

→ PARTICIPATION ATTRACTS – PARTICIPATION BINDS

DAVID ANDERSON



David Anderson öffnet den Blick für eine historische Bestandsaufnahme zur Genese englischer Museen und ihrer Aufgaben. Er fordert, dass Museumsleute sich heute wieder an die ursprünglichen Ziele erinnern sollten, Toleranz und Verständnis für ein breites Publikum zu fördern und damit Vorurteile überwinden zu helfen.

Ein solches demokratisches Museumsverständnis erfordert besucherorientierte Ausstellungen. Nur die Museen, die sich den Publikumsinteressen öffnen, sollten öffentliche Förderung erhalten. Museen müssen als Teil der »Learning Society« Chancen für Lernen eröffnen. Besucher, die sich aktiv mit den Ausstellungen auseinandersetzen können, fühlen sich dem Museum verbunden und kommen wieder. Der Beitrag zeigt wie diese Einstellung in der Praxis im Victoria and Albert Museum umgesetzt wird und begründet damit auch den großen Erfolg der neueröffneten British Gallery, die den Europäischen Museumspreis 2004 erhielt.

Since the war in Iraq, the issue of the place of museums in a democracy has been in the minds of many museum professionals in Britain. At the United Kingdom Museums Association Conference in October 2003, we were discussing what museums should do to help refugees who came to Britain. There was a very clear consensus at the conference that we should not get involved at the primary stage of contact between refugees and asylum seekers and the UK government because, if we did, there would be a real risk of loss of trust in museums if they were implicated in what (in the eyes of some professionals) are controversial and inhumane proposals for treatment of this vulnerable group.

My own museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum (initially called the South Kensington Museum) in London, was created explicitly to make a difference in society. The debate has always been what kind of difference this should be. At the beginning, the Museum aimed to train designers to know »good« and »bad« design; to educate the consumer to know the difference, and buy what (in the view of the Museum) was good; and to educate children as the makers and consumers of the future. But its ambitions were wider even than this.

The Great Exhibition of 1851, a staggeringly successful initiative which attracted six million visitors in a year, had demonstrated to the British Government that the masses could visit exhibitions in numbers, with serious intellectual engagement and without rioting. The Government in consequence

recognised that museums could be a major instrument of public policy, and could help the country achieve its social as well as its economic goals.

Henry Cole, Director of the new Government Department of Science and Art and the first Director of the Museum, declared his intent in his inaugural address in 1857 when he said that »this museum will be like a book with its pages open, and not shut.«

His most important objective was to attract large numbers from the working classes. It is clear from this and other writings and speeches that Henry Cole was engaged on a massive experiment in public education. He more than any other museum director of the nineteenth century in England saw the potential for museum education programmes to reach new audiences. He established a national programme of circulating exhibitions, fostered the growth of local museums, supported new colleges of science and art in towns and cities across the country, and sent curators from South Kensington to every corner of the nation to lead the development of adult education courses. An analysis of students at such courses reveals the diversity of their backgrounds – from lacquer workers to governesses among females, and from shoemakers to surgeons among males; most were aged 15 to 30 years (Anderson 1995).

Yet the critics of the »South Kensington system« were numerous and influential. The rigidity of Cole's principles of education in museums and in schools – which required unbending adherence to a programme of study of approved examples – was satirised by Charles Dickens in »Hard Times«, with Cole himself probably the model for »the Government Officer«. As Dickens wrote to Cole in 1854, »I often say to Mr Gradgrind, that there is reason and good intention in much that he does – in fact in all that he does – but that he overdoes it. Perhaps by dint of his going his way and my going mine, we shall meet at last at some halfway house where there are flowers on the carpets, and a little standing room for Queen Mab's [...] chariot among the Steam Engines« (Frayling 1987). [Queen Mab in English folklore was the queen of the fairies. For Dickens her value may have been as a symbol of the creativity and imagination people still needed as part of their education in an age of technology.]

