



# RENAISSANCE NORTH WEST museums for changing lives

2008 WORKSHOP

## Telling Tales: Thematic Display Making

A workshop delivered by Renaissance North West

# Foreword

**On 19 September 2007, Renaissance North West, in partnership with the North West Federation of Museums & Galleries and the University of Manchester, delivered the first Curating for the Future conference. Over 100 delegates from museums and galleries across the region had the opportunity to hear inspirational talks by leaders in the sector and to participate in workshops that tackled thorny issues around disposals, collecting, documentation, workforce development, curatorial expertise and access.**

The Telling Tales: Thematic Display Making workshop is one of a series which examines key issues facing museums that are identified in the Museums Association's Collections for the Future report.

This event was designed for curators working at small to medium sized museums who are responsible for a range of collections but who are not subject specialists in all areas of the collections they manage. The idea is that through learning about how colleagues have mounted non-linear, thematic displays that incorporate a number of eras and collection groups, delegates will feel more confident in making use of stored collections in new and dynamic ways.

It is hoped that as a result of this event delegates will be better equipped to create non-linear, thematic displays that tell stories, to make use of collections regardless of specialist subject knowledge, to widen access to stored or 'little known' collections, to identify objects for new, imaginative displays and to modernise 'tired' displays.

**Jennie Crawford**

Renaissance North West Communications  
& Events Officer

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# Introduction

## Collections for the Future and Effective Collections: the wider context

Established in 2006, the Collections for the Future Steering Group is responsible for developing issues arising from the Museums Association's 2005 *Collections for the Future* report within the North West and for overseeing the region's Renaissance plans concerned with collections care, management, reinterpretation and display programmes, with a view to widening access and user engagement.

Led by the University of Manchester, the Steering Group's membership extends beyond the Hub museums to include members from National Museums Liverpool, the Wordsworth Trust, Blackburn, Lancashire and Cheshire Museums Services.

The group delivers the Collections for the Future and more recently the Effective Collections agendas via three strands of investment: supporting posts, provision of small grants, and a programme of events that stimulate debate around collections issues, including the 'Curating for the Future' conference.

For the North West, as a deliberate policy, Renaissance has created development officer posts and contracts that are each committed to the three original strands of Collections for the Future, rather than assigning Museum Development Officers to particular museums or counties.

In 2007, the Collections for the Future Steering Group set up two grant schemes specifically targeted at non-Hub museums. This year the 'Collections Care Development Fund' and the 'Collections Access Grant Scheme' will offer individual grants up to £5,000 for initiatives by regional museums and galleries, making a total of £110,000 available.

Collections for the Future is occasionally portrayed as a 'back to basics' campaign, looking inwardly at collections, ignoring the outward facing and central involvement of users and audiences. In the North West we are developing new and innovative ways of working which put users at the heart of 'collections' activity and make the best use of available resources. Through events like this one we are disseminating and advocating best practice in collections care and interpretation, drawing on experience and lessons learned within the region and beyond.

### **Piotr Bienkowski**

Deputy Director, The Manchester Museum  
&

### **Jennifer Harris**

Deputy Director, The Whitworth Art Gallery  
*Joint chairs of the Collections for the Future Steering Group*

# Presentation 1

## The Textile Gallery at The Whitworth Art Gallery

Jennifer Harris, Deputy Director, The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

The Whitworth Art Gallery's Designated Collection of world textiles was refurbished in 2006. Though relatively modest in financial terms, the project was educationally ambitious, seeking to modernise displays that had become aesthetically and conceptually tired, using new thematic approaches to extend and diversify the Gallery's audiences and taking a 'layered' approach to interpretation that would 'speak' to everyone from local, ethnically diverse families to textile specialists and practitioners – the Textile Gallery's traditional 'fan base'.

Dr. Jennifer Harris, Deputy Director at the Whitworth, led the Gallery team responsible for reconceptualising the new displays.

### The Textile Collection

The collection contains around 17,000 objects characterised by geographical and chronological diversity, and embraces art, craft and industrial design. It provides examples of textile techniques and a picture of the social function of textiles within all the major world textile cultures as well as a record of both stylistic and technological development within the textile industry in Western Europe. There are significant holdings of modern and contemporary textiles. Consultation with user groups, before work started on the re-display, revealed a lot of enthusiasm for creating displays that highlighted this rich historical and geographic mix.

### Who uses the Textile Gallery?

The Textile Gallery occupies a prime position as the gateway to the rest of the building. Users include:

- **Browsers** – those passing through to other collection displays or temporary exhibition spaces.
- **Schools** – more than 60% of facilitated school groups use the textile displays and other resources in the Textile Gallery.
- **Families** – one of the strategic objectives of the re-display was to target local families and to use



The Whitworth Art Gallery

the Textile Gallery specifically as part of the aim of extending and diversifying audiences. The Whitworth is situated in the middle of an ethnically diverse area. Art collections can be alienating or difficult for non-traditional users, whereas textiles are highly accessible. Through clothing and furnishings everyone is familiar with them.

- **Researchers** – these include large numbers of students on facilitated or self-directed visits. Practitioners are also a core part of the audience. Of all the crafts, textiles attract the largest number of amateur, semi-professional and professional makers.

All these user groups were consulted about what they liked / disliked or would like to see improved or introduced into the re-displayed Textile Gallery.

## The previous displays

The Gallery contains 12 vitrine-like display cases that are part of the architecture of the original 1908 building. Prior to 2006 the displays were organised in a variety of ways. Some were arranged geographically, others by technique, whilst another group again reflected strengths of the collection. They were not linear, chronological displays and some were themed (looking, for example, at the social formations and contexts of textiles, such as their roles in women's lives) but, conceptually, they were lacking in coherence and, above all, they were visually 'tired'.

## Selecting themes to tell stories

The re-display explores the collections through four overarching themes that may be broadly described as Pattern, Design, Identity and Material Life Cycles. Three cases in a row are given over to each theme.

