

CENTRE FOR
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Accompanied Visits Report

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Report of accompanied visits to the V&A.

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Methodology

The purpose of the accompanied visits was to observe students' and tutors' use of the galleries and objects in relation to their courses, and also to investigate further the issues generated within the focus groups.

The accompanied visits were run by the three members of the CETLD team after training from Susie Fisher. The students and tutors went round the galleries of their choosing in groups of up to three accompanied by a single member of staff. They were asked to talk about their visit as they experienced it. Their experiences were observed and the different factors that appeared to influence their visits were noted. The observers also prompted the respondents for further information or clarification of comments or behaviour in order to help identify the meaning for the student or tutor.

This was designed to help focus our attention on key issues and ideas that occur on a spontaneous visit-orientated basis and to compare these to the potentially more reflective issues that emerged in the focus groups.

Sample

The project aimed to run accompanied visits with 5 students at the beginning of an assignment and 5 at the end of an assignment as well as 5 tutors who believe they are successful in using museum collections as part of coursework and 5 who judge themselves as being less successful.

However, a variety of reasons prevented this from happening. In the end the sample consisted of 7 tutors on 4 accompanied visits which took place as part of the focus groups. It was very difficult to recruit more tutors for this project, and so the emphasis was switched to the student visits.

As part of the focus groups 3 accompanied visits took place with 7 students. In addition to this 9 accompanied visits were carried out with 15 students –

making a total of 12 accompanied visits and 22 students. Students were a mixture of Levels, from first years to post-graduates and from a range of subjects, including fashion, ceramics, architecture, animation, 3d, and graphic design.

The visits that were part of the focus groups have been analysed as part of the main report, so this report will focus on results from the 15 students that took part in the separate accompanied visits.

Results

The breakdown of the students' levels and subjects can be seen in Table 1.1. Although it was possible to recruit from a number of different subjects, it is clear from Table 1.1 that it was difficult to recruit an even number across subjects and years. In order to avoid too much bias towards Level 1 Fashion and Textiles students in this analysis they will be discussed separately to the Level 2+ students, and the conclusions from the two sets of results will be drawn at the end.

Table 1.1

	Ceramics	3d	WMCP*	Graphic Design	Fashion and textiles
Level 1					8
Level 2		2	1		
Level 3	1				
MA	2			1	

* Wood, Metal, Ceramic and Plastic

Level 1 Fashion and Textiles Students

These students were taking part in accompanied visits on a wider course visit to the museum – they were instructed by their tutor to go to any gallery that wasn't fashion, and to draw objects there.

This is initially interesting on two levels – one, the fact that their tutor felt he needed to specifically forbid them from going to fashion; and two, that they were being instructed to draw objects, but not necessarily the whole object – just the part (pattern, texture, shape) that they were interested in.

The first point was emphasised by one of the students who visited the Jameel Gallery in Group 4, who said '*We want to look at the fashion stuff, because that is what we are studying but we were told not to – that's what we want to do!*' (Fashion & Textile student, Level 1). A student in Group 1 also indicated that she was subject-orientated in the same way when she saw the costumes in the Jameel Gallery and commented that she would look at them.

The second point is a clear indication that students are instructed or directed how to look at objects. The question of how students look at objects, and how/if they are taught to look at objects is key to this research.

Of the 8 students, who had all been instructed to look at objects other than fashion ones, 5 of them were attracted by costumes within the context of other galleries but all 8 students did choose to draw something other than costume.

The different galleries that these 8 students chose to visit (in two groups of 2 students, one group of 3 students, and one visit with 1 student) are detailed below:

Group 1 – The Jameel Gallery, the Nehru Gallery and the British Galleries

Group 2 – Twilight (Contemporary exhibition)

Group 3 – South-East Asia (Room 47b)

Group 4 – The Jameel Gallery and the Nehru Gallery

Group 2 made the most of the opportunity to see a temporary exhibition for free, while the other three groups all ended up in much the same area, reasonably close to the main entrance. The issue of orientation is important. All three groups picked up maps, but were drawn to the easily accessible Jameel Gallery in the first instance. Group 3 specifically wanted to go to Indian Sculpture, which she had seen on a previous visit briefly, but found it hard to retrace her steps and took about 5 minutes to find it. When asked how she would normally record an object or objects she wanted to return to she could

not identify a specific one, although she commented that she should have done something in this case.

The identification of a 'star object' is one that was raised in the focus groups and the accompanied visits with the higher level students. However, at this stage it does not seem so relevant. None of the Level 1 students seemed to identify a specific object of interest. Specific objects certainly caught the eye of the students '*that's a lovely piece*' (Fashion & Textile student, Level 1), about an Indian sculpture, and these were different in each case, but the students did not stop for very long in front of them and when pressed on what exactly about the piece had attracted her the student above was unsure: '*it's simplicity and rawness, it looks pristine*' (Fashion & Textile student, Level 1). The impression gained from the visits with these students is that they are 'browsing', in much the same way as they would in a shop or on the internet: looking at lots of things in a short amount of time. This may be related to the group dynamic, but it may also be an indication of the level of critical awareness in these new HE students. Another student who liked an object enough to go and find her fellow student and take her to it said that she wouldn't make an effort to visit it again '*it just caught my eye on this occasion*' (Fashion & Textile Student, Level 1).

The issue of what information about objects students require is another interesting facet to this investigation. The students do appear to read labels for further information and accept these as valid methods of communication and sources of information. When asked about where they would go for further information four of the eight identified the internet as a resource, while one mentioned the library. This did not appear to be an issue that the students had really considered before, which may relate to their position as new students and the relatively few projects they would therefore have worked on (they have not yet needed such further information).

