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13. A Museum Perspective

Christopher Breward (Victoria and Albert Museum)

Arts and humanities research directly informs the key activities of a national museum like the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The museum serves as an international centre of excellence in the fields of the history of art and design, conservation, learning and interpretation and contemporary creative practice, and its programmes benefit from research that is designed to contribute both to the public understanding and experience of its collections, and to the methodological and theoretical advancement of relevant arts and humanities disciplines. The V&A therefore fosters a proactive research culture, both in developing public outcomes that are underpinned by current scholarship (its galleries, high-profile exhibitions, publications, conferences and website) and in fostering collaborations with academic partners.

As a frequent recipient of Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and other research grants the V&A is well practised in recognizing and capitalizing on opportunities to enhance the value of its activities and outputs through ambitious, authoritative and accessible research programmes. This chapter will discuss recent examples of externally funded projects at the V&A where innovative object, collection, exhibition and archive-based research has made a demonstrable and positive impact on both specialist knowledge and the quality of the visitor experience, stimulating debate on past and present cultures, and encouraging new approaches to scholarship and the dissemination of expertise in the UK and beyond.

Much recent debate on the value of the public arts sector (including museums and galleries) has focused on its measurable contribution to the national economy via the creative industries, tourism and a vibrant art market, and to the quality of life of individuals and communities. It is certainly the case that the UK's museums play an important role in raising social capital, encouraging inclusion and kick-starting urban regeneration. Less has been said, however, on the ways in which the practice of arts and humanities research underpins these initiatives, particularly in the context of the museum exhibition and display. The following case-studies demonstrate the significant impact that such research activities can make via the public presentation of the nation's material and cultural assets.

Object-led research

The most distinctive feature of museum-based research is that it is based on objects. Prompted by artefacts from the past, museums have

traditionally tended to ask very focused questions about dating, authorship, manufacture and usage. While this approach was once seen as conservative by academics, in recent years the idea that objects should be given priority – that they should determine the course of research, rather than serving as data – has become more and more accepted. Indeed, many observers agree that there has been a ‘material turn’ in fields such as anthropology, social history and even literary studies, comparable to the much-discussed ‘linguistic turn’ that occurred in the humanities some thirty years ago. The shift towards materiality has encouraged museum professionals and academic researchers to work together more closely than ever before, particularly in the UK. This has been beneficial to all concerned. UK-based museum curators have broadened the range of questions that they ask of their collections, and the focus on objects has similarly transformed the methods and goals of scholarly research and learning in the British higher education sector.

There are multiple advantages to be gained by placing objects at the centre of a collaborative research project, rather than in the margins. First and foremost, artefacts exert friction on the researcher. General theories are invariably tested by the specificity and concreteness of objects, which rarely conform to expectation. Partly for this reason, object-led research is fundamentally interdisciplinary. Fully accounting for the research potential of even a single object might require contributions by historians of art,

Figure 13.1 Beer mug inscribed ‘1701’ and decorated in slip. © <http://www.vam.ac.uk>

culture, science and economics, as well as specialists in conservation and other scientific disciplines.

Take, for example, the illustrated decorated beer mug inscribed '1701'. Such an object can be studied, first of all, on the basis of its appearance. Its somewhat old-fashioned decoration in slip (liquid clay) attests to stylistic conservatism in Staffordshire, the place of its manufacture. Yet if we inquire further, we might find that the mug was implicated in new networks of distribution. The materials used to make it may have been sourced from far away, and the finished object sold in a distant city, or even abroad in America and Europe.

We might ask where and how the mug was used. Through the comparative study of objects like this one we can learn about communal drinking habits, the emergence of new venues for socialization and attitudes towards intoxication. Or we might wonder about the significance of its date inscription, which would lead to questions about attitudes to marriage, childbirth or political commemoration. The mug would probably have been used across a broad spectrum of society, from the 'plainer sorts' to the upwardly mobile mercantile class. This is a further advantage of object-led research: it often yields evidence of a wider demographic range than textual sources. In periods where many people were illiterate or semi-literate, or where documents are scarce, objects can often be the only means of accessing the experience of the majority of people – people whose descendants now form a core audience for museum displays and popular histories.