### 1. Making Patterns with Textiles

The pattern cases explore the basic textile patterning techniques – weaving, dyeing and printing, and stitching – through objects that reflect the historical and geographical diversity of the collection. Objects are placed deliberately low to encourage small children to look more carefully.

### 2. Textile Journeys

This theme allows students in particular to see how designers revisit patterns from the past and from other cultures, and use them as the starting point for new designs. It also examines the impact of trade and empire on textile design, production and consumption, for example, in the first selection the global impact of Indian trade textiles.

### 3. What Do Textiles Say?

The third theme explores the ritual and social function of textiles, such as their use in life cycle ceremonies or the way in which cloth and clothing can express power and privilege or are believed to protect against harm. Further consultation with users has revealed these displays to be some of the most popular with all groups of visitors.

### 4. Textile Life Cycles

This group of displays explores the themes of decay, recycling and conservation and demonstrates to visitors the business of museums and museum practices. Thematic displays open up rich opportunities for creative juxtapositions of objects, such as a pair of recycled fabric crows by contemporary Pakistani artist Ruby Chishti and an early 19th century patchwork quilt.

## Layered interpretation

Specially commissioned workstations are the focus for most of the interaction in the Gallery. These incorporate:

- Original examples of, or made-to-order, children's clothes from around the world.
- Textile-related art and craft activities for children.
- A small library of books about textiles for children and adults.

Given the make-up of users the Gallery has to be a grown-up space as well as a family-friendly one and lend itself to research as well as to play. So the workstations also contain:

- Handling samples that relate to the contents of the cases.
- Computers to search the collections online.
- Fact Files.



### Delegate feedback

*“The textile gallery presentation was excellent and full of practical ideas for transformation in our own setting – thank you.”*

## Fact Files

The Fact Files are central to the layering of information in the Gallery. In telling one story, another invariably gets hidden from view. Most of the Whitworth’s textiles were collected using largely aesthetic criteria of ‘good’ design or innovative technology because they were intended as a source of inspiration to designers, manufacturers and consumers. At the top tier, next to the cases there are text panels outlining the story that is being told and a checklist of case contents. This is enough, perhaps, to satisfy the browser but not the researcher.

Context is equally important – what the textiles were originally used for, or how they were worn. This information is included in longer, narrative labels in the Fact Files and represents a second tier of information. These layers of interpretation allow for different levels of visitor engagement.

The Fact Files also contain copies of the research sources we used in developing the stories such as articles, images, CVs of artists and designers etc. This takes the visitor even deeper than the extended, narrative labels.

At another level there is a Textile Trail, an activity guide for children based on the contents of the display cases. All the stories and poems, puzzles

and other activities were devised by a group of Year 5 children from a local school, working with the Whitworth’s Learning and Interpretation Manager and the curators.

## What are the future plans for the Textile Gallery?

### 1. Annual refreshments

The display mechanisms have been designed to allow for relatively easy annual changeovers so that displays do not become tired. One theme (three cases) will be changed annually but that theme will be retained for another cycle. Each changeover means revisiting the contents of the Fact Files and commissioning a new version of the Textile Trail. Within five years of the re-opening the whole cycle will have been repeated once with new objects. Then it will be time to carry out a summative evaluation and revisit the themes.

### 2. Add a richer consort of voices to the interpretation

There is a clearly articulated contribution from child users, but the Whitworth would now like to extend this in various ways and introduce contributions from artists and designers, representatives of source communities, and possibly collectors.

# Presentation 2

## Riverside Museum Project: Crossing Disciplines to Uncover More Engaging Transport Stories

Kate Tansley, Project Curator, Riverside Museum Project, Culture & Sport Glasgow

Culture and Sport Glasgow is developing a new transport museum to replace the current Museum of Transport. Due to open in 2011, the Riverside Museum is funded by Glasgow City Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Content for the new Museum is based on the story-telling model that was developed at the refurbished Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. This presentation is a case study of one interdisciplinary display, followed by a summary of advice on interdisciplinary practice from the team of project curators.



Culture & Sport Glasgow (Museums) / Zaha Hadid

## Institutional context: the story display approach

Glasgow Museums has an internationally significant collection of land transport and ship models. Since the Museum of Transport is part of a larger organisation, curators have free access to all of Glasgow Museums' collections. In planning a redisplay of the Museum, there are over one million objects to choose from, drawing on one of the finest museum collections in Europe. Inside the new Museum the visitor will be presented with one large display space rather than separate rooms or galleries. Visitors will be able to browse around approximately 150 self-contained displays as if wandering along a street.

## Case Study: Steamers at War Glasgow's involvement in the American Civil War

### Blockade runners

The American South purchased steamships from Glasgow to run supplies from Europe and sneak out cotton. Glasgow was more involved in blockade running than first assumed – one in three ships that ran the blockade was made in Glasgow, and all the major shipyards in the city were implicated.



Culture & Sport Glasgow (Museums)

With further research curators discovered that there were several ship models of blockade runners in the collection – six half hull models and two full ship models, all with individual histories. By searching the collection laterally a painting of one of the most famous blockade runners, the *Eagle*, was also discovered in the art collection.

Displaying the ship models and the painting together tells the story of Glasgow's involvement in the American Civil War in a visual and engaging way.

Curators then began to research the stories of each individual vessel asking the following questions: When and where was it made? What did it carry? When did it run the blockade? Did it get through? Was it captured?

## Confederate currency

While researching the story of the *Giraffe* steamship, curators discovered that it had imported engraving and printing machinery from Scotland to the American South so that the newly formed Confederate nation could produce its own paper money.

By searching the numismatic collections, a significant collection of Confederate notes was uncovered. It was felt that it would be good to include notes in the display as a specific example of this ship's cargo and contribution to the war effort, and also as a visual illustration of profiteering.

