

A Silver Lining

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

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The V&A Silver Galleries are three richly-decorated rooms crammed full of objects from religious and secular contexts here and abroad. You can investigate Victorian dining silver, look at silver from the Jazz Age and see silver objects used by children.

In these interviews, three people give their take on the galleries: curator in the Sculpture, Metalwork, Ceramics and Glass Department Eric Turner, who has been at the V&A since 1976 ; one of the longest serving V&A information assistants James Cross; and finally artist Anne Brodie, who made an installation in the galleries for a V&A late-night opening.

First, curator Eric Turner talked to me about why the gallery and the displays look the way they do. Soon after the Second World War, he said, the Victorian decoration was painted over and they became 'bland white boxes with fluorescent lighting', staying this way until the arrival of a sponsor one day in the early 90s.

... nothing might have happened except for the arrival quite out of the blue one day of a sponsor who came through the galleries on a very dull, wet, cold February afternoon where they did look at their dingiest and grimmest and said something must be done in the classic tones, how can I help. From that point on the Silver Galleries redevelopment started.

And how was the silver display redeveloped then after this?

Well we had a great deal of discussion about this and indeed some visitor surveys taken over a period of several months. What we decided was that the layout of the galleries should in some extent retain the traditional way in which we'd put it out. That is to say that there was a series of sequential masterpieces done in a chronological sequence. But at the same time what we wanted running parallel along the sides of the galleries was a much more thematic approach and this you'll see most particularly in the first gallery, which we describe as the first phase of the Silver Galleries, where you'll see things for example as tea, coffee and chocolate wares.

Dining, an important theme insofar as how silver was used in the domestic context, as it still is to this day. And that is a pendant, if you like, to the main island cases that you see down the centre of the gallery either side of the centre line where there is a straightforward chronological development of stylistic development throughout the period from the late Middle Ages until 1800.

One must explain of course, which is perhaps immediately obvious once you're in the galleries yourself, is that there are two entrances to these galleries. People, of course, can come through from either end, and it's pitched so that the pinnacle if you like, the latest silver where the story is not just ending but developing into the future, is more or less in the centre of the galleries, the fulcrum, and you've got it balanced by the historic collections either side.

What do you think it gives the visitor today to see a huge amount of silver in one space?

Well let me answer that with reference to the decoration as well as the silver collections that we see before us. There has been reservation expressed by some about such a huge concentration of silver but we are the National Collection of English Silver for example. We are obliged to put out as much as we can of the collections that we hold and do justifiably get criticism if we don't.

In the nineteenth century the object was to cram as many objects into a case as possible, and there are photographs taken of nineteenth century displays where they are immensely crowded, and arguably overcrowded, with limited label information and so on although at least it was deemed to be acceptable at the time. The twentieth century for much of it reversed that tendency.

But we decided that actually really the time had come and the fashion was actually swinging back in the opposite direction, if you like, the pendulum was coming back again. That people actually did like rich interiors and did in fact like rich displays and the rich Victorian interior perfectly complemented the concentration of the displays that we were intending to put in.

As well as working at the V&A, Information Assistant James Cross lives and works at the Brompton Oratory, the Catholic church next door. There he helps to make the services run smoothly and trains servers to carry out activities involved in the Catholic masses such as serving the priests, moving sensors and holding candles. I walked around the Silver Galleries with him.

So, James, what do you do at the V&A and how long have you been here?

I've been here about 26 years and I work on the Information Desk really giving out information to people who want to know a myriad of different and very often extremely obscure questions, and so I have to know it very well in order to be able to help them find what it is they're looking for.

You live and work in the Brompton Oratory, the Catholic church next door. Do you ever see any similarities between the church and the museum here?

Very much so. The Oratory is by definition very traditional, that's why I'm there. And the ceremonial there is of a very traditional nature and, indeed, a lot of the objects I see in here the same objects from seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth Centuries is in normal use there all the time. I see ewers and basins and chalices and beautiful cruet sets and gorgeous silver and gold things and we are using them all the

time next door so I look at it in a case here, go next door and see it in use. It's a wonderful connection between the two definitely, yes.

We're in the Silver Galleries now, James, what do you think of these galleries?