Despite all these benefits, object-based research also poses its own challenges. First and foremost, though museum collections are often defined by the goal of preservation, researchers are forced to think about the objects they hold as dynamic. Unlike most textual forms of historic evidence, material things are subject to constant change through modification, wear and repair. Though authenticity and originality are prized, the fact is that when it comes to objects from the past, alteration is the norm, not the exception.

Museum-based conservation offers a disciplinary basis for research into such issues. The techniques of the scientist and the conservator can be used to gain access not only to the moment of an object's creation, but also its entire lifespan: a principle that lies at the heart of the V&A's recent research project focusing on the Mazarin Chest (funded by the Getty Foundation and the Toshiba International Foundation, supported by the Japan Foundation and the Tobunken, and carried out at the V&A, Imperial College, Loughborough University, Dresden Academy of Fine Arts and the Institute of Catalysis and Surface Chemistry, Polish Academy of Sciences). The chest is a most unusual example of seventeenth-century Japanese lacquerwork, of a very high quality that would normally not have been exported to Europe. Its history of ownership permits us to see it in relation to a long series of people and places – from its Japanese makers to its initial owners, the Mazarin family of France, from the Romantic-era

Figure 13.2 The Mazarin Chest. © <http://www.vam.ac.uk>

collector William Beckford, to the V&A itself (the museum acquired the object in 1882).

The Mazarin Chest project also shed light on differing cultural attitudes to historic objects in the present day. The goal was to develop an integrated approach to the conservation of lacquer objects that respects both Western conservation ethics, in which concern with the re-treatability of objects is paramount, and Japanese conservation values, which seek to preserve the cultural continuity of objects by employing, as far as possible, materials and techniques similar to those used at the time of manufacture. The chest has thus been a basis not only for nuanced historic research but also new international exchanges of knowledge and understanding.

A final advantage of object-led research is its direct connection to physical experience. Every researcher who has worked in a museum knows that handling unfamiliar objects for the first time is among the most thrilling aspects of their work. This excitement is telling us something: through touch, we can begin to ask new questions about those different from ourselves. For those interested in issues such as comportment, the senses, and sexual and ethnic identity, materiality can provide routes into unspoken (and perhaps even unconscious) cultural values. Fashion – a subject to which we will return – is a particularly obvious example. Thinking about the self-regulating function of garments, from the kimono to the corset, is an instance in which research can make the lived experience of cultural difference immediately palpable to all.

Collection-based research

Like the objects which form their content, permanent collections such as those housed at the V&A are not inert. They are a live inheritance that requires constant reinterpretation and new models of communication if they are to speak effectively to contemporary audiences and enhance our sense of the complex, globalized twenty-first-century world as an entity with historical roots and challenging futures. Research is one of the methods by which we realize the social and cultural value of the assets that museums hold on behalf of the public, an obvious point but one that is too rarely made in press coverage and reviews of headline exhibitions and gallery developments. Two recently completed research projects help to elucidate the relevance to the UK's diverse communities of our material heritage as represented in the V&A Museum's collections.

'Fashioning Diaspora Space' was a three-year collaboration between the V&A and Royal Holloway, University of London. It was funded by the AHRC as part of the 'Diasporas, Identities and Migration' programme and examined the presence in the UK of South Asian (Indian and Pakistani) textiles intended for use in clothing. In the context of the museum, the project has expanded knowledge about the V&A's collections of nineteenth-century Indian textiles, not only in terms of identifying the objects, but also through asking how and why these collections were formed, how they have been used in the past and what they might mean to current and future generations of curators, visitors, designers and consumers. This research is also relevant to the holdings of other museum collections such as the Manchester Art Gallery, Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, Paisley Museum and Bath Fashion Museum, to the archives of past and present textile manufacturers at Macclesfield Silk Archives, Warners and G.P. & J. Baker, as well as to the work of contemporary fashion retailers. In comparing colonial and postcolonial forms, untangling their genesis, their cultural designations and translations, the project has significant implications for our understanding of wider British material and visual cultures and landscapes.