Glasgow profited from supporting the South in this war, and thereby supported slavery. Cotton prices in Europe had skyrocketed, a bale of cotton could be bought for £15 in the American South and then sold in Liverpool for £75.

Money was at the root of Glasgow's involvement in the American Civil War, and including Confederate currency in the display will help get this point across.

## A Confederate flag

Curators uncovered a gem in the collection simply by doing a broad keyword search on the collections database. They found a Confederate flag, which was flown in Scotland by a sympathiser with the South during the American Civil War.

The flag was flown by James Smith, a Scottish businessman who had lived in the Southern States for a time, but who had come back to run his manufacturing business from Glasgow. He also brought his black slave with him to serve in his household.

James Smith was not the only supporter of the South in Scotland. The shipyard owners and their workers profited, Glasgow textile merchants depended on cotton imports, and many of the people who worked in the cotton mills also supported the South.

To explore these different local perspectives the project curators researched Glasgow's relationship with cotton.

## Cotton

The west of Scotland was a big player in the textile manufacturing trade so it was appropriate to represent the commodity of cotton through a finished product.

Curators trawled the costume collection and selected several cotton petticoats and two cotton dresses. These textiles were made in Glasgow during the American Civil War at a time when Glasgow, like Manchester, was experiencing a cotton famine.

These dresses humanise this story, and will give the Museum an opportunity to illustrate the diverse opinions of Glaswegians on this war. The wives and daughters of the textile manufacturers or owners of the shipyards might have worn these dresses – luxuries made possible through profits from blockade running. But these dresses also tell the story of the cotton mill workers who were suffering because of the cotton shortage.

This story has many layers. Hopefully by including these associated objects with the original ship models the Museum can tell the overall story of Glasgow's involvement in the American Civil War and tease out some of the underlying issues such as profiteering and slavery.

## The display

At the top of the display is a grouping of cotton objects to address Glasgow interests in the American Civil War. In the middle section there's a mysterious layer of ship models representing Blockade Running. At the bottom is a Confederate support grouping with Confederate currency and the Confederate flag because profiteering was at the root of Glasgow's involvement in this war.

In the end, a display that started with ship models has evolved to include currency, art, and costume. And what was previously a hidden history will now be displayed prominently as a compelling story with multiple layers.

## Summary

### 1) Start with the objects

- The story should come from the objects not from a theme or an issue.
- Remember that you are telling a story, not a complete history. This may be a snapshot in time rather than a complete chronology.

### 2) Collections access

- You need to know what you have and where to find it.
- There is no substitute for sifting through the stores.
- You may also want access to collections at other institutions.



Concept drawing: Culture & Sport Glasgow (Museums) / Event Communications

### 3) Discover the stories of an object

- At the basis of this approach is the understanding that every object can tell many different stories, depending on its context.
- This is made possible with a flexible display approach and will enable a museum to change over a small percent of displays each year.
- It is an opportunity to take an object out of its 'normal' context and to find a unique story that has not been told before.

### 4) Research, research and research

- You cannot be a specialist in everything, so the key to this type of working is knowing where to find the information – not already knowing it.
- Research throughout the process and test each object to make sure it is truly playing its part in the display and contributing to the story. Some objects may not hold up under closer scrutiny, so be flexible and willing to remove or change objects.

### 5) Collaborate

- Developing interdisciplinary displays requires interdisciplinary working, so a high degree of collaboration is needed across the organisation.
- Do not be afraid to ask for advice. Seek out specialist knowledge inside and outside your organisation.
- Not knowing everything about a subject is a benefit because you can approach a display from a visitor's point of view.

### 6) Build a narrative

- From your key object, or group of objects, build a narrative with other objects to carry the story. The most important thing is to have a good story.
- Be critical with your object selection, and evaluate each object's direct and indirect connections to the key message of the story.
- Avoid selecting objects to simply illustrate a sub-plot. If you shoehorn objects in from other disciplines just for the sake of it they will end up causing problems later on.
- Rethink object and discipline hierarchies based on the role of the object in the story. For instance, art doesn't always have to be the star object – a painting can be used in a supporting role rather than as the focal point.

### 7) Convince others

- Working across disciplines involves convincing, and negotiating with, others about your idea. You need to be passionate about the story to bring others onboard.
- These types of displays can present conservation challenges.
- Designing multidisciplinary displays can also be a creative challenge. The smallest object may be the lead character in the story, whereas an associated object may be very large yet only play a supporting role.

## Conclusion

Interdisciplinary displays such as the Steamers at War story can be a way to reveal hidden histories and tell compelling stories. These displays can be more challenging to develop than working within traditional taxonomies, but they can also be more rewarding to develop and more interesting for visitors. Visitors like this new display approach at Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum and now the project team is looking forward to welcoming visitors to enjoy the new stories that will be part of the Riverside Museum when it opens in 2011.

### Delegate feedback

*"A very interesting range of speakers... I particularly enjoyed Kate's talk and await the opening of the Riverside Museum."*

# Presentation 3

## Searching for Universal Meanings: The Development of the Gallery of Craft & Design at Manchester Art Gallery

Ruth Shrigley, Principal Manager: Collections Access, Manchester City Galleries

**When it was opened in 2002, the Gallery of Craft & Design was considered innovative because of its use of universal themes in an art gallery context. With almost 900 exhibits, it made the Decorative Art collections more accessible than any previous displays. Six years on, has the thematic approach stood the test of time? Ruth reflects on the methodology used to develop the thematic structure, visitors' reactions to it and, finally, whether it has provided a useful framework for responding to changing agendas and audiences.**

### Background

The Gallery of Craft & Design is housed in the theatre of the former Athenaeum Club. An impressive space, some 375 square metres in area, it had never been used as a gallery before and was larger than any gallery used for display. For this reason, Casson Mann was appointed (best known as the designers of the British Galleries at the V&A) to work with the in-house team to devise the displays. The gallery fit-out was part of the HLF-funded Manchester Art Gallery Expansion Project and cost just over £1.3million.

