

## Best of British

**Hello and welcome to this podcast series, in which different people from the design world give their perspectives on galleries at the V&A.**

**I'm Rebecca Reynolds, Higher Education Officer for the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design, based at the V&A.**

**The V&A's British Galleries spread over two floors of the museum. They offer a view of British design from 1500 to 1900, starting with an early 16th century bust taken from a plaster cast of the face of the dead Henry VII, and finishing with furniture and other artefacts made by the Arts and Crafts movement in the nineteenth century. The Galleries opened in 2001, born of 'a fervent desire' to display objects in new ways which would be meaningful to a wide range of visitors.**

**Are they successful in this aim? We hear opinions from Professor of Dress and Textile History at the University of Brighton, Lou Taylor, and Design History MA graduate Charlotte Austin. But first Sarah Medlam, Deputy Keeper in the V&A's Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department, explains how the objects in the galleries are organised. She starts by talking about how the V&A selected objects for the galleries.**

Well, we started by thinking of the stories that you see in the galleries, perhaps the story of the importance of the court of Henry VIII and the court of Elizabeth and the early Stuart court. And we moved on from those to try to marshall those stories into four threads or themes that run through the gallery, because it seemed to us that we were asking those people who visited the gallery completely to make a very long and complex journey and we wanted to give them threads that they could follow. And one of those threads was the question of who was it who decided or pushed taste and decided what people were going to aspire to. And of course in the early period that was the court but in the later period, for instance entrepreneurs like the cabinet maker Thomas Chippendale, were actually forcing the pace just as advertisers force the pace informing taste in the twenty first century.

**So who led taste was one of the four themes. Can you just say a bit about the other three themes?**

The other themes that we were interested in was what was new. When were new types of object brought into British society, or when were new patterns of behaviour brought in that required particular new kinds of objects to be created for them, or when was some new technological method invented and those technologies, of course, no sooner invented were exploited, pushed by someone. A third theme we had was fashionable living, which was really to deal with this question of how patterns of behaviour changed in response to political events and also to economic events and to things like exploration. The fourth theme we dealt with in the gallery was style, and we thought that it was useful to our visitors to take them through the procession of formally named styles often only named after the time at which they were fashionable. But the famous names of Baroque, Rococo, Neo Classicism and to show

people in detail what it is about an object that makes us tag it with the name of, say, Rococo or Gothic Revival.

**You mentioned that in designing the British Galleries you were carrying out a campaign against blandness. How does that campaign come across in the galleries?**

In travelling round many museums and galleries to look at recent installations we had been struck by the fact that many of them were housed in supremely elegant galleries, usually in off-white or pale grey. And although those could look very very beautiful they had a somewhat deadening effect on the objects, and of course what they didn't do was suggest just how colourful the past was. Of course that depth of colour and saturatedness of colour exists in things like ceramics and glass in some cases but has often completely fled from any of the organic materials, wood or textiles. And so for instance when we came to re-hang the Great Bed of Ware in alternate strips of bright yellow and bright red, it really does reflect what the bed would have looked like when it was first shown.

**Next we hear from Lou Taylor, Professor of Dress and Textile History at the University of Brighton.**

**Lou, you've said that there are two specific joys to the British Galleries, could you say a bit more about that?**

Yes, there are many joys of the gallery, but the two that strike me, being a dress historian who's studied in the V & A since I was a student at St Martin's a long time ago, first of all that finally fashion, clothes, textiles have been included alongside furniture painting, ceramics, jewellery and that never happened before. Fashion was always shut away on one side, so where there are garments they're placed in a context, so the contexts in are very carefully themed, I've found in a very readable and exciting way: birth, marriage, death was one, or leaders of taste is another theme that I thought was absolutely clever, so I found the gallery very readable.