One of the earliest groups within the Indian textile collections at the V&A consists of examples acquired at the Great Exhibition of 1851. This was the first time that large numbers of the British public had seen what Indian textile producers were capable of creating. The quality of Indian hand-woven silk, embroideries and muslins was unmatched by industrial British textile manufacturers. In the 1860s and 1870s many of the South Asian textiles in the collection were cut up and put into two multi-volume sets of textile sample books. These were sent around the country to both inspire designers and manufacturers, and with a view to building up the sales of British textiles to the Indian subcontinent. New entries on the V&A website (the non-destructive equivalent of these nineteenth-century albums) about South Asian textiles in the museum have made relevant images and information on their history, context and use universally available to a

UK (and international) audience for the first time since the middle of the nineteenth century.

The story of the V&A's South Asian textile collection is typical of diaspora narratives in its mixture of emulation, destruction and learning. These processes – both positive and negative – are to be found in many other instances of cultural exchange, international trade and migration. Indian textiles, too, include vivid examples of objects whose very surfaces play out the action of far-flung networks in their materials and decoration. The investigation of a distinctive Parsi Chinese embroidery, consisting of a coloured embroidery on white silk depicting birds among foliage, shaped for a *jubla* or girl's shirt (figure 3) reveals longer histories and connections. The Parsis of Bombay (Mumbai) were descendants of the Zoroastrians who emigrated to the Indian subcontinent from Iran in the eighth century. Parsi-owned shipping companies traded with China, returning with highly prized Chinese goods including embroidered textiles. Some Chinese embroiderers also settled in Surat, a port city in Gujarat. This single *jubla* is thus the complex result of the interwoven histories of four nations in two continents spanning twelve centuries. New interpretations fostered through the focused research of such an

Figure 13.3 Embroidered jubla from the Victoria and Albert Museum's South Asian textile collection. © <http://www.vam.ac.uk>

object (amongst many others) indicate that it is time to move beyond postcolonial hand-wringing and progress in our understanding of a shared human past.

A second example focuses on an aspect of the museum's practices where research has revealed a previously overlooked area of the V&A's collecting history. The thirty-month-long project, conducted as part of a Cultural Ownership and Capacity Building Project and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, focused on identifying and interpreting Africa-related materials within the collections. The undertaking built on several years of engagement with black British communities, seeking to build black and minority ethnic audiences for the V&A and to develop collaborations and skill-sharing within the black heritage/cultural sector.

The V&A has always collected the art and design of Africa. Initially, its collecting focused on the northern part of the continent. Thirteen Tunisian textiles were part of the 1851 Great Exhibition purchases which formed the core of the collection. Ancient Egyptian textiles and glassware, and Moroccan and Algerian ceramics and jewellery, formed other collecting strands through the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. This same period witnessed a number of key imperial acquisitions from sub-Saharan Africa including religious, ceremonial and decorative items associated with Ethiopia's ruling family, acquired through the Abyssinian Expedition of 1868, and thirteen pieces of largely gold regalia, probably associated with the court of the Asante leader, acquired through the British invasion of Kumasi, state capital of Asante, Ghana, in 1874.

More recently, these African acquisitions have been supplemented with objects that reflect the changing political, social and cultural contexts of 'postcolonial' Africa. The Word and Image Department has been particularly active, acquiring prints by African artists including Ben Enwonwu, Tunde Odunlade, Paul Sibisi and David Koloane. The cultural influence of the African diaspora is also represented in acquisitions of work by Caribbean artists such as Winston Branch and Aubrey Williams, and Black British artists such as Maud Sulter, Lubaina Himid, Chris Ofili and Faisal Abdu'Allah. It is hoped that this fresh, research-informed awareness may fuel revisions to the museum's collecting policy and encourage a more proactive, creative approach to its Africa collections and their future development.