William Morris, a key figure in the development of the V&A's collections in the early days, was by the 1880s deeply disillusioned by museums in general and the South Kensington Museum in particular; their disappearance from his utopian London of the future in »News from Nowhere« was deliberate and pointed (Morris 1970). It is the practice of the arts by the wider population that he believed was important. By this time, Henry Cole had already retired, defeated by the art historians who by now had completed their conquest of an institution which he had, thirty years earlier, tried to establish predominantly as an educational instrument. »Unless museums are turned to

the purposes of education», Cole predicted, »they dwindle into very sleepy affairs« (Frayling 1987), and so it turned out.

A healthy society, and a democratic society, needs citizens who have the education, understanding, political consciousness, confidence and skills to participate effectively. Through active participation in cultural activities, children can learn not just how to design and make a pot or a painting or a film. They also learn that it is their own right to participate in cultural activities. A model of learning, and of museums, which fails to encourage wider participation by the public – cultural citizenship – is antithetical to the development of a strong and healthy democracy.

Why do European museums not engage more intellectually with their own practice and discuss their impact on society? Not because they are underfunded – of course, money is always short, but this is a feeble, evasive, self-serving excuse, not a rational argument; these decisions are a matter of priorities. Nor is it because visitors do not come to learn – all the evidence of the last decade (in the UK, at least) shows that over 90 % of adults and young people say they enjoy learning, and believe they learn something every day of their lives. They want more opportunities for learning, not less, from museums, as extensive summative evaluation of the V&A's British Galleries has demonstrated (Creative Research 2002). Perhaps it is because many artists and curators don't like to design galleries around the needs of audiences? If so, this is not acceptable. We need to sit these people down and explain to them in words of one syllable that public museums are paid for with public money.

Does this matter? It matters because European societies now need opportunities for a different kind of learning than that offered by schools and colleges of the traditional kind. Education in the twenty-first century must become trans-institutional, and personalised, with the focus on development of individuals in every stage and area of their lives – in families, voluntary organisations and peer groups and through museums, libraries and art institutions as well as in formal education.

For example, the growth of the creative industries – the »hot« zone of many European economies – depends in part upon the transition to this new model for learning and skills. Creative practitioners do not emerge from thin air. They are dependent upon the wider cultural sector – including museums – for their development and inspiration. Museums in particular can be seed-beds of creativity, offering richness of resources, novel and complex environments, and the stimulation of diverse ideas.

Since 1997, when the new Labour Government took office, there has been a dramatic level of intervention by government in the cultural sector. It has created Culture Online, a € 20 million fund over two years to create online resources which foster public participation in museums, libraries, the per-

forming arts and broadcasting. It has given over € 100 million over two years to its national agency, the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives, to enable it to develop the services of major regional museums and particularly to improve facilities for learning and access. It has reintroduced free admission to all national museums. It has established a fund of ca. € 8 million over three years to enable national and regional museums to work together in partnership on educational and community projects.

All of this is in addition to the large sums of money which are already being distributed by the National Lottery in the UK to support public access to museums and other cultural institutions. Later this year, the Government plan to publish a national strategy for museums and gallery education, the aim of which is to review current spending on museum and gallery education (which has amounted to hundreds of millions of euros in recent years) and to identify how it could be used more effectively in future, to support the new objectives the government has set.

These initiatives have taken place in the context of broader social and educational change. In the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, the concept of the learning society has gained wide currency, as has the idea that learning does not take place just in school but also through families and other informal contexts. This has a major implication for museums and other cultural institutions. Instead of being the sector that learning forgot, the cultural sector is rapidly emerging as the second learning sector, and for adults the most important one. In Britain, far more adults when interviewed say they learn through the cultural sector than say they learn through formal classes.

Museums are also uniquely important as places to learn the new skills and literacies – visual and oral, social, experiential, participative and creative – we will need to participate in the cultural activities in society. With or without governments, and prompted in part by the growth of interactive digital media, a new education system is evolving to meet the demand for new ways of learning, and museums can be an important part of it.

In practice our visitors mix and match a wide range of learning strategies throughout their lives, integrating according to their own interests formal education, self-directed learning (as, for example, when inexperienced beekeepers learn from other expert beekeepers in their locality) and informal learning (such as that which families do without any advice or mentoring). And all of this is taking place through a very diverse set of local and national, cultural and educational institutions, including museums. Ministers and officials know this, and it is one of the reasons why they are turning more to museums to play a greater role in learning.

