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Gallery Design Statement

Victoria & Albert Museum, Europe 1600-1815

ZMMA are the architects and exhibition designers for the new Europe 1600-1815 galleries, comprising seven galleries and associated spaces covering nearly 20,000 square feet in the V&A's Aston Webb frontage building, running along Cromwell and Exhibition Roads, South Kensington.

Rediscovering Aston Webb's Architecture:

The galleries were last remodelled in the 1970s, when they were sub-divided into small rooms that entirely obscured Aston Webb's historic fabric and windows. Responding to a key objective of the V&A's FuturePlan brief, ZMMA's design removes these divisions, restores the Grade 1 listed historic interiors and returns these grand spaces to their original proportions.

Transformation:

The project creates an additional gallery in an area formerly used for storage, reclaiming over 5000 square feet of previously lost space for gallery displays. This ambitious structural remodelling has removed 360 tonnes of brickwork and introduced 25 tonnes of new structural steelwork without disturbing any of the V&A's beautiful, sensitive displays over three gallery floors above the new spaces.

Material Richness:

ZMMA's design is infused with the fashions, materials and craftsmanship of the Baroque, Rococo and Neoclassical design periods represented in the galleries. New materials have been chosen for their understated warmth and richness – figured stone, cast and burnished bronze, finely profiled walnut, moulded plasterwork and soft leather – which are intended as a foil to the exquisite, shimmering palette of the objects. The wonderful, historic fabric of the existing building has been brought to the surface too – thousands of square feet of the original teak floor have been removed, each individual parquet block being restored and re-laid, and elegant architectural plasterwork details have also been remade.

Poised Interventions:

New object display screens, cases and plinths tread lightly on the original Aston Webb building's surfaces, conceived as pieces that furnish the galleries but do not dominate them. ZMMA has designed the object display screens, supports, and plinths to float over the expansive floors with detailing that lends the spaces an unusually poised lightness and delicacy.

Display Cases:

Display cases, designed by ZMMA and developed with world-leading specialist case-makers Glasbau Hahn in Germany, use fine bronze framework and stand delicately on slender bronze feet. The case designs are not only extremely secure, protective enclosures but make reference both to the V&A's original, 19th-century museum cases as well as to the tradition of vitrines as beautiful furniture in luxury shops.

ZMMA has worked with the V&A's curators to make each vitrine a specific setting for its objects, its display telling a story – for instance, from a dynamic, vicious array of hunting weapons, to a trophy-like, gleaming, celebratory tower of the Duke of Wellington's silver banqueting service.

ARCHITECTS

Atmospheric Settings:

ZMMA has worked to give each gallery room its own particular atmosphere, colouring and method of presenting its objects in resonance to that part of the collection's chronological period and style. From the deep, plum-purple display walls of *'Europe and the World 1600-1720'* through to *'Liberty, Luxury and Power 1760-1815'*, a more open and pale-toned space with its promenade of period costumes, transformations in the mood and disposition of displays reinforce the transition from Baroque to Rococo and Neoclassical periods.

Vistas, Intimacy and Comfort:

ZMMA's design creates long vistas through the grand enfilade of spaces from gallery to gallery, display to display. Views are punctuated by key objects, weaving a seductive narrative and drawing visitors through the displays. Each gallery room has a series of themed displays with object groupings of various scales, arranged to form inviting, intimately-clustered settings for visitors to indulge in. Modern leather gallery seats by ZMMA positioned at key places allow visitors to enjoy the comfort and luxury of the age, surrounded by its riches.

Open Display and Space:

As many objects as possible have been designed on open-display, such as the prominently positioned Meissen table-fountain, set at a key junction of gallery routes and open to views from the distance as well as near-to, so that both the broad sweep of its form and the craftsmanship and fineness of the porcelain can be discovered. Bernini's sculpture Neptune and Triton commands the entrance to *'Europe and the World 1600-1720'*, positioned to be glimpsed from the V&A's entrance hall. Furniture is displayed sometimes on raised, stone surfaces, other pieces (surprisingly) stacked on a wall, and others on special steel platforms, conveying the idea of furniture being purchased and delivered.

Rooms-Within-Rooms:

Spaces have been carved out of the V&A's building to allow visitors to discover three panelled historical interiors – a 17th-century French bedchamber, a Parisian cabinet from the reign of Louis XVI and a mirrored room from 18th-century Italy. Each is wrapped in a new fluted timber or plaster enclosure to emphasise its presence. Meanwhile, 'The Salon' explores the Enlightenment via a contemporary sculptural installation by artist collective Los Carpinteros, creating a further 'room within a room' in this pivotal, day-lit gallery.

Day-Light and Lighting:

The galleries will be suffused with natural daylight and the grand, teak window joinery that characterises the Aston Webb rooms will be revealed through the galleries. Changing natural light will animate the spaces as it washes over new shutter-panels that allow glimpses of trees and sky outside. ZMMA has developed new ways of controlling daylight so that light-sensitive objects are properly protected – achieved through daylight-testing in collaboration with University College London and Sutton Vane lighting consultants.

Artificial lighting will be provided by warm, discreet and hidden LED lights throughout. ZMMA has designed large, suspended hoops of light that float from the ceiling coffers of the large gallery rooms and help define the particular display enclaves below. This source will be supplemented by concealed, low-level lighting made possible by new advances in miniaturised lighting technology.

Low-Energy Environment:

The environment will be controlled by an innovative, sustainable and low-energy climatic control system, developed with environmental engineers ARUP. Air will be distributed through the existing network of historic brick service-tunnels that lie underneath the galleries and emerge through bespoke cast-metal floor grilles designed by ZMMA.