



## How do HE Tutors and Students use Museum Collections in Design?

### Qualitative Research for The Centre of Excellence Through Teaching and Learning in Design

January 2007

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## Aims and Objectives

**Overall** • To provide a baseline of knowledge on how Design Tutors and Students currently use the V&A's collections, in order to develop future CETLD programmes.

### Research Aims

- To identify factors which encourage or inhibit a V&A visit.
- To explore how Design Students use the V&A collections as part of their learning experience.
- To understand what kinds of display and interpretation are most useful and engaging as a learning support for Design coursework.
- To understand the role of the Tutor in relation to museum usage.
- To identify resources which the V&A could provide in order to support Design Students' understanding of collections.
- To explore how students and Tutors feel about mobile learning technologies.

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## Methodology

**Two extended focus group sessions, each containing three/four accompanied gallery visits**

Session ① • **7 course Tutors/Programme Directors**

3 Royal College of Art

4 University of Brighton

*Specialist subjects* • Ceramics, Graphic Design, 3D Design, History of Design

**3+ hours, V&A**

Session ② • **9 Design Students**

3 Royal College of Art (Postgrad)

6 University of Brighton (Undergrad)

*Specialist subjects* • Ceramics, Fashion, Animation, Textiles, Architecture, Art & Design, Design Products

**3+ hours, V&A**

### Additional Research Features

Carried out by Catherine Speight and Beth Cook (CETLD) under the supervision of Susie Fisher.

### 9 Accompanied visits in Gallery

12 Undergraduates; 3 Postgraduates

### Online survey

(Sample size Tutors 35, Students 77)

All fieldwork was conducted in the V&A in November/December 2006.

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## Stimulus Material

- The Gallery itself
- Bubble cartoons
- Hypotheses about the museum learning process (listed overleaf)
- These were used as probes in the group discussion to explore how respondents felt about each particular issue



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## Stimulus Material

### Tutors

- Students need strategies for looking at objects.
- Students discover things about objects in museums by accident.
- Students learn from the museum environment as well as from specific objects.
- It is important for students to know about the context of an object.
- Students learn from drawing objects.
- Students find museums overwhelming.
- Students don't really know what is in the museum.
- Students use museums differently at different stages in their course.
- Students don't use museum archives.
- Design students have a visual imagination.
- Museums aren't an integrated part of design courses.
- Postgraduate students don't need help interpreting and looking at objects.
- Students only visit museums to look at something specific.
- Students prefer to listen to information rather than read it.
- Students these days aren't taught how to look at objects.
- Students prefer on screen resources to 'the real thing'.



## Stimulus Material

### Students

- Students learn from the museum environment as well as from specific objects.
- It is important for students to know about the context of an object.
- Students learn from drawing objects.
- Students find museums overwhelming.
- Students don't use museum archives.
- Design students have a visual imagination.
- Postgraduate students don't need help interpreting and looking at objects.
- Students only visit museums to look at something specific.
- Students prefer to listen to information rather than read it.
- Visiting museum helps design students create their own objects.
- Students think visiting museums is an essential part of their course.
- Students prefer to visit on their own rather than in groups.
- Students use collections from outside their own subject area.
- Students keep a record of their favourite objects in the museum and refer to it later.
- Students don't use museum websites.
- Students are discouraged from visiting museums and archives because of cost and distance.
- Students are more interested in seeing temporary exhibitions than permanent galleries.
- Students would use museums more if there were better resources.
- Students these days aren't taught how to look at objects.
- Students prefer on screen resources to 'the real thing'.

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## Overview

- Tutors recommend museum visits and specific exhibitions if they themselves are impassioned by them. Museum visits are rarely a course requirement. Students are split by personality into those who like museums and those who don't. Many are content to take inspiration from the High Street rather than the museum.
- A student visit is almost always triggered by an exhibition. In the course of visiting, the student will wander at random through the galleries.
- The minority of students and Tutors based nearby (RCA), will become more familiar with the V&A and may 'pop in' to look at something special. For most students cost, distance and lack of knowledge about the museum act as barriers.
- Students' outlook and purposes mature over their course of study. Insofar as they use the V&A, it must reflect and meet these developing needs.
  - Browsing for ideas and inspiration.
  - Researching for special projects, papers and dissertations.
  - Designing and creating objects from materials.
- Tutors and students all feel they could learn how to look at objects more effectively but they disdain help. Help is too clumsy and mechanical. Nevertheless, displays could be set up to reveal relevant points about the object. This would involve
  - Unusual juxtapositions
  - Different ways of categorising
  - Handling objects
  - Looking at different designers' solutions of universal design problems.
- Mobile learning technologies are viewed with suspicion. They are believed to force the agenda and take away from the experience of the real object.
- Design Tutors and Students are ambivalent about the V&A as an institution. They are trained to undermine orthodoxy and at the same time they want to participate in the museum's role of bringing design to the public arena.

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## What is the World of Design Teachers and Students Like?

- This seems to be a world with a very strong self image and a strong set of internal values. This culture profoundly affects how Tutors and their students interact with the closely allied world of the Art Museum.
- Teachers and students see themselves as artists. Therefore
  - They are **makers**, working with real objects and real materials with their hands, in the real world.
  - The Holy Grail is inspiration and originality. Students and teachers alike strive to create something original and they prize it in others when they recognise it.
  - They are reluctant to accept the authority of other people and institutions in relation to works of Art and Design.
- Is there some sense in which this community regards itself as special? With the corollary that they may believe they have the right to be singled out? e.g. for special access, their opinions should be listened to?