The gallery was intended as the main showcase for Decorative Art, a Designated Collection which consists of over 13,000 objects ranging in date from 1100 BC to the present day. As well as ceramics, glass, furniture and metalwork, there are items, which would be classified as archaeology, arms and armour, ethnography or social history in a non-art museum.

The team consciously set out to push the boundaries of museum practice whilst also appealing to diverse audiences and creating access to items previously in store. The team knew that they wanted to create displays that were relevant to modern life and to move away from arranging objects purely by date, material or cultural origin. Choosing to abandon established frameworks can be extremely daunting, especially when you have a large, empty space to fill!



Manchester Art Gallery

## Sources of inspiration

Four activities really helped to define the broad concept for the gallery:

- visits to the stores with colleagues to explore unfamiliar areas of the collection and take snapshots of interesting groupings.
- reading about material culture and the concept of the Renaissance *cabinet of curiosities* or *wunderkammer*.
- visits to other museums & galleries.
- public consultation with visitors and non-visitors conducted by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre.

The team realised that the collection was a modern *cabinet of curiosities* that had the potential to arouse curiosity, inspire a sense of wonder in human creativity and encourage the exploration of ideas through objects. This led to the concept of a gallery exploring the creative relationships between people and objects, across cultures, time and media.

Public feedback gave the team the confidence to develop this concept: the focus groups were interested in the stories behind objects, information about the people associated with objects and emotional or aesthetic rather than purely didactic experiences.

## Creating and developing a thematic structure

Several techniques were used to express the concept as a thematic structure and then to develop the content of the individual themes, the most helpful being:

- visualisation of the completed project: a brainstorming session where the team imagined the visitors' initial impressions when entering the gallery and their feelings on leaving.
- ideas brainstorming sessions: a series of team meetings resulted in 102 ideas for themes which were edited down to eight main themes and 63 sub-themes for the Design Brief.
- object analysis exercises: a few individual objects were analysed using the eight main theme headings in order to test whether the themes would stimulate strong object narratives.
- word maps and thematic organograms: these helped to define relationships between themes and sub-themes, group sub-themes together and eliminate any overlapping of ideas.
- specialist advice and consultation: this was essential in order to interpret the less familiar collection areas and to acknowledge the views and needs of specific communities.

- pictorial storyboards: one for each sub-theme with a photograph of each exhibit; low-tech but versatile as a quick visual reference for allocating objects to themes, working out object groupings and editing.

It was essentially a reductive process, which eventually resulted in three main universal themes, Making, Memory and Collecting and 25 broad sub-themes (eg. Clay, Marks & Marketing, Life Events, Object Memories). Many of these enabled the team to mix objects from different dates, styles and cultures.





## The role of the Interpretation Strategy

This was developed by the curatorial team with input from education staff and was crucial in making the sub-themes accessible to people with different interests and needs. The key elements of the Strategy are:

- juxtaposition of items from different parts of the collection with shared imagery, function or formal qualities to create stories within stories.
- layered, colour-coded written interpretation using Ekarv (a set of principles for writing clearly for general readers, devised by Margaretha Ekarv)
- items for handling.
- accessible audio-visual interpretation with Braille, large print transcripts of audio pieces and sub-titled short films.

## Visitor reactions

The majority of visitors like the gallery in general and the complaints tend to come from people who have a specialist interest in one area of the collection that they consider to be under-represented in the displays:

*'It is a feast for the eyes and arranged in a stimulating structure... Bravo especially for breaking the mould, mixing contemporary with antique stuff to good effect, showing Greg collections...'* 2002

*'My discovery that this world class collection (Greg)*

*has been reduced to a few shelves and no catalogue to support it left me horrified.'* 2002

*'I like the way the objects are interpreted as written in the introduction.'* 2005

Unfortunately the gallery has not been formally evaluated but it was included in a study of visitor behaviour titled *Researching Learning at Manchester Art Gallery*, conducted by the Centre for Museology at the University of Manchester in 2003. The evidence

seems to validate the use of universal themes:

*'Visitors to MAG rarely sought to acquire knowledge for its own sake; their experiences fed into their own personal narratives and structures, and not in building external frameworks.'*

*'Visitors respond positively to the integration of art and artefacts into narratives of social and individual histories (as was shown in the tracking studies in the Gallery of Craft & Design).'*

## Responding to visitors and new agendas

We have worked with the thematic structure for six years, making changes in response to visitor comments, developments in museum practice and our own observations. The themes have proved sufficiently flexible to enable us to:

- Add new acquisitions and items from store: a pair of Sikh gauntlets are displayed in response to a request to participate in the nationwide Anglo-Sikh Heritage Trail.
- Trial co-curation: a Chinese Elders group worked with MAG staff and Chinese collections to re-display the Object Memories theme.
- Add new voices: six short videos have been developed that feature collectors talking about their collections and why they collect to give a contemporary and personal dimension to the Collecting theme.
- Encourage visitor responses: an activity relating to the Remembering Slavery programme asks 'what does freedom mean to you?'
- Trial new technology: Quick Response codes are currently being tested (visitors can use a mobile phone with a bar code reader to access web-based interpretation).

- Develop partnership working: Manchester Metropolitan University has created a series of temporary displays showcasing the work of contemporary makers in the Making section.

## Conclusions

Overall the introduction of the thematic approach has been positive:

- The themes have proved that they have more potential for development than any previous framework we have used; the design tends to be the main constraint.
- Devising a new thematic structure encouraged the curators to be more creative not only in selecting and arranging the exhibits but also in devising accessible interpretation for different audiences.
- Drawing inspiration directly from the collections led to more aesthetically appealing displays and avoided the 'book on the wall' approach.
- Choosing universal themes enabled the team to combine, and give equal status to objects made for people from different cultural and social backgrounds, to emphasise similarities rather than differences.