Exhibitions

Placed at the crossroads between scholarly enquiry and communication with a wider audience, exhibitions are ideally located to disseminate the broad cultural, social and economic benefits associated with the arts and humanities field, positively engaging visitors in a much more direct and immersive manner than other forms of media. Unlike other academic outputs, exhibitions must confront the demands of appealing to very large non-specialist audiences while making specialist knowledge widely

accessible. This unique set of circumstances makes exhibitions a particularly challenging and stimulating arena within which to explore the value and impact of research.

In recent years, exhibition-based research within the UK has changed dramatically in character and scope. Museums have been at the heart of a momentous cultural shift which has transformed them from perceived passive recipients of research-led initiatives to frontrunners. Fostered by an increasing number of national and international research funding schemes and policies designed to generate active collaborations between museums, universities and colleges, this radical transformation raises important questions about the new character and purpose of exhibition-based research. This is the framework within which the groundbreaking exhibition *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (V&A, October 2006–January 2007) operated – the result of a four-year research project funded by the Getty Foundation and the AHRC.

The research leading to an exhibition differs substantially from conventional academic research. Centred on ‘things’, the research process must acknowledge that objects are carriers of complex visual, material, cultural and social meanings, and that as such they should generate multiple narratives and interpretations. This recognition often demands breaking out of traditional disciplinary boundaries and embracing an interdisciplinary outlook. The research for *At Home in Renaissance Italy* was carried out by a multidisciplinary team including scholars working within art, decorative arts and architectural history, social history, Islamic studies, music history, archaeology, the history of science, food history and conservation. Exploring the domestic interior in Italy between 1400 and 1600 in all its visual and material complexity, with objects ranging from prestigious old master paintings and sculptures to pins and pastry cutters, the exhibition brought together for the first time the world of Renaissance ‘high’ art and that of domestic material culture. Engaging with household life and everyday experience as well as cultural forms, the exhibition addressed topics as wide-ranging as cooking and dining, marriage and childbirth rituals, gambling, music-making, health and hygiene, collecting and mathematical knowledge.

The project aimed to make a major new contribution to Renaissance studies and to give revived meaning to the outstanding Renaissance collections housed within the V&A (recently presented afresh in the new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries, opened in December 2009). To achieve these objectives the project maximized its investment in original research by focusing on a wide variety of largely unpublished written documents, visual sources and objects. From domestic inventories to cookery books, from celebrated family portraits to popular prints, from ancient gems to chamber pots, the exhibition revealed a new, multifaceted aspect to Renaissance art and culture.

The multiplicity of research methods and exhibits involved in the project was reflected in the narratives accompanying the display, based directly on

primary sources, which suggested different, often contrasting interpretations of the same objects. Replacing the traditional, authoritative, curatorial voice with a more challenging and active approach, this mode of display aimed at including the viewer creatively in the meaning-making process and encouraging a dialogue between specialists and a wider audience. This curatorial strategy meant that there was a direct continuity from the initial framing of research questions all the way to the labels read by members of the public.

Much recent debate has highlighted the widespread dissatisfaction with traditional arenas of social and cultural exchange and the need for alternative spaces for public discourse. As public events and experiences playing a role in the creation of shared meaning, exhibitions can be seen as a largely untapped force for debate and social cohesion. Exhibitions such as *At Home in Renaissance Italy* can respond to this demand for public engagement with culture in different ways. By presenting historical materials in an exciting and accessible form they can help to bridge the gap between past and present. By revealing everyday objects, stories or situations that resonate with the life experience of the viewer they can appeal to wider cross-sections of society. By addressing complexity and difference head-on, challenging commonly held assumptions and establishing a dynamic relationship with the viewer, they can provide potent evidence of the value of investing in research into the arts and the humanities.

Creativity and design practice

Museum-based arts and humanities research also capitalizes on and creates multiple connections within the creative industries, making links between practitioners including fine artists, graphic, fashion and 3D designers and craftspeople; manufacturers; scientists; retailers; educators; and journalists, publishers and media producers. It encourages debate and collaboration across discrete sectors to their collective benefit and offers an inspirational space in which national conversations about creative skills can take place. In the case of the V&A, research projects focusing on fashion have been particularly successful in generating productive dialogue about this high-profile, multimillion-pound industry and its economic, cultural and political meanings and impact.

