitor a lot more freedom, but also more responsibility.

Vox pop Woman:

I was on a bit of a magical mystery tour. I wasn't very clear where I was going. I didn't find it very clear, actually what was coming next and where things were.

Vox pop Woman:

I think you could come here probably all your life and still get lost, but that's part of the fun!

Sarah Medlam:

I think you only have to go into the galleries with someone who perhaps has very little experience of objects to see those objects they light on in a completely different light because they're not bringing an expected response to them.

Christopher Wilk:

And that gives great pause for thought and it gives, I hope, to curators a much greater sense of modesty about what they're doing and about their ability to influence how visitors are going to think, how visitors are going to react to what we put on display.

Vox pop Man:

We spent the better part of two hours just looking around because, as a yank, we don't have anything like that in the States.

Vox pop Man: (Italian)

Il piacere e' l'ambiente, si respira cultura.

Vox pop Woman:

It's a treasure trove. You will get to places that you never expected to get to.