



## Museums in contemporary society

*Secrets of the V&A perspective: Tim Benton*

### **Tim Benton:**

We wanted to choose a major national museum because these great institutions are the ones where heritage is tested as far as museums are concerned. The V&A also is of particular interest because when it was founded just after The Great Exhibition in 1851 it began as a teaching collection for what became The Royal College of Art, the Kensington Schools, and so the objects were collected are really as examples of the different crafts: metalwork, ceramics, glass, fashion, textiles, and so forth. Later, as the collection grew, it became something else, it became in fact one of the very best in the world collections of decorative arts and design. And the result of this is that there are two different kinds of collection in the V&A. There are objects which are there as examples of different media and they're still represented like that, you have the metalwork together, blue glass together, and so forth, and there are displays which are thought of as representing the history of style.

For the visitor to a museum like the V&A a lot of what you look at is really the history of culture, and this is where heritage comes in. People look at British work in terms of some notion of Britishness, or they look at Indian and Chinese work in terms of an idea of the culture of those countries and those civilisations, and so from that point of view it's almost inescapable that everything in the collection, or most of what's in the collection, is seen as part of British heritage. The Museum Curators, and for example the Director, see as an important part of their responsibility to preserve this British heritage, and they would understand that British heritage is including not just objects made in Britain but objects which were required, for example in the period of the British Empire and have now become a staple part of the collection. This becomes quite an important argument when it's a question of repatriating objects that are claimed by the countries of origin. Curators are pulled in a number of different directions. All curators feel that they have a kind of Hippocratic Oath, that their task is to conserve what has been given to them to look after, and this is I mean the worst thing that can happen to a curator is for objects to get broken or lost, or devalued in some way, or for somebody to claim that they're fakes, for example, so this thing of preserving the physical objects, but also their reputation, is extremely important for a curator.

But on the other hand the Government will tell them all the time that if they're going to pay them all this money then they've got to attract large numbers of visitors and attracting a large number of visitors involves different strategies. For example it may be better to spend time instead of looking after your permanent collection, putting on a temporary exhibition, because putting on a blockbuster exhibition can bring in a lot of people, including a lot of revenue-earning foreign tourists, so that's one kind of tension. Then there's the question about display. A beautiful, beautiful object which is very small, very difficult to understand, or something which is not actually very beautiful but very rare, may not attract the public. It may in some cases be better to recreate something, or to create a multi-media presentation which will capture the imagination of the visiting public, particularly for example children, and evoke the past or some aspect of British culture more vividly than the real things themselves, and this struggle between authenticity and presentation values is a major issue for curators.

One of the reasons frankly for choosing a major museum as the subject was that normally it's in museums that the Authorised Heritage Discourse is represented in its most perfect form for the reasons that I've been discussing, in other words, the fact that there's a permanent collection, that curators have very strong professional formations, and so forth. It was very interesting that the people we interviewed in the V&A from the Director downwards did not represent those views in their purist form. The purist form of AHD that a museum curator would mix these statements together, basically that the value of objects is inherent in the

things themselves so that a very beautiful vase is just beautiful, and unique and authentic, and so forth, and these characteristics are in the object and, in a sense, don't need representing and explaining to the public.

Secondly, that the judgements that should go towards selecting what to put on display come from professionals who are the best qualified to judge, so it's not up to the public, it's up to the professionals to decide which are the best objects, which should be put on display, how they should be displayed, and so forth.

And then thirdly, that this should link up with ideas of nationalism, so the idea that this certainty of expertise of the curators, and this conviction that the qualities are inherent in objects is linked to the idea that these objects are inherently British or English or Scottish or Welsh, that they have an identity which is kind of fixed and irreversible. And putting all these things together, I mean for example the V&A in the seventies was pretty much like that. You went into the V&A and you were shown displays, there was no explanation about why they were like they were, and you accepted them as just being the best of their kind, and that was it, you didn't have a kind of dialogue with them. Now what we heard from the Director downwards was museum professionals were very aware that this wasn't acceptable now. They were aware that the public had to be taken into account, that telling stories was very important, that the demographic of the visiting public was important, that they were trying to attract more children and also a wider ethnic diversity of visitor, and that they were trying to do it in a way that was pleasurable, so they were putting their professional expertise, if you like, in the mix with other people, for example an educationalist and an historian who are both involved in the design of the British Galleries, so that was surprising in a way and what it makes me think is that although the AHD in its classic form is not now how museum professionals speak, there is a new and revised AHD, one which if you like, like politicians today speak a language of openness and democracy, and the client is always right, and so forth, while at the same time achieving their own aims of maintaining what they think of as the important values in the collection, and also maintaining their view of history.

I don't think there's any question of this being a phenomenon of deceit or of a kind of selling out to some sort of external thing, I think there's a very strong, self-controlling intellectual development which has taken place. But there's also a cultural change which is to do with the intellectual business, you know the articles and books that have been written. There was a movement in the seventies called the new museography and all these people today were part of that movement, they were reforming the museums as they saw them which they felt had become too authoritarian, too rigid and so forth, so this is the new generation of people who have themselves helped to raise barricades, if you like, in their institutions over the years, and they're now trying to be much more sophisticated in the way that they deploy objects in the face of the public.