**IMPLICATION • THE WORLD OF UNIVERSITY DESIGN DEPARTMENTS WILL NOT FIND IT EASY TO ACCEPT HELP, PERHAPS BECAUSE THEY FEEL THEY ALREADY OCCUPY THE HIGH GROUND.**

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## The Spirit of the Encounter

### Tutors

- Keen to talk about the agenda as they saw it, e.g.
  - Dialogue
  - Challenge
  - Handling
  - Politics of the Museum

**“Design is a visual property. It is a complete way of understanding objects.”** Tutor
- Very reluctant indeed to bend their minds to the practical problems the museum wanted to address, e.g.
  - How they integrate museum collections into teaching
  - How the museum can display objects more helpfully
  - How their students learn to look at objects.

**“Go back to making pieces, creating pieces. The enquiring mind.”** Tutor
- There was a feeling that they shouldn't be asked to concentrate on someone else's agenda, that theirs had precedence.
- The most effective way to generate this kind of constructive discussion turned out to be to put hypotheses to the group and ask for responses.
- Some tutors were habitually so focused that they didn't have enough time to 'play' themselves. Given the chance, they welcomed some 'time off' in the galleries.

**“Cool ideas. This is 4,000 years ago. It's like a cylindrical storyboard.”** Tutor in Gallery

**IMPLICATION • TUTORS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE MUSEUM IN WAYS WHICH DO NOT CHALLENGE THEIR AUTHORITY OR RAISE THEIR DEFENCES.**

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## Students Mature over their Years of Study

- Year One**
- Just out of school.
  - Bemused, not sure of their own opinions and ideas.
  - Building a treasury of ideas, objects, images.
 

**“You just go in to saturate yourself with different influences. No fixed agendas.”** Student
- Years Two and Three**
- Focusing their interests.
  - Term papers, dissertations to write.
  - Hands on, create objects.
 

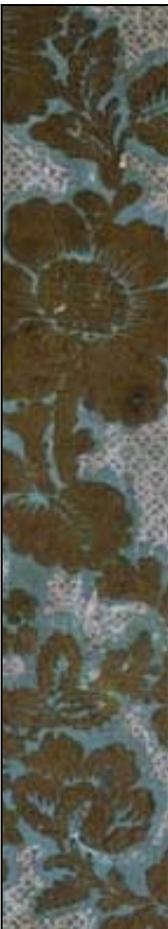
**“I come to see particular examples but you get led off. You come to something not necessarily related to what you’re doing and you get fresh inspiration.”** Student
- Year 4 Postgrad**
- Dedicated to a particular medium (e.g. ceramics, fashion).
  - Highly motivated to make a personal, unique contribution.
  - Looking to make a name for themselves in the Design world.
 

**“You see how it’s made. You find a piece and relate it to your personal designs.”** Student

In addition, they are young people with a need to eat, socialise, talk, play about, go shopping. And they need space for this.

**IMPLICATION • THE MUSEUM NEEDS, IDEALLY, TO FEED STUDENTS AT EACH OF THESE STAGES.**

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## How Do Students Relate to Objects?

This is at the heart of everything. Using the framework from Inspiring Learning For All...

- Knowledge**
- Students need to have looked at a wide range of created objects and be able to draw on examples and references. Both inside and outside their special discipline. Social and historical context adds to this sometimes but not always.
 

**“You can spend an hour or two just to absorb it. I know now about that thing. It’s quite satisfying.”** Student
- Emotion**
- Students are looking for an emotional response, an object which transfixes them, fascinates them and in which they can’t help but get involved. This is as likely to be in the shops as in a Museum.
 

**“I love the glass piece (in the V&A foyer).”** Student
- Analysing**
- Students need to understand their own reactions in more depth. They will often take a single idea and study it in its various forms, e.g. the heart. This appeared in the Leonardo exhibit and the V&A shop.
 

**“Your eye gets trained to the form, the heart. You’re drawn to the heart.”** Student
- Being inspired**
- Students are looking for happy accidents, unexpected objects, random juxtapositions which inspire their own ideas.
 

**“It helped me inadvertently with my work. The three photographs of adolescence.”** Student
- Creating**
- Students are working up to the act of creating an object. They interrogate objects which have found solutions to the kinds of problems they are currently wrestling with.
 

**“They should have samples that you could touch.”** Student

**IMPLICATION • STUDENTS ARE ENGAGED IN A PRACTICAL LOVE AFFAIR WITH OBJECTS. THE PROCESS IS ONE OF GETTING EVER CLOSER PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY, MENTALLY.**

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## How to Look at Objects • Tutors and Students

- 'How to look at objects' is a much broader concept than the vocabulary suggests.
- Looking implies this is a **visual** process and it is but vision is only part of the story. Perhaps 'apprehending objects' (while pompous) is more accurate.
- Students look at objects according to their purposes at the time.  
e.g. grazing, problem solving, creating an object.  
"There are more styles of learning than are being offered. Tactile, auditory, contextual." Student
- They, therefore, need to have a variety of avenues of access. In addition to the visual, everybody mentions  
Handling  
Different perspectives
- By handling they mean  
Picking it up      Feeling the texture      Scrutinising a detail from underneath  
Trying it out      Testing the materials      Seeing how it moves  
"It's frustrating not to touch." Tutor  
"Please don't touch. It's behind glass. When it's out of the cabinet, you can relate more." Student
- By different perspectives they mean not just the curator's but the maker's, other students', other artists', display team's etc., etc.  
"In the MOMA gallery in New York there was a materials scientist and a curator and they talked about 10 pieces of work from multiple perspectives." Tutor