The 'Shopping Routes: Networks of Fashion Consumption in London's West End 1945–1979' project was one such initiative. Jointly hosted by the Geography Department at Royal Holloway, University of London, London College of Fashion and the V&A between 2003 and 2006 as part of the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption Programme, the project had the central aim of providing a new critical history of the development of the West End in the postwar period; widening and complicating existing assumptions, particularly those associated with the powerful myth of 'Swinging London.' The project had a series of focused research objectives, seeking to provide an account of the interfaces between designers,

manufacturers, suppliers, retailers, urban planners and consumers in the city. It also sought to develop recent ideas about the spatial contexts of fashion consumption, especially those situated in major metropolises, and to enhance understandings of consumption-led processes of urban renewal and transformation. It had the wider aim of interpreting London's role as a major fashion city in a comparative context, by examining the development of a range of key global sites of fashion consumption within a longer time-frame.

Through a combination of cross-institutional and multidisciplinary approaches, the research succeeded in providing a much more nuanced and extensive history of a phenomenon that hitherto has generally been approached through nostalgic accounts that focused on over-familiar sites like Carnaby Street and the King's Road, and on the emergent celebrity culture of the 1960s. It achieved this in a number of ways. First, archival research pointed to the significance of long-term features of London's fashion landscape, situating the seemingly overnight transformation of the city in the mid-1960s in the context of existing structures of retailing, wholesale, promotion and consumer behaviour, some of which had their roots in the mid-nineteenth century. Secondly, it challenged the existing emphasis on individual designers and boutiques, in favour of a framework that emphasized networks and relationships across sectors and traditions, and identified fashion consumption's interactions with other elements of urban change, particularly in architecture, planning and heritage. Thirdly, the project provided a systematic study of the concept of the 'Fashion World City', placing the specific characteristics of postwar London in a wider analysis of fashion's relationship with metropolitan modernity, which continues to have important resonance in the present.

The results of the research were disseminated through a number of channels including books and journal articles. The study of fashion in world cities formed the basis for a major international conference that brought together academics from a wide range of disciplines, and included studies of New York, Paris, Milan, Tokyo, Moscow, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Mumbai to complement the London focus. Most importantly, in 2006 the project was responsible for a high-profile exhibition on *Sixties Fashion* and an associated website at the V&A. This provided an opportunity to test some of the research findings through an engagement with the museum's collections, and through collaboration with designers, journalists and retailers active through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Both display and website, together with an exhibition book, were designed to reach a broad audience and had a demonstrable effect on the popular imagination, drawing positive press comment and informing the content of the UK school curriculum. The website also provided a way of soliciting memories of the period from the public, and a means of disseminating oral history interviews with key designers, entrepreneurs, journalists and others involved in 1960s London.

In general, the project has formed part of a wider re-evaluation of the political, economic and creative legacy of the 1960s that has taken place in UK academic circles and in the popular media during the past two decades. But besides providing an important platform for debate on these retrospective issues, 'Shopping Routes', particularly in its work on fashion and the concept of the World City, also engaged with wider discussion on contemporary urban policy in relation to what has been termed the New Urban Cultural Economy. What this museum-centred research initiative has identified is the extent to which the drive towards symbolic distinctiveness by competing fashion cities needs to be considered alongside the contradictory forces that stifle urban individuality and creativity. These forces include the hyper-capitalization of property markets and the increasing power of global corporations in a hugely expanded luxury-goods sector. History does have something to teach us.

As the content of the *Sixties Fashion* exhibition suggested, connections between the new symbolic industries (media and advertising) and older craft traditions were much more dynamic in cities like London, New York, Milan and Paris in the 1950s and 1960s than they were after the massive de-industrialization of the 1970s and 1980s. The creative networks, flexible production and vibrant consumer cultures of the previous era have been replaced by the corporatized surface sheen of now. So, though 'Swinging London' was a small, local affair, its openings for new businesses, its legacy of traditional fashion skills, its affordable infrastructure and its innovative approach to consumerism offer a genuinely distinctive template to those concerned about the serious challenges faced by UK fashion entrepreneurs in the globalized landscape of the early twenty-first century.