I think these galleries are really beautiful. I love walking through these galleries because since their restoration of the ceilings to their Victorian splendour in this Pompeiian-style, I find it's like a beautiful jewellery box showing the objects off. The objects to my mind can sing.

So just looking at the card here, what we're looking at here is an eighteenth century Italian chalice which would have been used in church services I suppose.

Mass, yes. It would have been used at Mass by the priest

Tell me a bit more about how you see this chalice.

I love this chalice because it is completely bonkers. It is of no practical use for the priest to use at Mass, it's too heavy for him to lift physically. Also the priest at Mass needs to lift the chalice with one hand at various points in the Mass and he simply cannot do it. The vases around the bottom that are sticking up would poke into his hands as he held it! But bonkers things can be wonderful because it incorporates all the classical symbols, all the beautiful restraint of Neo-classicism despite the fact that it is completely unrestrained, the way everything has been flung at it, every Neo-classical design, leaves, vases, beading, grapes. So bonkers definitely, beautiful definitely.

It's actually more like a piece of furniture than a cup that you'd use isn't it James?

Yes. In fact I would go farther and say that it's more than a piece of furniture, it's almost like architecture. The design at the bottom looks like terraces with garden vases along it, you expect people to start walking along it any minute.

What about this large, I don't even know what it's for, this large object in the middle of that case James?

Yes, I presume it's some sort of silver centre piece that was very fashionable at this period. I think it is really nasty. The foot, the Neo-classical foot, is very beautiful, yes, with the acanthus leaves scrolling above it but then this hideous great silver egg shoved on top makes it look like a sort of Easter present gone wrong kind of thing.

When artist Anne Brodie first saw the Silver Galleries, it reminded her of Antarctica, where she had spent three months at the British Antarctic Survey base on an Arts Council-funded fellowship. A parallel between the two places inspired an installation for a V&A late-night opening. Anne talked to me about this.

So, Anne, when you were talking about the installation you made for the Silver Galleries, you commented that, when you first went into the galleries, it was ‘too much; too beautiful; too impossibly bright and shiny.’ And you said it stopped you from looking. Can you say a bit more about that, please?

The minute I walked into the Silver Galleries, it just completely hit me. I mean, it was just so sparkly and just ridiculously bright. And it stopped me from looking because there was, literally, too much; I couldn't focus; I couldn't land my eyes on any one thing. It was a bit like how I might imagine Elton John and Versace to design a Silver Gallery, to be totally honest: it was too, too much. And it was also, in that respect, quite exciting to have that much glare. And I just ... It totally did take me back on board – particularly – the journey to Antarctica... coming into the Antarctic Peninsula, sailing down, really gradually, through increasingly fantastic, jaw-dropping scenery, where, in actual fact, I kind of retreated inside at one point because I couldn't make sense of just how much there was. And it was assaulting lots of my senses; it was visually and aurally and emotionally too much. And, also, the light – it was very, very, very bright; you couldn't look at it without sunglasses. And I just didn't know where to rest my eyes. It was just an excess. And I just kind of made that very quick connection.

And can you tell us a bit more about what you did to the Galleries to respond to that feeling please ?

Okay. I basically did something very similar to what I did on the boat and at the research station in the Antarctic: I took sheets of transparent tracing paper – great reams of it. I wanted a more subtle shadow cast from the cabinets. I wanted to hold it back in the same way that I was putting the paper up in the windows to hold back the Antarctic. And, in Antarctica, what I actually did was, I put it up at the windows and then I ripped it, ever so ... with the edge of a pen and a compass, just to let a little bit in.

This was the windows of the boat?

Yes, the windows of the boat and at the research station where we were. And it was just a way of making a physical filter. And so, with the galleries, I saw the freestanding cases as lanterns. I wanted to, as I said, hide – hold back – the silver but to let some of the light from the cabinets shine through. Once I had done that, I was able to look around me and I noticed, for the very first time – which I didn't notice at the very beginning, walking into the Galleries – there are some really beautiful paintings above the cabinets – never mind the Galleries themselves. And they were just lost. So, yes, I covered them up with tracing paper, basically, and put the main lights off – the ceiling lights – in the evening. And, in the course of the evening, it got darker outside and the cabinets acted like projections and the silver glinted off the internal lights of the cabinets and just created subtle glints of the silver going on inside, which I thought was much more exciting.

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