**IMPLICATION • THE DESIGN WORLD NEEDS TO APPREHEND OBJECTS FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND, IN PARTICULAR, HANDS ON. TO OFFER AN OBJECT IN A GLASS CASE IS TANTAMOUNT TO TYING THEIR HANDS.**

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## Teaching Students to Look • Tutors

- Knowing how to look at objects is the fundamental skill. Students arrive in Year 1 unable to do it and leave as graduates, having acquired the skill (supposedly).
- As an artist, you are meant to be able to look at objects but Tutors appear to regard it as crass to discuss how the skill might be taught.
- They don't 'teach' it, nor are they receptive to the idea that the V&A should teach it. Perhaps it is more like acquiring a feel.
- Moreover, they disagree that either undergraduates or postgraduates no longer need help to look at objects.
- Nevertheless, there **are** some strategies being employed by Tutors.

They are

- Setting students to draw as a means of getting them to investigate the object thoroughly.
- Debriefing students after their encounter with the object and encouraging them to articulate why they responded as they did.
- Standing with the student beside the object and engaging in dialogue about it.
- Using a moving image to focus down on details.

**IMPLICATION • TUTORS AND STUDENTS WOULD, IN EFFECT, BE GLAD OF ALL THE HELP THEY CAN GET IN LOOKING AT OBJECTS. BUT THE MANNER IN WHICH HELP IS OFFERED IS ALL IMPORTANT. IT MUST NOT APPEAR TO DEMYSTIFY, SIMPLIFY, UNDERESTIMATE.**

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## Quotes • On Looking at Objects, Tutors

- “You go with the way they look.”** Tutor
- “Dialogue is fundamental. One to one, information delivery and managing circumstances.”** Tutor
- “If you ask them about the way they notice, it leads them to further areas. They become aware of what they’ve noticed.”** Tutor
- “You can focus on detail with a moving image.”** Tutor
- “Touch is fundamental.”** Tutor
- “Their dialogue is about how to communicate ideas and what they’ve learnt through recording them.”** Tutor
- “Think differently! Give them pointers to what they’re looking for. How are they set up to look? How do they get to know the way they’re looking? This is a problem with a lot of students.”** Tutor
- “They are less used to looking at real things. Students look at the film. They haven’t clocked what that object is because they’ve just downloaded it.”** Tutor
- “A handling session with objects to bring out the language.”** Tutor

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## Learning to Look • The Students’ Perspective

- Students appear to see this as one issue buried among many. No special priority.
  - Reading labels or not
  - Looking for inspiration
  - Notching up exhibitions
  - Browsing
  - Drawing objects from life
  - Understanding materials
  - Relating to the commercial world.
- They almost speak as though looking is something you do or you don’t do, at will. Without grasping that this is a skill to learn.
  - “You investigate the object (by drawing it). You have to look at it and often you don’t really look.”** Student
- There is a general understanding that images are easy to come by on screen these days and, as a result, given less attention.
  - Email, downloads, mobile phone photos.
- Object drawing is the commonly recognised tool for getting people to look at objects thoroughly. There is some suggestion that this is associated with school rather than college.
  - “You’re taken round museums when you’re little. You draw a little picture and write a summary.”** Student
- However, the mature, committed students appear to value drawing highly and learn from it.
  - “If you draw, you have an understanding of the materials, the inherent quality of the materials. Like bone china, pushed to the limit. Tensile, thin.”** Student

**IMPLICATION • STUDENTS WILL WELCOME ALL THE HELP THE MUSEUM CAN GIVE THEM IN LOOKING AT OBJECTS. THEY WILL THINK OF IT AS MAKING THE OBJECTS MORE INTERESTING TO LOOK AT.**

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## What is the Role of Museums in Teaching Design?

- Offer an encounter with real objects in the real world.
- Provide context • History, ceremonial, makers, how it came to be here.
- Provide a 'sweet shop' of different objects, exemplars?

**“You want to broaden their experience of the museum. Give them the sweet shop. It inspires and interests and guides them in researching.”**

**Tutor**

- Offer archives, library, as a support to research.
- A source of exhibitions.

### **Pitched against the outside world**

- The High Street abounds in designed objects, graphics, images, movies, architecture, fashion.

**“People who don't go (to museums), they go into shops every weekend. The way they read things is pure. They learn to read objects in shops.”**

**Student**

- Many people feel more comfortable and stimulated in the world of commerce and can derive many of the same benefits in terms of browsing and inspiration, with the additional benefit of 'hands on'.

**COMMENT • DO MUSEUMS NEED TO FOCUS THE PRODUCT THEY ARE OFFERING TO STUDENTS AND MARKET THE BENEFITS TO THEM?**

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## How are Museums Used? Tutors' View

- Actually visiting museums seems to depend on personality and personal fit. Some people love them and some people don't.

**“In the middle of a project you should really see this at the V&A but some people wouldn't go.”**

**Student**

- It is now not cool for Tutors to make a museum visit compulsory.

**“Years ago, we instructed them to go.”**

**Tutor**

**“I might say 'I think you should be going to this gallery', but don't stifle it by prescribing.”**

**Tutor**

- Many Tutors now feel they can recommend and encourage, adult to adult, but that's the limit.