The museum as a forum for cultural exchange

Besides functioning as platforms for creative reflection and innovation in relation to the UK's history and current cultural and economic status, museums are also ideal venues for the staging of new cultural interactions beyond national frontiers. As we have suggested in reference to projects on Japan, South Asia and Africa, because objects themselves have always traversed national boundaries they are therefore a remarkably effective way of studying historical and contemporary cultural exchange. Through intelligent juxtaposition, museums can encourage researchers, curators and the public alike to see both difference and continuity across diverse nationalities, ethnicities and geographies. This has long been a guiding principle of research at the V&A, and informs permanent displays such as the British Galleries (opened 2001), the Jameel Gallery for Islamic Arts (opened 2006) and the Ceramics Galleries (opened 2009).

The research for two exhibitions, on view in 2008–9 at the V&A, exemplified this approach. *Cold War Modern* (researched in collaboration with colleagues

at the University of Brighton and the Royal College of Art) used the museum platform to reconfigure understandings of international relations in the recent past through the prism of design. Concentrating on the highly volatile years from 1945 to 1975, the exhibition examined the key themes of the period including the task of reconstruction in Europe after the Second World War and the rise of consumerism, demonstrating a continuity with the themes of modernism as they emerged in the interwar years (explored in the V&A's *Modernism: Designing a New World* exhibition of 2006). The strong influence of the Cold War upon popular culture was shown through graphics, fashion, film and product design.

Rather than focusing exclusively on the two superpowers that formed the poles of Cold War politics (the USA and USSR), the exhibition looked at countries such as Italy, France, Poland and Czechoslovakia, all of which were shaped by the era's politics but were not necessarily able to dictate them. The recovery of design history from these contexts unveiled complex lines of stylistic and technological exchange. The Soviet satellites of the Eastern Bloc, for example, experimented with surprising intersections between modernism and ideology. Across the project's wide geography, art and design during this period played a central role in representing, and sometimes challenging, the dominant ideas of the age.

China Design Now was an even more clear-cut example of the museum as a forum for cultural debate and exchange and a vehicle for truly original research. Based on extensive curatorial fieldwork carried out in Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing over a period of four years, and a three-day research workshop held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, in 2006, the exhibition provided a snapshot of the last ten years of rapid change in China's creative industries. Despite considerable recent media coverage in the UK (partly due to the hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing), public understanding of the social and industrial transformations occurring in China is only just starting to take shape. In such a moment there is no substitute for on-the-ground research, and the V&A was able to provide this in depth, bringing examples of product, fashion, architectural and graphic design before the British public for the first time. In addition, *China Design Now* offered insights into the dynamics of emergent design professionalism – and lessons that might well be applied to the study of other places and times.

Public understanding

These various case studies demonstrate the vibrancy of arts and humanities research undertaken within just one national institution; many other similar examples could be cited from the activities of the V&A, and more broadly across the British museum and gallery sector. What positions interdisciplinary museum-based research in the UK as unique is its innovative focus on material and visual culture as a primary focus for explaining broader

cultural, aesthetic, economic and political developments; its openness to cross-institutional and interdisciplinary research as a means of formulating such explanations; and its extraordinary capacity to further specialist knowledge whilst also informing wider public understanding. There is of course much potential for strengthening the research-base of the UK's museum sector, not least through further research that demonstrates the essential link between grounded, scholarly investigation of collections and the experience of the visitor. All must agree, however, that the simplistic dismissal of museum outputs as 'dumbed-down' versions of academic research – spectacular but empty entertainment – overlooks the tremendous innovation that underlies museum work in the UK today. This research constitutes an example to our international peers, and a major contribution to the intellectual and cultural life of the nation.¹

Note

- 1 This essay has benefited from contributions by all members of the Research Department at the V&A (especially Glenn Adamson, Marta Ajmar, Sonia Ashmore and Liz Miller) and members of the museum's Management Board.