There is also an increasing awareness that museums exist in specialist learning ecosystems. For example, the V&A's ecosystem is that of design. The students who study through our collections go on to become fashion

designers, or architects, or graphic designers, or creators of software. Some also become the teachers of the next generation of designers. Many, when they are parents, want their children to have more creative opportunities than they themselves experienced as children, and look to museums to offer this. By attempting to address these kinds of educational needs, many museums are returning to the missions they first articulated when they were founded, but are adapting them to a form appropriate to our digital age.

Some projects illustrate this process of change. They are offered not because these projects are better than those other museums have developed, but because each illustrates a different approach to engaging visitors with content that is distinctively museological in its nature, in ways that a traditional glass case exhibit on its own is unlikely to be able to do. They also raise their own issues and problems.

»Going Graphic« was the V&A's first significant public digital project. Over a period of two weeks in 1998, any visitor who wished to do so could borrow a digital camera to take photographs of whatever they pleased in our galleries. They were then invited to use a simple piece of software on a computer in a temporary digital studio to create a poster on the theme, »The V&A – a place for people«. Over 2,000 digital posters were created by visitors, and all were uploaded onto our website on the day they were created so that visitors could then e-mail them on to friends or family from their home, school, college or community centre.

The posters our visitors designed gave us an extraordinary insight into what is going on in their minds, in ways not even drawing activities have done. Certain visual stereotypes – such as nose to nose confrontations between visitors and sculpture – emerged time and again. So did the wish (especially on the part of families) to commemorate the occasion by posing in front of works of art. Some images were humorous, and many of them were playfully disrespectful. Some images were beautifully designed, others were not. Some were very witty. All were, in their different ways, interesting statements about the relationship between the museum and its audience. Very few made any attempt to say anything serious about the objects on display.

What do these images tell us? That the efforts museums make to communicate significant art historical concepts and information are futile? This would be an unduly negative interpretation. But they certainly suggest that the experiences of visitors in galleries, and the ways in which they think about those experiences, are a lot less directed by museums than we might have thought. The outcomes of projects like this suggest that our assumptions of scholarly influence and value are not entirely shared by our visitors. When they are allowed to communicate with us freely and independently, they may not think what we want them to think, or say what we want to hear.

»Breathless« was a temporary exhibition which explored the relationship

between photography and time, from the dawn of the medium in the mid-nineteenth century to the present day (Haworth-Booth 200). The theme had great potential for school children and students who were studying photography so, with funding from the Japanese company Canon, the V&A invited young people aged 14 to 18 years to visit the exhibition, and then to create their own photographs on the same theme. A selection of their work was then exhibited at the V&A next to the main photography exhibition gallery.

The result was a wide range of images of remarkable creativity and quality. The schoolchildren and students who participated were not specially selected for their ability – they were normal cross section of their age group. But they showed that, when given the opportunity, encouragement and incentive, everyone is capable of creating works of art of freshness and originality (Morris/Chapman 2002).

On this occasion, the curators of the Museum's own photographic collections enthusiastically supported the idea of exhibiting the young people's work in a prestigious location and with respect. But this kind of display is still a cause for serious concern for many curators in museums in the United Kingdom, who are afraid that museum visitors will become confused about what works are of quality, and what are not. It is the museum's role, in their view, to be very clear about this, and only to exhibit works that achieve excellence. But what is »excellence« in museums? Does it refer only to the quality of the collections? Or does it also include excellence of experience for visitors, and excellence in the learning process the museum has developed in order to engage visitors more deeply with museum content?

The redisplay of the V&A's British collections – a run of galleries which comprise ten percent of the whole site – was a huge financial and museological challenge for the institution. The decision of the project leader, the curator Christopher Wilk, to involve four educators, led by Gail Durbin, as core members of the project team was critical. As a result, the needs of audiences, from families and schoolchildren to students and self-directed adult learners, were strongly represented at every stage and in every aspect of the development of the new galleries.

The galleries were also designed for different types of learners. For this reason, some areas are suited to quiet contemplation, others for activity and participation. The activity areas contain a wide range of hands-on exhibits. This seems to be the first time a national art museum in the UK has made visitor participation an essential element in the design of a permanent gallery.