**“The Tutor's role is to convey passion.”**

**Tutor**

**“It's only a recommendation, we say, 'Be Physical about Research, get out there'”**

**Tutor**

- Other Tutors feel more at home with particular museums and have evolved more directive tactics to get the most out of them. Often for Year 1.

- Course recommended visit

**“Some are local, some online. We'll take them to specific exhibitions.”**

**Tutor**

- Curator/teacher/student visit, involving dialogue

**“They put on something specially for the students. There's some focus to it.”**

**Tutor**

- Field trip

**“It's better to have a managed visit, physically bring them here and have a day's drawing.”**

**Tutor**

- Set an object related task

**“How glass relates to the subject area.”**

**Tutor**

**QUESTION • WOULD MORE STUDENTS VISIT MUSEUMS IF SPECIFIC TASKS WERE SET AS PART OF THEIR COURSE?**

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## How do Students Use Museums?

- Museums are loosely equated with exhibitions and students are typically recommended to go and see a particular exhibition if it is relevant to their course.
- Many scan the website first to see if there is enough to hold their interest and merit a visit. Some will just make do with images on screen.
- Exhibitions are currency. Students can brag about having seen them and the longer the list, the higher the status.

**“The exhibitions. I don’t ever go to the exhibits.”** Student

- Almost no-one makes a visit specifically to visit the galleries, although most will stray into the galleries for a little freelance browsing on their way to and from the exhibition.
- Sometimes students will develop a special relationship with a museum and become more familiar with it, pop in often, perhaps mount a project or part time work with the staff and use archive and research facilities.

**“Go and find some gallery space and go and stand in your favourite creative atmosphere.”** Student

- For the many who don’t, museums remain places they don’t know much about and might be too big to get to grips with.
- Students inevitably remember back to being children.

**“You go to the kids bit first. Interactive and hands on.”** Student

**“When it’s active, it draws your attention. It’s bringing out the child in you.”** Student

If they suspect there is no hands on, their enthusiasm will diminish.

**IMPLICATION • MORE STUDENTS COULD USE MORE MUSEUMS MORE EXTENSIVELY THAN THEY DO.**

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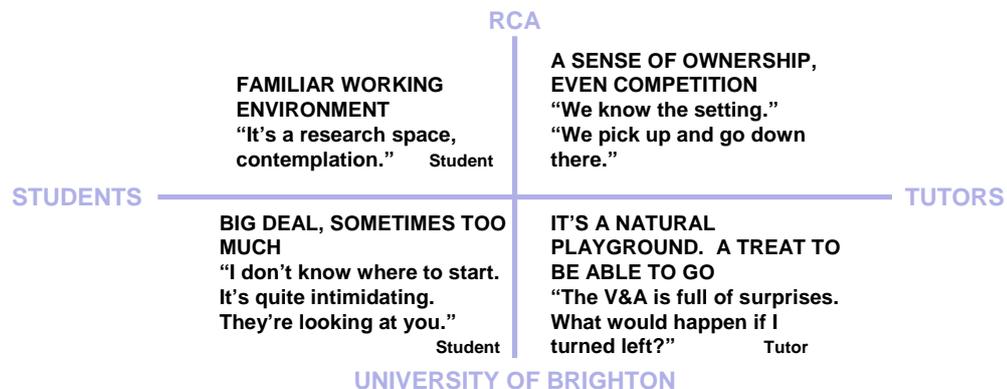


## Perceptions of the V&A

- The V&A trumps most other museums in terms of
  - Physical size
  - National authority
  - Extent and quality of its collections.
- At the same time, it is huge and potentially confusing, out of control.
 

**“There are so many things, how to find your way. It’s overwhelming.”** Student
- Perceptions change according to how familiar people are with the museum and this depends partly on physical proximity. Tutors and students at the RCA were much more confident and at home than Tutors and students from the University of Brighton.
 

**“It’s easy to go to things you’ve been to before because you know where it is.”** Student



**IMPLICATION • IS THERE A NEED FOR V&A AND UNIVERSITIES TO FACILITATE PHYSICAL VISITS TO THE MUSEUM IN ORDER TO LAUNCH STUDENTS ON THE FAMILIAR PATH?**

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## The V&A is more than a Housing for Objects

It is a political institution in its own right.

And, therefore, there is a strong political relationship with the colleges based on

Perceived authority

Careers arena.

### Authority first

- Students are **trained** not to accept authority. The goal is to challenge it.
  - “It’s a convention. Can it be subverted?” Tutor
  - “Objects as venerable puts people off.” Tutor
- This is a stance they actively enjoy.
  - “The underlying doctrine. You’re told what’s right. The cracks start to form when you’re too close.” Student
  - “You can’t engage in critical discourse.” Student
  - “It’s the Authority, the establishment.” Student
- Young artists feel bound to form their own views as they strive for originality but they can also feel overwhelmed. The solution is to ask for multiple perspectives.
  - From different people; maker, curator, marketing, other artists.
  - By using different principles of categorisation.
  - “Challenge new and unfamiliar objects.” Tutor
  - “Our experience contrasted with the words. Who has the authority?” Tutor
  - “They should have thought that there’s more than one way to skin a cat.” Student

**IMPLICATION • THE V&A WILL BE CRITICISED FOR TRYING TO HAVE THE LAST WORD. IT WOULD DO BETTER TO USE ITS AUTHORITY TO CREATE AN ARENA FOR DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND DEBATE.**