Finally, universal themes are now more commonplace and may become an established alternative to the traditional chronological, material or cultural frameworks. The challenge for all of us is to find new ways of engaging audiences whilst remaining true to the character of our collections.

## Delegate feedback

*"The piece on the Gallery of Craft & Design struck a chord with me, then to be able to see the gallery was a real plus."*

# Presentation 4

## Pick and Mix: Multidisciplinary Displays at Kelvingrove Museum

Richard Sutcliffe, Research Manager (Natural History), Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, Culture & Sport Glasgow

**Richard Sutcliffe describes some of the new natural history displays in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum which were developed using the 'story' approach. Understanding a Landscape relates rocks and mineral specimens to the scene in a painting of the River Clyde. Animal Armoury uses arms and armour and natural history specimens to explore the idea that human offensive and defensive technologies are a product of a deeper evolutionary process.**

Following careful planning that started in the mid 1990s, the Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum closed to the public in June 2003 for a complete refurbishment and re-display. It re-opened in July 2006.

Glasgow Museums' collections contain an estimated one million objects and there is in excess of 600,000 natural history objects. Selecting which objects should go on display was therefore a difficult task.

It was decided to take the story approach. Staff members were asked to come up with ideas for stories based on their knowledge of the collections. These were to be object-centred, with stories based on existing objects as far as possible, rather than coming up with a story and then seeing if there was anything suitable in the collection to fit. From an initial list of over 200 stories, about 100 were produced.

### Individual stories have:

- A key concept – the main thing we wanted the visitor to remember.
- Key message(s) – usually just one or two – to keep the story as 'tight as possible'.
- Learning objectives – to link in with the Scottish 5-14 curriculum.

- Behavioural objectives – what we wanted visitors to do.
- Visitor experience – how we proposed to involve visitors, through their senses, investigation, interactions, previous knowledge, emotions etc.
- Target audience(s) – the level to pitch for the individual stories.
- Key objects – usually a relatively small number, plus additional objects where required.

It was not necessary for a story to follow a linear path as each individual section of a story should stand up by itself.



Culture & Sport Glasgow (Museums)

## Multidisciplinary displays

Before the Museum was refurbished, the displays were arranged traditionally by subject area (Natural History, Ethnography, Art, and Human History etc.) in separate galleries. As part of the refurbishment curators were encouraged to pick and mix objects from different disciplines. Today, natural history objects have been used in a wide variety of displays. Whilst many objects are engaging in their own right, this new approach enables the objects to tell stories and to reach new audiences.

Unusual combinations of objects act as a visual grab and encourage visitors to look at a wider variety of objects. The outcome may be to get an art lover to appreciate geology or a naturalist to look at furniture in a new light.

## Understanding a Landscape

This is a display based around an oil painting, titled *The First Steam Boat on the Clyde* by John Knox (1778-1845). The painting is of the view from Dalnottar Hill (to the west of present-day Glasgow) looking down the River Clyde, and includes the *Comet* steamboat, which was built in 1812.

Rather than just describing the painting from an artistic or historical point of view, it was decided to use this work of art as a tool to describe the geology and geological processes that have gone on in the area.



Culture & Sport Glasgow (Museums)

Four large rock specimens that can be handled by visitors are on open display in front of the painting. Images are projected directly onto the painting to illustrate where the different rocks are located within the landscape. An audio commentary and a video on a small screen to the side of the painting shows maps, modern day views, and explains how the difference rocks were formed and how the landscape evolved.

The display is accompanied by another painting of

the same view, titled, *Bowling* by Horatio McCulloch (1805-1867) and specimens of some of the minerals that occur in the lavas.

### Visitors have choices:

- Admire the painting.
- Look at and touch the rocks.
- Press buttons to start short audio visual presentations.
- All of the above.

## Visitors can find out about:

- Building mountains.
- Sea and swamps.
- Volcanoes and lava.
- The Ice Age and after.

*"I was not interested in geology but the paintings drew me in". – visitor comment.*

## Animal Armoury

This is a story in the Conflict and Consequence Gallery, where natural history, ethnography and arms and armour objects are displayed side by side. It demonstrates the similarities between human and evolutionary solutions to the problems of defending yourself and attacking others.

It's easy for visitors to see how armour resembles the hard shells of crustaceans since both have the same purpose which is to protect the soft body inside.

Many different animals parts have similarities with armour:

- Armadillos and Norway lobsters look like gauntlets and the joints move in much the same way.
- A rapier (1650) and an elephant's tusk are both offensive weapons and both can be lethal!

- A Burgonet helmet placed alongside a black hornbill demonstrates how the shape of the armour has evolved from the defensive strength of the bird's beak.
- A 19th-century Kabotzu, a kind of Japanese helmet with 'ears', makes the soldier resemble a hare!

Video sequences were produced for the Gallery to show how animals and humans use similar skills to fight or defend themselves.

- The horns of antelopes are compared with rapiers.
- Head-butting rams and knights jousting are also compared.

We have used similar ideas in many other displays. In the *Hunting* display we have animal trophies adjacent to firearms from the RL Scott Collection. They do not relate directly to each other, as the guns were not used

to shoot the animals, but they sit well together.

Some of Scotland's most iconic plants and animals have long been used in advertising. We have included non-natural history objects in the *Famous Scottish Wildlife* display.

- Bottles of Famous Grouse whisky are placed next to a red grouse.
- A freeze-dried haggis is next to a model of the 'real thing' – mixing fact and fiction for the confusion and entertainment of our foreign visitors!



Culture & Sport Glasgow (Museums)

Lastly, in the *Wildlife in Danger* display we positioned a familiar object, a dining room chair, in a case with several threatened primates. This juxtaposition highlights the fact that cutting down forests to make furniture is a threat facing some endangered animals.

*'I saw the carving on the chair and had a closer look then realised there was a lemur there, I wouldn't have looked at a case full of monkeys'.*  
Visitor comment.