One aspect that was noted with the older students was their 'museum savvy' nature, and the amount of comparisons they drew between what they were seeing/experiencing and what they had seen or experienced before. Three of the 8 Level 1 students referred to something else in relation to an object or space they had seen before: either a lecture, artist or exhibition they were aware of.

Level 2+ Students

The second group of students to be discussed here were those at Level 2 or higher. They chose a range of galleries to visit that were more dispersed within the museum, and had more specific ideas about what they were looking for even though they had not been given a task by a tutor.

Group 1 – The Whitely Galleries (Rooms 65-70a)

Group 2 – The Nehru Gallery, the Gilbert Bays Gallery and the Märta Rausing Gallery

Group 3 – The British Galleries

Group 4 – The British Galleries

Group 5 – Twilight (Contemporary exhibition)

These students had all come to the museum for the accompanied visit, and defined their aims themselves. The issue of orientation within the museum appears to be similar between the different levels – it took most of the students some time to work out the way they had to go. One student did comment that *'it is good to get lost sometimes'* although she then qualified this with the statement *'though it depends how much time you have'* (Ceramics student, Postgraduate). When you have a specific target which you cannot find, this can be frustrating – and it is clear that this can be the case for experienced students who use the museum frequently as well as for new students.

In other aspects, however, the higher level students seem to relate very differently to the museum. The four students who were undertaking accompanied visits on their own all identified a 'star object' (although they didn't phrase it as such). These were objects that were either a pre-known favourite such as the case of the Tippoo's tiger (Ceramics student, Postgraduate) or new objects that were of great interest to the student, such as a silver fruit bowl (Ceramics student, Postgraduate) or particular photograph (Graphic Design student, Postgraduate). In this case, a good proportion of the visit was spent looking at the object, and it was sometimes used as a reference point for other objects or was returned to at the end of the visit. The level of engagement with these objects was far higher than with other objects on the visit, and with any objects that the Level 1 students saw. The impression of 'browsing' that was strong with the Level 1 students is less apparent with the

later students, although this is still an element when there is not a specific project to complete. One student in the British Galleries was looking at William Morris for leisure in the knowledge that *'you carry it around with you...it might pop up a few years later'* if and when needed (Ceramics student, Level 3). This idea of a personal database of objects, patterns, exhibitions etc. is very interesting and is backed up by the 'museum savvy nature' of the students. Compared to the 3 out of 8 Level 1 students who reference their experience to something else, 5 out of 7 higher level students linked things they saw on the accompanied visits to previous galleries, museums, or objects they had seen (both within the V&A and externally).

The level of information required by the students about the objects seemed to vary, and depends to a great extent on what the reason for the interest in an object is. When questioned about where they would go for further information answers ranged from speaking to people within the museum to looking things up on the internet, although there were differences in approaches to such information. One student said she always read the labels (Ceramics student, Level 3) while another was observed not doing more than glancing at them (Ceramics student, Postgraduate) and another was observed selectively reading labels (reading labels attached to books rather than objects) *'probably because objects were more self-explanatory than books'* (3d student, Level 2). The group of 3 students also all agreed that they didn't like reading the labels.

One interesting point of comparison can be seen between the Level 1 fashion students who wanted to go and look at the fashion galleries and later students who agreed that they looked at other subjects more because of a belief that *'if you get ideas from your own area it's like you're copying'* (3d student, Level 2).

Conclusions

- Identification of 'star objects' – at the higher levels 5 out of 7 students identified a key object. It appears that the object first attracts the student on the same emotional (rather than technical) level as it might anyone else. The object becomes more important in the context of the student's further knowledge. Its ability to answer some of the questions

they have in relation to their own work elevates the object even further, but this depends upon the student's purpose.

- Over time students become 'museum savvy' as they build up a set of references to compare new experiences and objects to. This combines with the focus and analytical ability that develops as students mature.
- Museums are seen as a voice of authority, which they are taught throughout their courses to question and erode as they develop an identity as an artist. They are aware that they have different requirements within the museum from other audience groups. They are also aware of the possibility of different perspectives from that of the museum.
- The student need for the information that the museum provides seems variable and students often use their own developing library of knowledge as opposed to reading the labels. At later stages they can be very selective about what information to take from an object - e.g. a pattern or texture. They do not always show a great deal of awareness about the context of an object in the wider setting of the gallery.
- Desire to touch objects – 6 out of 12 students expressed the specific desire to be able to touch the objects. Looking at an object is not nearly enough: this is only using one sense. Students are interested in the whole experience: they want to touch and test things out rather than being reliant on the information the museum provides. The opportunity to talk about their experiences as they went around was also considered to be useful by some of the students: vocalisation provided an opportunity to clarify internal thoughts and questions.
- It is not clear how students learn to look at objects, but there is a clear difference between the way first years and postgraduates look at objects. Drawing appears to be key to this process and was mentioned or demonstrated by students of all levels. The desire for space to draw where you are not on display yourself was also common.
- Strategies for looking at objects depend upon the project and what a student needs from the object. Students were attracted to single objects, objects placed in relation to each other (table settings, for example) and series of objects.
- Students clearly use the museum differently at different stages of their courses. The visit with the postgraduate was more useful for her than

the ones with the Level 1s, which was a more social event. The question of whether the museum should try to work with these differences or try to override them is worth considering.

- The museum needs to consider its role in both the academic and commercial aspects of design students' education: object and display.
- The issue of orientation within the museum is very important. The majority of students were confused at one stage or another about where they were and, while this wasn't necessarily always considered a problem, it does indicate that students would benefit from more assistance in this matter.