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## A Careers Arena

- Recognition by a museum can profoundly affect an artist’s career. To have ‘an in’ with a museum is a step up.
  - “Our Tutors have lots of contacts with the Brighton Museum.” Student
  - “I want my work to be seen and I want to be aware of what’s going on.” Student
- Dialogue with curators, public competitions for artists, collaboration over exhibitions, having work on display. These are all chances for recognition and career advancement.
- In some ways, museums and practising artists are drawing on the same tools of the trade.
  - How to display works effectively.
  - How to write descriptions of the work.
  - How to market to the public (shop, advertising).
- The ‘Twilight’ exhibition received a lot of interest and praise for its dramatic décor, in addition to the quality of the exhibits.
  - “In Twilight, we looked at how the display was put together.” Student
  - “It’s another agenda. Empower them to write and produce. It’s important, the psychology of consumer goods. Inaccessible, ostentatious, original exposure.” Tutor

**IMPLICATION • DOES THE MUSEUM NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DESIGN STUDENTS WANT TO EMULATE ITS PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AS WELL AS STUDY ITS OBJECTS?**

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## What Encourages People to Visit the V&A?

For those who love it ...

- It is a big treasure trove, Aladdin's Cave, inspiration. You never know what you might see. Conversely, there will almost certainly be an example of the object you specifically want to see.
- The atmosphere is charged with inspiration and the appreciation and presence of other like-minded people.

**"It's a great place, charged with inspiration flying round. If someone's looking at an object you feel the bond and you wonder why."** Student
- The architecture is stunning.
- The exhibitions are high quality and set the agenda.

**"In the Ossie Clark, they had the picture of Celia Birtwell displayed behind the dress."** Student
- There is the promise of learning, study, archives, evidence to bring to bear. This is **robust**.

**COMMENT • THIS IS A DESCRIPTION OF A CONFIDENT VISITOR, FAMILIAR WITH THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE MUSEUM AND SUFFICIENTLY MATURE TO HAVE IDENTIFIED THEIR OWN PURPOSE IN VISITING.**

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## What are the Barriers to Visiting the V&A?

For students, the biggest barriers are

- **Lack of knowledge**
  - What's in there?
  - How it's organised.
- **Orientation problems**
  - Finding where an object is.
  - Getting lost in the galleries.
- **Elitist, too expensive, not for us**
  - High exhibition charges.
  - Expensive café.
  - Violin player in the foyer.
- **Glass cases, hands off**
  - No handling sessions.
  - Too frustrating.
  - Makers need to handle to appreciate.
- **Crowds of other visitors**
  - Impede my view.
  - Spoil my concentration.
- **Too far away**

**IMPLICATION • THE STUDENT WANTS TO BE EXPOSED TO IDEAS AND EXCITED BY THE UNEXPECTED. WHEN HE FINDS IT, HE WANTS TO PICK IT UP, EXAMINE IT CLOSELY AND TALK ABOUT IT. ALL THE ABOVE WILL GET IN THE WAY. THE NEW VISITOR IS NOT CONFIDENT.**

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## How Can the V&A Best Help Tutors and Their Students?

What have we found out?

- It is not a simple matter of designing more sympathetic displays, although this would help.
- It will not be achieved by more authoritative information, although ensuring that students know about archives and libraries and feel welcome will help.
- It will be about recognising kinship between a Museum for Design and the Designers themselves.
  - Hands on relationship with objects.
  - A need to challenge.
  - A desire for dialogue.
  - A need to display and promote.
- It will need to acknowledge that the curator's orthodoxy is only one of a number of valid perspectives.
- It will need to respond to the student as she matures through all the different stages from timorous browsing through to creating objects with materials.
- It will need to help without appearing to help.

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## What Did We Learn From the CETLD Hypotheses?

- The hypotheses of the CETLD team helped tutors and students to articulate their underlying beliefs
- Summarised here is the climate of opinion surrounding each of the hypotheses
- From the reactions of tutors and students, we can gauge what kind of intervention is needed and will best help students of Design

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## Hypotheses 1

**Students find museums overwhelming.**

**Students don't really know what is in a museum.**

**Students don't generally prepare for a museum visit.**

- Yes, students find museums, especially the V&A, overwhelming at the beginning but once they have a firm purpose they can usually crack it.
- Once they're in there they are overtaken by chance encounters with objects and excitement and fascination takes over.
- They don't generally prepare for a museum visit because the visit itself is viewed as preparation for other things.

### IDEAS

- Establish an entertaining, 'find' screen in the main lobby where students can look in whatever objects or categories come to mind. It should then print out their route, overlaid on a gallery map.
- The V&A should personally introduce itself to each new intake of design students in the catchment area and tell them what's in the Museum.
- The V&A could create a 'home base' for visiting Design Students. A dedicated room where they can take stock, socialise, buy cheap coffee, discuss what they're doing and what they've seen.

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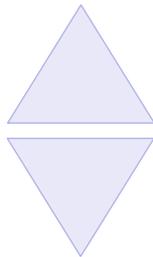
## Hypotheses 2

**Students use museums differently at different stages of their course.**

**Museums aren't an integrated part of design courses.**

**Students think visiting museums is an essential part of their course.**

- Museum visits are not generally integrated into the design course, although Tutors will make referrals and recommendations about exhibitions as they go along. Students accept that some people will visit museums and others won't. Everybody accepts that there is useful stuff in there but not essential. If necessary you can get it online.