**Could you talk a bit about one or two of your favourite places in the gallery?**

I absolutely love the Garrick Corner. You have to make sure you find your way up the stairs to the second floor, which quite a lot of people miss. And there in one corner is an absolutely fascinating collection of artefacts that belong to the actor David Garrick and his wife kind of around the 1740s, 50s. And he being a leading actor and theatre director was very, very famous and apparently he had this very, very smart house in the centre of London. And what the V & A have done is put together a series of artefacts that belong to him from the different departments of the museum, that was a thing they never did in the old days. The glass was always in the glass department, the chairs were in furniture and then never the twain should meet but they put them together and it's very, very interesting. If you look really, really closely at the labels to see that some of the artefacts were collected, let's say in 1896, some in the 20s and there's a painting that has been brought specially which shows them in their sitting room, recently, that was bought for the gallery. You also have the most beautiful, the

most beautiful, painted Chinese silk dress that Mrs Garrick wore. Sitting next to, if I remember rightly, a porcelain tea service and a bed and a really nice label and accounting of them as leaders of taste in this setting and it thrilled me because it creates the whole atmosphere of a very tasteful, trendy, As we would say *avant garde* even sort of English Rococo setting. I also love the whole bit around the Victorian period, I love the stuff about the 1851 exhibition, good taste, bad taste that Cole thing, which is very, very interesting and funny. And they've got the only non-glamorous garment in the big case, which is this huge knitted man's vest, which was obviously some new knitting technology for the 1851 exhibition. It won a prize, and of course a lot of stuff came to the V & A, and I thought that was funny that they picked that but that's laid out very, very nicely.

So if we talk about the processes of going round the British Galleries, maybe a very nice idea is to think of Gaynor Kavanagh's words about what museums are. She calls them 'dream spaces' which I love. So maybe I'm saying that when you go into the British Galleries it needs to become your space to dream, to take slow dream time, looking at...if it's the clothes that fascinate you, how might they be, have been worn, how might they have been made? Or just looking at the beauty of them, I keep using this word beauty and it's somehow in my area of fashion history, nobody talks about beauty anymore but the clothes, the prints, they are absolutely beautiful, so just to spend time swallowing up the beauty of them in a dream space.

**Lastly, I spoke to History of Design MA graduate Charlotte Austin.**

**So, Charlotte, how did you get to know the Galleries ?**

Well, I was introduced to the British Galleries when I took the MA History of Design course here at the museum. We had a number of sessions in the Galleries to learn how to interpret objects. And, in fact, our first essay concentrated on individual objects and many of these were selected by students from the British Galleries. And through this work, we learnt how to interpret objects in relation to the broader context of their manufacture and how they were used.

**And are there any objects that you'd particularly pick out from the Galleries yourself?**

Well, for me, the most intriguing pair of objects are Margaret Laton's jacket and the portrait of her wearing it. I found this pair quite moving really because they connect the past and the present. We have this jacket, which exists now, in the present, and then we have a portrait, which shows how it existed and how it was perceived in the past. And, through the jacket, we can connect with Margaret and we can connect with the painter. For instance, we can follow with our eyes –or even sketch – the embroidered patterns in the same way as the painter did all those years ago. And I think there's something quite magical about that.

**And what else do you think the galleries particularly offer?**

Well, the galleries are organised in a chronological fashion and so you can follow paths, depending on your interests, through the Galleries. So, for instance, I used the British Galleries to write a museum trail, which follows how classical styles were

popular and then, how medieval styles superseded these. There are displays of various objects which were influenced by both of these styles. For instance, there is a corner of artefacts which shows how people's fascination with the classical styles went to the extent that they actually went on the Grand Tour to look at them in person. And then you can walk through the galleries to see other objects with a completely different look: the gothic feel – like King René's cabinet.

**And is there anything missing from the Galleries for you?**

One disadvantage of the Galleries is that they're quite dark, but they have to be like this for conservation reasons. Possibly, now, they feel a bit dated in comparison to the newer galleries in the museum, like the Jewellery Gallery, which is very new and shining. On the other hand though, the Galleries have an amazing atmosphere; it's very restful and contemplative. They're a really lovely place, where you can go and sketch or just imagine the past.

**You've come to the end of this podcast; thanks very much for listening. Other podcasts in this series look at the Silver Galleries, the Jewellery Gallery and the Cast Courts.**