## Advantages and disadvantages of multidisciplinary displays

Advantages:

- Multidisciplinary displays make connections between disparate objects and collections.
- They attract visitors with different interests into parts of the Museum they may not otherwise visit.

Disadvantages:

- Visitors may not like natural history objects next to 'high art' or 'precious relics'. Some 'would rather have similar things together'.
- Sometimes there is a danger that messages can become confused; people may make up their own mistaken connections if the text and graphics don't explain clearly why objects are displayed together.

## Conclusions

Critically, some of the most popular displays were the ones with a good mix of objects. Overall most visitors seem to understand and enjoy the mixing of disciplines. Often there is initially confusion but

then more interest. However, not every gallery or case is a mix of objects. There are still some more traditional displays, for the visitors who are happier with a room full of paintings or a case full of swords.

Finally, with 93% of visitors polled saying the displays were good or very good the decision to pick and mix the objects appears to have been a good one!

## Delegate feedback

*"I enjoyed the variety of today's talks particularly focussing on collections that get less priority – like natural history".*

# Presentation 5

## The Roman Roots Project : Kings Weston Roman Villa

Kate Iles, Assistant Curator of Archaeology, Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives

**Kings Weston Roman Villa is a late third century Roman villa in Bristol. The Villa sits in the heart of Lawrence Weston, a residential area designated by Bristol City Council as an area of 'neighbourhood renewal' (a scheme to regenerate deprived areas). On site you can see the remains of a hypocaust, mosaic floors, walls and a bath suite. The Villa is cared for by Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives but until recently had no on-site interpretation. Like the Museum's stored collections the Villa had a huge amount of potential that needed to be unlocked. Roman Roots, an HLF funded participatory project working with young people from the local area, achieved this.**

### The brief

To work with young people from the local community to create permanent on-site interpretation for Kings Weston Roman Villa and to increase awareness of the site.

### What the project involved

- Creating different forms of interpretation.
- Partnership working with local youth agencies.
- Key decisions being made by young people.
- £25,000 HLF funding from Young Roots Stream (working with 13-19 year olds).

### The approach

A thematic and story based approach was chosen, rather than a site specific tour or room guide to engage audiences.

*"Visitors enjoy a thematic approach much more than the straight delivery of information, and therefore engage more fully."*

(Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum*, 2006 p.196).

Bristol City Museum also chose a participatory approach and created an after school club for young people aged 13 to 16. This specific age range was targeted as they are an audience frequently under-represented in museums.



Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives

*“Young people are less likely to receive education from museums than schools or children in families.”*

(Anderson, *A Common Wealth, Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom*, 1997, p vii).

### Project aims

- To interpret the Villa for the public.
- To reach new audiences.
- To increase awareness and access to the Roman Villa and unlock some of the stories it holds.
- For the young people to learn new skills and increase their knowledge of archaeology and the role of museums.

### How we did it

The Project ran from June 2006 to May 2007 and involved weekly after school sessions, trips to a variety of heritage sites and interviews with museum professionals. Evaluation packs and exercises encouraged young people to record and remember the interpretative techniques they liked and disliked and helped them to form their own ideas for the Villa. Once the young people had the skills needed to create interpretation everybody suggested ideas for themes and stories. We then voted on the final selection.

### The themes

All themes were spread across the site and not all are directly associated with the Villa. Instead they reflected the interests that the young people developed and the stories that they felt needed to be told. Each theme uses a range of interpretative techniques:

- Roman food really captured everyone’s imagination and was easily the most popular theme. It was interpreted through a family activity area, an information board, recipe cards and a tasting session.
- A Roman villa theme was selected to encompass essential detail. Stories were told through two information boards, a film, a piece of drama and a 3D model.
- The Roman mosaic theme was told through contemporary mosaics created by the Art and Design G.C.S.E. class of the local secondary school and through a board.
- Stories of the Roman bath also used an information board next to the bath suite, a film and handling material.
- Finally, the theme of Roman clothes was told through a dressing up box as it could not be supported by anything found on this site.



Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives

## Evaluation

- Thematic on-site interpretation was achieved. 95% of visitors said they liked the new interpretation whilst 89% said they would recommend the site to friends and family.
- Under-represented visitors were involved. In total around 50 young people from the local area contributed to the project and many of their families visited the site.
- Awareness of the Villa, collections and the Museum Service was increased.

## Benefits

The thematic approach lends a new and imaginative way of looking at the Villa that is both accessible and fun. It also allows the project team to tell stories in a wider Romano-British context.

Working with young people meant the Museum Service was able to reach an under-represented audience and encouraged ownership and pride of Kings Weston Roman Villa. The young people involved motivated staff to be creative and helped produce interpretation that would appeal to their contemporaries.

## Challenges and rewards

The project team's main challenge was time! The after school club and individual aspects of the project took up a great deal of staff time. Also, external partners were frequently unable to meet the project deadlines. The interpretation panels took longer to create due to the literacy levels and short attention spans of the young people. Towards the end, the project had to 'compete' with other after-school activities.

However, the rewards easily outweighed the challenges. The young people learnt new, transferable skills and the Museum Service increased its knowledge of thematic interpretation and participatory working. The young people had an overwhelming enthusiasm for archaeology and the project gave participants a chance to learn from each other. The project was also a great opportunity for personal and professional development and boosted people's confidence in themselves and the Museum Service.



## Recommendations

- Work with young people and listen to their ideas.
- Play to the strong points of the collection or site.
- Encourage ownership and pride in the collections and Museum Service.
- Have a strict time frame for the project and do not under-estimate the amount of work involved.