Young, browsing  
Treasury of ideas  
Need the **MANY**

Maturing, focusing  
Dissertations, papers  
Making objects  
Need the **ONE**

Students do use the museum differently at different stages in the course. As they mature, they will need to focus, to look at research specifics.  
Browsing for ideas never stops.

**"You're throwing the net out, bringing things in."**

Student

### IDEAS

- Some teachers devise specific tasks to be achieved through gallery objects. Should there be a treasury of these ideas for other Tutors to draw on?
- For each exhibition, the V&A could publicise a link to an object within the galleries which contrasts with or illustrates the point of the exhibition.
- Students would include the museum in their coursework if the museum included their coursework in the galleries.
- The V&A could use the shop as a basis for development, contemporary design in the commercial world, more calculated to appeal to traditional non-visitors.

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## Hypotheses 3

**Students are discouraged from visiting museums and archives because of cost and distance.**

**Students prefer to visit on their own rather than in groups.**

**Students would use museums more if there were better resources.**

- Yes, students are discouraged by cost and distance but this is not the whole story. If the subject of the exhibition is important to them (e.g. Vivienne Westwood, for a fashion student) they will find a way.
- They are unlikely to become familiar with the galleries unless they are physically close.
- Students are social. Like everyone else, they are looking for a formula which lets them examine objects independently but also gives them someone to talk to about their experiences.
- Better resources in the same spirit as the current museum are unlikely to attract students who currently neglect museums. They need to see a different, more participative role for themselves within the museum.

### IDEAS

- Start a grants fund for subsidising student entry to exhibitions. Make eligibility dependent on some desirable gallery behaviour e.g. have visited 3 different galleries in the past 3 months (like a Caffé Nero card).
- Promote events and objects in addition to exhibitions.  
"There's not enough here which is projected. They want to feature their skill, their stuff."  
Tutor
- Create spaces for students to contribute to the museum. Design competitions and displays, interactive walls for comment and reaction, opportunities for co-curation, changing some of the rules.



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## Hypotheses 4

**Students are more interested in seeing temporary exhibitions than permanent galleries.**

**Students only visit museums to look at something specific.**

- Yes and no. Temporary exhibitions supply almost all the motivation to visit. They punctuate the landscape and provide focus. In addition, they are expected to take a different slant and act as a talking point. Students based nearby who have built up a relationship with the museum will pop in to pursue issues and objects specific to their own needs.
- The associated wandering through the galleries often turns out to be just as interesting and inspiring as the exhibitions but it is unlikely to trigger a dedicated visit.

### IDEAS

- Set up focus points within the gallery which address contemporary or contentious issues, using objects from the collections.
  - Juxtapose unusual objects to make a point.
  - Select a contrasting criterion for categorising.
- If the issue is really contentious (e.g. de-accessioning) a bit of press interest would give the galleries currency.
- Provide an opinion and review channel for students so that they can let other students know what the good objects are and what's not worth seeing.



## Hypotheses 5

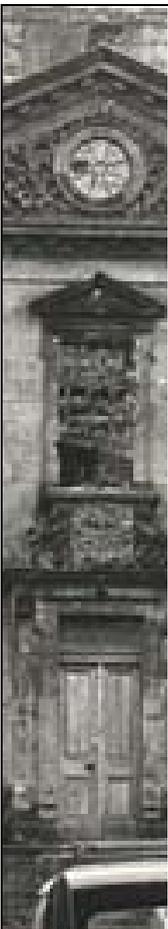
**Students discover interesting things about objects in museums by accident.  
Students use collections from outside their own subject area.  
Visiting museums helps design students to create their own objects.**

- The Zeitgeist buys into the principle that the wider you cast your net, the greater chance you have of creating something inspired and original. Students naturally cast further afield, perhaps more in the real world than the museum.
- No-one doubts that visiting museums helps students to create objects. They see what other people have done, how they have used the materials, how they have solved particular problems.
- Students, by and large, seem not to be seeking extra information about objects over and above noticing them, looking at them and examining their own responses. If they can learn something extra, it is probably accidental. However, if they come purposefully to an object, to analyse it, then what they discover is by no means accidental. The insight is generated by the mindset of the observer.

### IDEAS

- Unusual juxtapositions of objects and categories often trigger the most thought. These could be identified and set up by the museum itself or they could be generated randomly (e.g. by a fruit machine in the foyer). The student puts in one object/category and the machine generates a random one to juxtapose.
- Object commentaries in gallery need routinely to show the maker's perspective. Which materials? What were the challenges?

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## Hypotheses 6

**Students learn from the museum environment as well as from specific objects**

- Yes, triumphantly! Students talk about being inspired by the passion of other people in the galleries.  

**“If someone’s looking at it, you feel the bond and you wonder why?”** Student
- The museum itself, by virtue of its architecture, its orthodoxy and its taxonomy, influences how objects are presented and it's part of the student's job to recognise and identify this context and then to undermine it.
- The V&A also carries with it the concepts of large, elite, expensive. This has helped set up the debate about 'art on the street' versus 'art in museums' and who it's for.
- The design of exhibitions is a subject in its own right in addition to the objects featured in them.

### IDEAS

- Should the V&A talk more transparently about its own affairs?  
 Criteria for categorising.  
 Joy and frustration with the building.  
 Creating exhibition environments.  

**“They don’t bleed out into other spaces. Why aren’t they in Selfridges or Heathrow?”** Student

 Should the V&A transplant its culture into other environments and invite debate?

