

# The Art of Design

## The evolution of exhibition design in the museum environment

The evolution of exhibition design plays an integral role in museum history. As painting began to escape the confines of the frame and spread on to the museum wall, it not only hurdled physical boundaries but also bypassed conventional means of presentation. This 'new' approach to art practice began to rely upon the museum context and the viewer's awareness of that context to read the work. Subtle notions of difference between 'wall painting' and 'mural' were conceived. The long progression from the prehistoric wall-painting to the framed picture and out again is reliant upon context.

The earliest display cases can be linked to the display of religious relics in pre-Renaissance Europe. Stephen Bann in his essay, *Shrines, curiosities and the rhetoric of display*, comments that reliquaries 'were the amazingly elaborate and costly arrangements for showing the relics of saints and other cultic objects to the faithful pilgrims who travelled hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to gain sight of them.'<sup>1</sup> Reliquaries were a display case in miniature, a vessel of truth and authority. This method of display and its associations has carried through to the present day.

A Cabinet of Curiosity, which Francis Bacon proclaimed 'no learned gentleman should be without'<sup>2</sup> was a small room which presented objects and materials as a 'cabinet of the world'. The studiolo of Francisco I was one of the first cabinets, a secret room

in Florence designed by Borghini in the 1570s. Cabinets contained cupboards, which were lavishly decorated, employing symbols or colour coding to convey their contents. Sculptures were displayed in niches and paintings wallpapered the walls and ceilings in a symmetrical fashion. As the public began to access collections they were moved from cupboards to glass display cases, often placed in front of windows for better viewing.

The earliest museums, such as the Uffizi, developed in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. In this style of presentation, on an aesthetic level, paintings were primarily displayed for their decorative purposes. Works were hung symmetrically with their frames touching one another; smaller paintings were arranged around a larger central work. The aesthetic sensibilities of the display overrode the intent of the artwork, paintings were often cut down or extended to fit the available space and layout, even transforming rectangular works into ovals.

In the 18th century a more functional style of arrangement began to emerge with works being hung according to 'school' or country to give an historical perspective. In America, artist Charles Wilson Peale established an extension of the traditional exhibition gallery used by established artists to display their works. The extent of Peale's collecting saw the development of the first museum in America. Every inch of the Museum's walls was covered in

carefully arranged and categorised objects, portraits, even live exhibits including a grizzly bear. Peale can be seen as an innovator of a number of museum display techniques. He produced painted backgrounds to contextualise each specimen, produced more life-like forms to display animal skins on, and used skylights to illuminate objects.

Peale continued his art practice and also proved innovative in the display of his own work. A life-size painting, *Staircase Group: Raphaelle and Titian Ramsay Peale I* exhibited at the Philadelphia Statehouse in 1795, depicts his two sons climbing a staircase. Peale insisted that the work be displayed not on the wall, but in a doorway; he crafted a step at the base of the painted staircase to further enhance his illusion of reality. It was so successful that the visiting George Washington bowed in acknowledgement of the two young men. Peale recognised the importance of context when playing with the notion of illusion, relying upon the 'authority' of the museum.

Peale's art practice extended beyond painting on canvas to a variety of creations including animated artworks that he described as 'perspective views, with changeable effects, of a nature delineated in motion.'<sup>3</sup> This culminated in the production of an exhibit of dramatic proportions with a pond and landscape covered in flora and fauna, including a cut away cross-section of earth to display minerals.

Peale blurred the boundaries between artist, curator and designer, which is illustrated in his late self-portrait, *The Artist in his Museum*, 1822. This image encapsulates Peale's interests through the depiction of an artist's palette, taxonomic specimens, fossils and visitors to his museum. Peale's theatrical gesture of unveiling the museum beyond the curtain not only highlights Peale's collection, but his understanding of the role that presentation and design plays in exhibiting both artworks and specimens.

Continuing earlier trends in design evolution, the abstract artist's studio became a design template for museum display in the 1920s. Artists such as Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy explored exhibition design, and the subject was a focus of the Bauhaus School. Experimentation flourished, producing a variety of environments customised for the art they were presenting. Organic, dream-like interiors were created for the display of Surrealist art while hard-edged, free-standing, sculptural structures displayed works by artists such as Picasso. The architecture of the space became more minimal to focus audience attention on the artwork. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, can be credited with the introduction of the 'white cube' model of display which has become an international standard. MOMA in turn was influenced by European design, particularly German modernism.

The use of colour in museums has many contributing influences that can be traced over

time as an extension of the interior of a stately home or public building. Paintings and objects were displayed over fabric wall linings, wallpaper or decorative paint finishes and this was transferred to the museum interior. However the use of colour in contemporary museums is largely a perpetuation of the 'white cube', with its origins in expressionist art and Alexander Dorner's 'atmosphere rooms'. The Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany, was specifically influential with its presentation of an eclectic display of artefacts and expressionist works which focussed on the emotional influence of the objects. Coloured walls and exposed brickwork were dominant in the presentation of the works. This established the trend of using colour to reference artworks or objects on display rather than 'interior' colour trends. Colour is used to reference or evoke a particular period in history, a country or culture. This has become further convoluted by technological developments in house-paints. Artists began to extend their palette with the use of house-paint, initially due to financial constraints. This resulted in the direct application of the contemporary interior palette to the artist's canvas, progressing to the walls of the museum. This interplay of artist's palette, interior colour, and museum interior is likened to the mobius strip – a perpetual cycle of self-reference.

Installation art arose in the 1960s as a direct attempt to break down the notion of the 'white cube', yet ironically became a 'standard' of art presentation in itself. Some artworks are entirely reliant upon

the actuality of museum display. Damien Hirst's *Shark*, encased in glass and steel, is suspended in a limbotic state between the two worlds of specimen and artwork. Transport the work to the Natural History Museum, and the viewer's cognition shifts to the other side of the brain. Could certain artworks 'be' without the museum in which it resides? The location of the artwork feeds the question, 'what makes it possible to see a painting as a painting?'<sup>4</sup> Sandy Nairne comments 'Art and exhibitions have evolved together, so that contemporary art cannot be fully understood independently of its presentation.'<sup>5</sup>

The cyclical nature of exhibition design will be taken even further with the 'virtual museum'. Today, the world wide web provides unlimited possibilities for display, foreseen as early 1947 when André Malraux presented his concept of a 'museum without walls'.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bann, 'Shrines, curiosities and the rhetoric of display' from the book *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Walsh, 'The idea of modernity' from the book *The representation of the past Museums and Heritage in the post-modern world*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wilson Peale quoted in Susan Stewart, 'Death and Life, in that order, in the works of Charles Wilson Peale' from the book *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993, p. 87

<sup>5</sup> Sandy Nairne, 'Exhibitions of Contemporary Art' from the book *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, The Open University, 1999, p. 105.