



Museums in contemporary society

Redefining the V&A perspective: Tim Benton

Tim Benton:

There was a widespread feeling and Christopher Wilk, who was the person in charge of the British Galleries project, expresses it very well in the clip, that the V&A had become completely stuck in its ways. The display, the main display, was the one that had been introduced just after the war. It was divided very clearly into these two forms of display: the teaching galleries which were the ones with metalwork, ceramics, glass and so forth represented together, and then the primary galleries which displayed things together, often in room settings, and basically the public were not looking at them any more and so something had to be done. And there was already an example in the Indian and Chinese Galleries of a much more dynamic kind of display, much more designed. Objects were selected to go together in a visually stunning way, but also to try and tell stories so that you would have, for example in the Indian Galleries objects were put together in such a way that you could understand something of the culture of the Mughal courts and so forth.

In the British Galleries the main driving force is historical so you work through roughly in historical order and objects are selected and displayed together, often with a historical connection so for example you have the Court of Henry VII, or we have the Court of Elizabeth the First, that sort of thing, and there were also other themes that were very important in the selection and display of objects, themes for example as the cultivation of taste, and the sub-question about who governs taste, drawing attention to the wealthy middle classes and aristocracy whose collections formed a key part of what the V&A now holds, so it's trying to make the public aware that these beautiful objects were not for everybody but they belonged to a particular social strata, and that was new. And then also among these themes was a more popular theme - what was the culture of the general public, and there was another theme as well to do with innovation, innovation in materials, innovation in, for example importing new kinds of objects, and so forth. So these ideas played an important role in selecting objects of display, and the displays were often going from like a whole space to even quite small collections which made a particular point, using objects to tell stories, and these stories in the end are social and economic, and to do with the imagination as well.

Another important aspect of the changes that were part of the new museology was to consider the experience of the visitor. A key person in this group that created the British Galleries was an educationalist who thought of things in terms of what people actually did, what they could do with objects, and so the result of this is that there are sections of the British Galleries where people can try things on, people can even touch things, you can build things, you can make things, you can design a coat of arms, and all of this we saw. There are also a lot of multimedia displays and these multimedia displays partly give you the background context or, in some cases, they help you to understand the objects that are on display, they'll show you how things are made, they'll tell you what to look for, and that is a big breakthrough in the way that a major gallery can communicate with the public and, crudely, educate it. Telling stories and informing the public has the great advantage of being, of creating a dialogue with the public, but at the same time it's a dialogue of the teacher and the student. Some things are more open than others, but generally speaking multimedia displays present a single view of the past, a single view of what happened, and although this view is in most cases a modern view, it takes into account social diversity and all sorts of things, it nevertheless is one view and if you don't agree with it there's nothing really you can do about it, and that is more true about interpretative multimedia exercises than if you just show the object. In the old museology there was this idea that you mustn't intervene between the object and the spectator. This way the spectator could interpret the object in any way they liked. For example, at the Tate Gallery for nearly ten years during the period when Alan

Bowness was the Director of the Tate Gallery there was an absolute ban on interpretative text on captions, so that the captions or paintings could only read artist's name, title of the work, date if there was one, and the accession number and nothing else, and this was a real point of principle and there were many debates about it. Now the view is that difficult works, or any kind of works, benefit from having a bit of context, a bit of interpretation, to help the viewer, the sort of sociological evidence that the more people feel excluded from museums anyway because, for example of not having a culture which supports an understanding of the objects in a museum, the more they like having some interpretation and some information. It's now accepted that it's good to add interpretation but there are dangers there as well. In the video Christopher Wilk says quite rightly that the British Galleries were a huge success. They're considered in the business the model for how to do this kind of big display and the reviews, and so forth, are very positive.

But it's interesting that from a demographic point of view the British Galleries haven't changed very much the profile of people who visit the V&A and the British Galleries; in fact, curiously, there are slightly more older people now who visit the British Galleries, there are fewer children, and many of the people, as Christopher said, who visit the hands on parts of the museum which were designed for children or in fact older people. So from that point of view it hasn't had the radical effect that was hoped for. I think also there are things one can say about the British Galleries as a criticism, if you like. One is that they are very dark. They're dark because if you want to have interdisciplinary displays which makes textiles and paperworks, and so forth with other more robust things like woodwork, and so forth, you have to keep the light levels down everywhere, whereas conventionally in a museum you can have high light levels where there are paintings or sculptures, and then you have low light levels where there are works on paper. And this is a penalty, if you like, of this desirable outcome of having interdisciplinary things, having objects mixed together in order to show the culture of particular groups of people, rather than just showing things by their type.

Another interesting judgement that one can make on the British Galleries is that many of the key ideas which dominated the discussion of the group that created the British Galleries during the period of design, and so forth, are things that don't communicate very well, and I think this is an interesting question – does it matter? On the one hand the themes are very important intellectually for the design of the display and have an impact on the things that are shown, so from that point of view it doesn't matter that people are not actually aware of what the themes are. The important thing is that these themes helped to guide the thinking of the people who made the selection and decided how to put the things together, and that has had a good effect, if you like, on making a display which is clearly structured; the viewer sees an order in what is displayed. But it also demonstrates something that I was trying to suggest earlier, which is this conflict between wanting to choose things because they're the best, and wanting to tell a story and in the end telling a story had to step aside in some cases to allow the most beautiful, the most unique, the most valuable objects to be displayed and if you ask well, what is the basis on which one talks about the best, in the end you're talking about the fairly narrow consensus of a particular group of professionals at a particular moment in time. It changes over time, and it changes in different professionals. It changes within an institution some people think, some things are more important than others, but these are professional judgements, professional judgements which have been largely echoed by specialists across the field, these aren't just people in an ivory tower. Most design and art historians at a particular time, in a particular place, roughly share the same set of values, but these may not be the same values that are shared by the general public.