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## Hypotheses 7

**Students need strategies for looking at objects.**

**Students these days aren't taught how to look at objects.**

**Postgraduate students don't need help interpreting and looking at objects.**

“They do need help, even we do.”

Tutor

- Neither student nor Tutor feels completely confident that they know how to look at an object. It is **the** skill and, by its nature, it can never be complete.
- But teachers are reluctant or unable to teach strategies. Are they worrying that it has all become mechanical and the 'feel' is lost?
- Tutors may take a more active or more passive view.
  - Active • Give students a task (i.e. giving them a purpose) in which they have to assess the object.
  - Passive • Debriefing a student after their encounter with the object and encouraging them to articulate how they felt and why.
- Postgrads are more likely to have a particular purpose in looking at an object. This does not mean they will have seen all that could be seen.

### IDEAS

- Articulating what you notice is key to realising what you've seen. Is there a way to incorporate the 'walking and talking' technique which was popular in research into a student service?
- Students don't want to feel they are accepting orthodoxy and being helped. However, if displays were set up to reveal a particular point, they would in fact be experienced as **interesting** (and therefore helpful).
- Different details on an object can be pointed up by using different voices and different perspectives – maker, curator, commercial director, other artist.

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## Hypotheses 8

**Students learn from drawing objects.**

**Students keep a record of their favourite objects in the museum and refer to it later.**

- Drawing an object is still the best way for students to look at it in detail. Slightly old fashioned as a method but still given a space by most Tutors and most students. Drawing leads to understanding.
- Students need to keep records of their favourite objects and also of the thoughts/ideas they had at the time.
- They are impatient to capture image and thoughts electronically (by mobile phone?) but they recognise this is not the same thing as looking at them thoroughly, in fact often the reverse.

### IDEAS

- Sometimes electronic recording is made more difficult by the museum, no photography, high prices for 3D, etc. Should there be a no cost, museum sanctioned method for giving students electronic images?
- Should there be a check-in point where students can tell an interested person what they've learnt from doing the drawing and debrief?
- Should the exhibit label be marked to show if there are website images available?

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## Hypotheses 9

**Design students have a visual imagination.**

**Students prefer to listen to information rather than read it.**

- No-one agrees about this. Some Tutors couldn't see that there was any other kind of imagination than visual. Others think Design is multi-sensory.
- What is agreed is that up to 40% of Design Students are dyslexic and, therefore, it is easier for them to look at images and to listen to, rather than read, information.
- What is clear is that Designers have an 'eye/hand' imagination because they are creators of objects. The opportunity to handle and play with objects is very scarce indeed and this drives students away from museums into less frustrating environments.

### IDEAS

- Identify environments where design students can interrogate objects through touch and handling. Students are keen to see behind the scenes, objects which are not on display. Could they handle them?
- Think more about making points about the objects through their physical relation to one another, e.g. side by side comparisons, different orientations, categorising by colour not chronology, etc., etc.
- Cut down on labels with sustained texts, include more graphics and bulletpoints.
- Use movable video lenses to give people some control over how they investigate a stationary object.
- PDAs may have a role in interpretation here, revealing the hidden sides of the object.



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## Hypotheses 10

**Students prefer on-screen resources to the real thing.**

**Students don't use museum websites.**

- Students prefer an encounter with the real object to seeing it on screen. And their Tutors believe it to be essential.
- That said, screen based information is utterly normal and expected for today's students. They expect to check things out on-screen, 'What's on in London?', 'a follow up on an object they've seen in a museum.'
- They are furious if a normal Google search doesn't come up with museum collections if they are relevant to the subject. They don't understand institutional ineptitude on screen.
- Websites and on-screen resources are a staple, a quick source of enquiry but not the optimal experience. Students are always making a cost/benefit calculation from a screen view about whether it's worth going to see something in the flesh. If it's behind glass, it's less tempting.
- If they consider the museum at all, they will almost certainly check it out on the web.

### IDEAS

- Research the kinds of searches which Design Students put into Google and assess what it would take to get the V&A onto the first page.
- Amplify the 'making and creating' stories behind key objects, on the website, to make up for the scarce mention in gallery.



## Hypotheses 11

**It is important for students to know about the context of an object.  
Students don't use museum archives.**

- A few students enjoy the object, steeped in its own history, significance, human usage, but the majority seem less interested.  
**"I agree it's important but in the background."** Tutor
- At the browsing, collecting ideas stage, too much detail is a distraction. It is their personal road to discovery which is more important.
- As they focus and are required to do academic papers, context and research are inevitable and they are grateful to have it all laid out for them.
- Relatively, few know about the V&A archives and even then they may feel it is not for the likes of them. They are unlikely to make a special trip to the museum for the archives unless their other information sources falter.

### IDEAS

- Team the archives with a student 'home base' where they can go through the material informally, get cheap coffee, talk to friends, use the web.
- Introduce the archives personally to 1<sup>st</sup> years and set up an entry system to be as little bureaucratic and intimidating as possible.
- Make it easy (free) for Tutors to bring in year groups on an introductory trip.