## Delegate feedback

*"I was inspired by the Roman Villa project and hope to try something similar."*

# Presentation 6

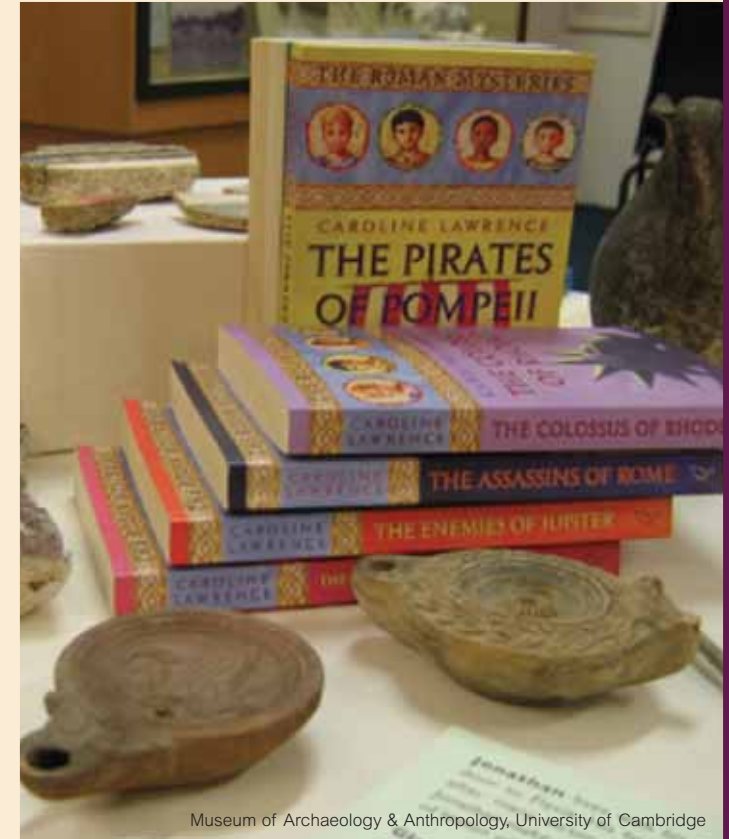
## Interpreting Roman Material with 'Book Displays'

Anne Taylor, Curatorial Assistant for Archaeology, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

**The Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology has been putting on small temporary displays based on novels (either for children or for adults), starting with the story Wolf Brother written by Michelle Paver about a boy living 6000 years ago, in the period archaeologists call the Mesolithic period. Anne discusses these 'book displays' with a particular focus on the Museum's use of Roman material.**

The Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology has a large collection from all over the world, ranging in date from prehistory to the present day. Although the Museum has over a million artefacts there are only a few permanent members of staff. Among these the two curatorial assistants manage the collections, supervise researchers, teach undergraduates and are responsible for temporary exhibitions.

Finding and accessing the Museum is hard for the non-University visitor and the whole building and style of display can be intimidating. The present archaeology galleries were developed in 1984, designed around the undergraduate syllabus, and labels are small, discreet and scholarly. More recently, the Museum staff have planned a series of small, easy to install displays which are very different from the permanent exhibitions. Both the Curatorial Assistant and the Outreach Organiser enjoy reading children's fiction, and were particularly impressed with the Chronicles of Ancient Darkness series by Michelle Paver, stories set in what archaeologists call the Mesolithic period among the hunter/gatherers of 6000 years ago.



Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge

## Why use books, and children's books in particular?

- These displays give young visitors the chance of being the experts. Usually it is the adults who read museum labels and inform their children but these displays reverse that situation.
- The displays are not scholarly but fun: a less formal and didactic display, bringing colour and something modern into the Museum.
- Using quotes from a story helps to put the objects into a context, to show how they might have been worn or used.
- The books chosen appeal to both boys and girls.
- A way of bringing an otherwise disparate group of artefacts out of the stores.
- Intrigues the adult visitor – what is this about?
- The author has already done the research!
- If children have not read the book then they might be encouraged to do so.
- Provides more opportunities for outreach activities.

### The Wolf Brother series

What impressed the staff so much about Michelle Paver's first book in the series, *Wolf Brother*, was the quality of her research, the accuracy of her descriptions and how well they matched objects in the collection. In her author's note Michelle Paver wrote:

*"The people of Torak's world would look just like you or me, but their way of life would strike you as very different. Hunter-gatherers lived in small clans and moved around a lot: sometimes only staying in a campsite for a few days. Much of this I've been able to learn from archaeology ... But that's only part of it. How did they think? For that I've looked at the lives of more recent hunter-gatherers, including some of the Native American tribes, the Inuit and the San of southern Africa."*

In the 1950s Cambridge University ran a major excavation at the Mesolithic site of Star Carr in Yorkshire and the Museum holds hundreds of these artefacts. It was easy to find material to illustrate episodes in the book by combining 'Star Carr' with 'Plains Indians'. Combining anthropology and archaeology in one case was another advantage. Museum staff have developed a good relationship with the publishers, Orion Books, (they gave permission to use quotes from the book and featured the *Wolf Brother* display on their website) and the author came to the exhibition opening. She was delighted to see the archaeological material from Star Carr displayed alongside her book.

The book display cases are very small, one metre by one metre, and there is a limited budget of £10 per display. Anne, the Curatorial Assistant, is responsible for the whole delivery, from choosing the book, selecting the objects, writing the labels and dry-mounting them, to actually installing the



Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge

display. The Museum has a running programme of temporary displays, often based on books, to cover events such as Science Week in March, National Archaeology Week in July and The Big Draw in October.

### The Roman Mysteries series

The Museum's theme for National Archaeology Week 2006 was "World Archaeology" and it displayed the *Roman Mysteries* series of books by Caroline Lawrence because they are set in Italy (Ancient Rome of AD 79-81) and also published by Orion Books.

The Museum holds a large collection of Roman material, mostly local to Cambridgeshire, but quite a lot from Italy, France and Spain. The permanent

gallery shows only the local material, linking in with the Archaeology of the Cambridge Region section of the undergraduate syllabus, so this was an excellent opportunity to display pieces from further afield.