Visitor activities are not confined to separate discovery areas. They can be found in many places throughout the galleries amongst the works of art. There has been almost universal agreement on the part of art critics and the public (as expressed in evaluation studies) alike that this has been done in such a way as to enhance the exhibits and stimulate interest in the objects on

display, whilst creating galleries as beautiful as any in the museum. Academic historians have praised their scholarship, and families like their child-friendly exhibits.

Visitors are encouraged to study the collections in more depth in separate study rooms. These areas also provide a rest area in the middle of your journey through this vast expanse of galleries. There are computers at intervals as you move through, which encourage you (for instance) to design your own bookplate or wallpaper design, or to contribute your views on the galleries for other visitors to read or respond to.

Audience research was a key factor in the success of the galleries. As well as surveys of different types of visitors to identify their interests and needs, the Museum tested almost every aspect of the design – from hands-on exhibits to the words on the labels – by developing prototypes to try out with visitors.

In terms of audience response, the new »British Galleries« are incomparably more popular with visitors than the traditional displays they have replaced. The V&A's audience more than doubled as soon as they opened from 900,000 per annum to 2,300,000, and at least half of this increase can be attributed directly to the British Galleries rather than the free admission which was introduced on the same day. (We can say this with confidence because no other national museum saw its visitor numbers increase by more than 50 % when they went free at the same time).

Evaluation has shown just how much visitors like the new participative exhibits. 93 % of visitors to the new British Galleries said they were »just like a museum should be«. A staggering 95 % of visitors to the galleries (six months after they first opened) said that they had come to the V&A because they had made a conscious decision to visit these galleries – which is evidence that content can attract as well as bind museum users. Only 1 % of visitors said they felt that the interactive elements detracted from their appreciation of the objects on display, whereas 93 % said that they positively enhanced it, and 89 % felt they helped to improve their knowledge of the subject (Creative Research 2002).

Why have the British Galleries proved so popular? It is not as if the use of interactives and opportunities for visitor response are in themselves innovations – many science museums have offered these for years. What was unusual was that this has been done by a national museum of the arts and cultural history, on a scale and with a commitment to the quality of the visitor experience that is without precedent, in the United Kingdom at least. And there was a determination to harmonise this effort with a commitment to curatorial scholarship and aesthetics. In the opinion of many museums professionals who have come to see the British Galleries since they have opened, the chemistry has worked. If so, why is there still such deep resistance, es-

pecially in art museums, to using visitor research to inform and shape the process of design of galleries, in the way curators and educators on the British Galleries project have done?

The common factor that »Going Graphic«, »Breathless« and the »British Galleries« all share is that they invite visitor participation. There are, then, many ways in which museums, through their events and exhibits, can make a significant difference to the societies of which they are part. But however they do so, they must create environments which invite visitor participation, and respect the capabilities of children and adults as interpreters and creators of museum content, if they are to be effective. Research tells us clearly that this is what visitors want, and when we take this step they will reward us with their support.

Try on a Corset and a Crinoline, Victoria and Albert Museum



References

- Anderson, David (1995): »Gradgrind Driving Queen Mab's Chariot«, in: Alan Chadwick/Annette Stannett (eds.), *Museums and the Education of Adults*, National Institute of Adult Community Education, Leicester.
- Frayling, Christopher (1987): *The Royal College of Art: 150 Years of Art and Design*, Royal College of Art, London.
- Haworth-Booth, Mark (ed.) (2000): *Photography and Time Special Millenium Issue of Aperture magazine* 158, New York.
- Morris, Susan/Chapman, Colin (2002): *Photography at post-16 Museums as a Resource: Information and Ideas for Teachers*, V&A, London, 2002.
- Morris, William (1970): *News from Nowhere*, ed. James Redmond, Routledge, London,
- Creative Research, *Summative Evaluation of the British Galleries, Report of Research Findings*, Creative Research, London, 6th September 2002.

Contact

David Anderson, Director of Learning
 Victoria & Albert Museum
 Learning and Visitor Services Division
 Cromwell Road
 South Kensington, London, SW3 2 RL
 fon: ++ 44 (0)20 – 79 42 21 88
 email: d.anderson@vam.ac.uk