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## What is the Place of Mobile Learning Technologies? • Tutors

- PDAs will have to make a case for themselves for this audience. The case for visiting a museum relies on having an encounter with real objects in the real world.  
**"The V&A has the real thing. You can see the detail and the scale, the fact that it's made of stuff and how they've made it. It's an encounter."** Tutor
- Tutors and students are from different generations with respect to technology. Tutors tend to shy away, students tend to take it for granted.
- Tutors see technology as dictating the agenda, not responding to their personal needs and insights and rebel against it.  
**"A machine is less free because the machine tells you where to go."** Tutor  
**"PDAs are disheartening, a set method."** Tutor  
**"The screen is very focused. We assume that students are cleverer than they really are."** Tutor
- The only Tutor with inbuilt sympathy for screen imagery himself taught on-screen design and regarded moving images on-screen as a legitimate medium in its own right.

**IMPLICATION • TUTORS ARE UNLIKELY TO WARM TO MOBILE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES OR RECOMMEND THE MUSEUM WHICH USES THEM UNLESS THEY HAVE HAD POSITIVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES THEMSELVES.**

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## Students and Mobile Learning Technologies

**“It’s seeing something really nice and the quality of the artefact and things to be challenged.”** Student

- Students have a scattered experience of audio guides. Some like the insight they give you but most resent being led, herded along with everyone else.

**“I like to make up my own mind. It dictates where you go and what you think.”** Student

**“I want to look as long as I want. Everyone’s doing it in the same order.”**

**“An audio guide’s good because you’ve got an idea.”** Student

- In addition, audio guides are **slow**.

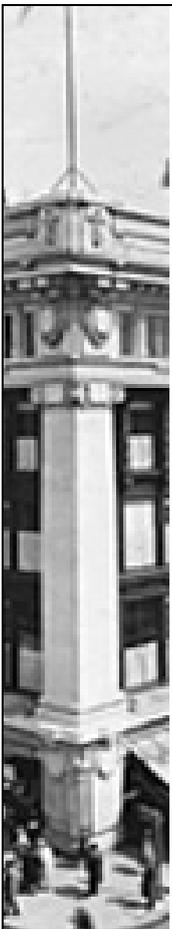
**“Audio, old people. They move really slowly.”** Student

- There is a certain amount of enthusiasm for podcast downloads from recognised sites (e.g. MIT) to help with coursework outside the museum. Students might be prepared to engage on-screen prior to or post the exhibition itself, if it was entertaining. But ...

**“Some people have it on computer and never listen.”** Student

**IMPLICATION • PDA WILL HAVE TO BRING SOMETHING EXTRA TO THE PARTY, NOT JUST FURTHER TEXT AND IMAGES. PAST RESEARCH SUGGESTS THEY ARE MOST REWARDING WHEN THEY REVEAL VISUALLY SOMETHING UNEXPECTED ABOUT THE OBJECT.**

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## Summary • What Does the V&A Need to Address?

### A Participative Relationship

Design Tutors and Students feel as though they are labouring in the same vineyard as the V&A. They would like a hand in

Categorising objects

Contributing to display

Privileged access behind the scenes and hands on

Joint promotions, competitions, sponsorship.

### More Emphasis on Creating and Making Objects

Maker’s perspective

Materials

Hands on ‘feel’ of the objects; form, texture, relationship in space.

### Supporting Students at Every Stage of the Learning/Making Process

Browsing, forming opinions, being inspired

Academic study, context, archives, reference

Designing and creating objects

Locating objects in the commercial world.

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## Recommendations

### Some changes will be in gallery and some outside • In gallery first

- The key idea here is to set up objects from the collections, in relation to one another so that the visitor clearly 'sees' a relevant point about the design. The visitor makes the leap.
  - Juxtaposing unexpected objects
  - Re-categorising objects (e.g. all things spiky)
  - Taking the properties of materials to the limit.
- Ideas concerned with the problems and challenges of actually making the object from the design. Are there universals which all makers have to confront? e.g.

#### Transitions

e.g. in 3D space, from one colour to another, from one material to another

#### Punctuation

e.g. how to stop a colour becoming flat, a shape becoming predictable, etc.

- More hands on, as an additional way of 'seeing' and 'looking'.
- A scattering of single heroic objects for deep contemplation and analysis as well as objects in relation to one another.

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## Recommendations

### Changes outside the Galleries

- An independent channel for students within the V&A, possibly including a 'home base for students'; social, informal, cheap coffee, on-screen guide.
- A channel for dialogue with curators and display professionals who would debrief on ideas and explore them with students.
  - Objects and their relationships
  - Ways of looking
  - Displaying, promoting, merchandising
  - Challenging the orthodoxy.
- Introduction and promotion (branding) of the V&A product, aimed at Tutors and students. Get them in, show them what's there, make them feel valued.
- Website downloads, linking the exhibitions to a challenging story in the main galleries.
- Annual competitions, sponsored events, co-curatorship to be available to students via their courses.
- Playtime and refresher time for Tutors themselves, organised by the V&A (under the guise of conferences, guidance seminars) to reacquaint and enthuse Tutors with V&A collections and what can be done with them.

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## A Last Thought from Students

“I can’t understand why they don’t ...

“

**Give students greater access to handling and experiencing the objects.  
Have broader advertising outside London and advertise directly to students.**

**Have access to special collections.**

**Have a student café.**

**Mix up the collections in terms of category.**

**Have the projects with colleges.**

**Make the temporary exhibitions free for students.**

**Have clearer cataloguing directions.**

**Revamp the permanent collections to make them more inviting.**

**Have more student competitions and exhibitions.**

**Have an archive database on the internet.**

”

Is this the agenda?

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## APPENDIX

Report of Online Survey  
Report of Accompanied interviews

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