The books are aimed at readers aged 7 to 14 and follow the adventures of four children who are largely allowed to fend for themselves, rather in the way of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven*. Usually just one book is featured, putting the book itself on display and using quotes from the text which relate to objects from our collection. For the *Roman Mysteries* Anne decided to focus on the four main characters and display all the books in the series. She searched the database for items in the collection from Roman Italy, and from Pompeii in particular, which seemed to echo events in the books. These were not necessarily of the right period, but it was the flavour of the books that Anne was concerned with. For example Flavia's slave, Nubia, loves the Roman baths so a drain cover, a strigil and a bottle for perfumed oil were included in the display.

There is an outreach programme for each book, beginning with *Wolf Brother* where Museum staff took replica objects into the local library to accompany readings of appropriate excerpts, and joined Michelle Paver at a book launch in one of the Cambridge book shops. Most displays lend

themselves to art activities and creative writing workshops – staff have been working with a poet-in-residence at a local secondary school for example, with workshops based on Roman Cambridge rather than Roman Italy.

### Future book displays

The next book display, for Science Week, is another of Michelle Paver's set in the Far North – an opportunity to use some Inuit pieces from the collection. The Museum is planning a series of Touch Tables to accompany this, showing the modern equivalents of carved wooden snow goggles and blubber lamps. Again these activities help to put the museum objects into context.

There are also display sessions that are organised for small groups of school children. They begin by gathering round one of the 'book' exhibitions and talking about labels, titles and stories then go into the work room with paper, pencils and real museum objects. Each group makes up their own small table-top exhibition with a title and story and then presents it to the others. We have found this to be much more stimulating than straight-forward object-handling sessions.

There is no shortage of books to interpret Roman material. There are stories by Rosemary Sutcliffe and Henry Treece, the *Horrible Histories* series (the



Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge

Rotten Romans) and cookery books. There could be a wonderful display of Samian ware, spoons and mortaria to accompany Apicius, Mark Grant's *Roman cookery: ancient recipes for modern kitchens* and the scholarly book by Hilary Cool.

### Delegate feedback

"I am full of admiration for this curator and her 1meter-squared display case!...it was refreshing to hear about a project with a small budget and limited time".

# Delegate Feedback

*"I really enjoyed the chance to attend a workshop about an area of museum work which is not the main emphasis of my job. This is only possible because the event is free – it gives a more rounded view and a fuller understanding of the role of museum collections."*

*"It's nice to have speakers from large and small museums. Big scale, well funded examples sound great but more often it's the smaller scale work that actually happens and that most people can relate to."*

*"It's always useful for the speakers to talk about pitfalls and problems and not just give a 'rosy glow' to the projects. These speakers did this."*

*"I wanted to know where to go for areas of expertise and subject specialist groups."*

*"Opened my eyes to varied approaches and ways of illustrating ideas."*

*"I go away enthused – again – and wish there were six of me to do it all! Many thanks."*

*"This event would have been useful for our 'stuck in the dark ages' museum staff who may find the event title too contemporary."*

# Actions & Outcomes

## **By June Renaissance North West will launch the 2008-09 Collections Access Grant Scheme.**

These resources provide support for regional museums to better understand, care for, interpret and present their collections to users.

Investing these resources in regional museums will help increase:

- visitors and users of regional museum collections
- objects and collections used in public engagement programmes and in high quality, innovative displays
- relevant, meaningful and high quality collections' interpretation
- understanding of and responses to user needs in work with collections.

## **On 8 & 9 September 2008 Renaissance North West, in partnership with The University of Manchester and the North West Federation of Museums & Galleries, is holding the second annual Curating for the Future conference.**

The conference will explore the theme of Relevance, Meaning and Responsibility.

Inspirational keynote speakers will address the why, how and who of each thematic strand by addressing Why museums have a global responsibility, How to make diversity work and Who decides the relevance and tells the story. There will be a debate to address who is responsible for advocacy and how it can be done effectively.

Delegates will have the opportunity to participate in breakout sessions that will examine broad sectoral challenges such as organisational change, diversity, how long we keep collections for and how we use them, building relationships with our visitors and reflecting on the different types of cultural knowledge.

## **In October Renaissance North West is supporting places for colleagues working in the region's museums and galleries at this year's Museums Association conference in Liverpool.**

Further information will be made available on the Renaissance North West pages on the MLA North West website:

[www.mlanorthwest.org.uk/museumslibrariesarchives/museums/renaissancenw](http://www.mlanorthwest.org.uk/museumslibrariesarchives/museums/renaissancenw)

# Renaissance North West

**Telling Tales: Thematic Display Making forms part of the Renaissance North West events programme which examines and debates key issues facing museums. Contributors from all over the country have shared experiences – good and bad – about programmes they have developed, partnerships they have formed and how the projects have impacted on their organisation and audiences.**

Since 2005, there have been eight other FREE workshops:

- audiences and collections
- working with schools
- family learning
- income generation and media relations
- community engagement
- live interpretation in museums
- artists in museums
- dynamic rationalisation.

Renaissance is the Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) Council's £150million programme to transform England's regional museums. For the first time ever, investment from central government is helping regional museums across the country to raise their standards and deliver real results in support of education, learning, community development and economic regeneration. A

network of 'Hubs' has been set up in each English region to act as flagship museums and help promote good practice. Alongside the Hubs, the Renaissance teams and Museum Development Officers are providing advice and support, Subject Specialist Networks have been set up, and national museums are sharing their skills and collections to ensure Renaissance benefits the entire museums sector. Renaissance is helping museums to meet people's changing needs – and to change people's lives.

For more information and further copies of this report, please visit the Renaissance North West pages of the MLA North West website:

[www.mlanorthwest.org.uk/museumslibrariesarchives/museums/renaissancenw](http://www.mlanorthwest.org.uk/museumslibrariesarchives/museums/renaissancenw)

or contact the Renaissance North West team:  
0161 235 8825

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