

## Architecture Trail: The V&A Building

### Introduction



The V&A building was designed not only to house its collections, but as an exhibit in its own right. This trail will take you through the Museum to look at some of its unique architecture.

The building introduced a new style of architecture, based on older buildings, but using modern production techniques and materials in new ways. It was a successful collage of styles and motifs, almost like an architectural scrapbook.

Its influence was huge, especially in the revival of terracotta and mosaic in Victorian Britain. As you walk around the Museum, the original floors, walls and ceilings are a reminder of a time when the styles of the past were being translated into the machine age.

The trail starts outside the main entrance on Cromwell Road. Use a V&A map to help you find your way along the trail.

### Main Entrance

Cromwell Road

Built 1899–1909



The main entrance to the V&A is the central focus of the building facing onto Cromwell Road. Its extensive decoration is centred around and above the main doors and archway. The carved stone sculpture is a mixture of subjects, ranging from Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to symbolic themes such as Truth, Beauty, Knowledge and Inspiration.

The style is complex and hard to classify. Many of the elements are classical, but the open crown on top of the central block comes from Gothic church towers. To some

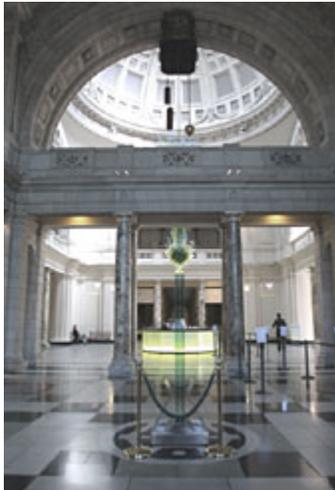
extent this mix reflects the wide range of the Museum's content at the time.

Now enter the Museum through the doors into the Grand Entrance.

## Grand Entrance

Level 1

Built 1904–9



Entering the V&A through the Grand Entrance you immediately come into a large, domed space.

Its form and decoration draw on the Classical Revival style of 16<sup>th</sup> century France, with pillars, arches, a dome and surroundings of polished marble and stone. The aim was to create an impression of grandeur and refinement.

The Grand Entrance was also designed for practical purposes. Circulation space was needed for people to plan their visit, get information or meet others. These activities still take place today.

Walk through the Grand Entrance hall and continue straight ahead through the Shop. Carry on and go through the doors into the Garden.

## The John Madejski Garden

Level 1

Built 1863–1908



Facing you is the original front façade of the V&A, which makes up the whole north side of the Garden.

The façade was designed to suggest the Museum's history and purpose. It is in the Classical Revival style of 15th-century Italy, as a mark of refinement and learning.

The mosaics and sculpture represent Science, Art, Poetry, History and Philosophy. The triangular pediment celebrates the Great Exhibition of 1851.

The mosaic, the hard red brick and the moulded terracotta used on the building were all promoted at the time as attractive materials that could withstand pollution.

Leave the Garden and turn left down the long Sculpture gallery (Rooms 23 and 24). Continue straight on, past the large stairs on your right. Turn right up the next small flight of stairs and then turn right into a large hall, Room 46a. This is one of the two Cast Courts.

### **Cast Courts**

Level 1, Rooms 46a and 46b

Built 1870–3



These great halls, originally called the Architecture Courts, were built to house the V&A's growing collection of large-scale architectural plaster casts.

The courts made use of new ideas, technology and techniques. The coved ceiling was one of the first uses of laminated timber. The glass roof originally used glass squares set into the ironwork frame without putty, to allow the metal to expand. Even before opening the roof leaked when it snowed.

Around each gallery there is a narrow gallery supported by cast-iron brackets, covered in plaster. It originally carried hundreds of gas jets to light the courts.

Retrace your steps by going down the central corridor to the short flight of stairs. Turn left, then left again up the large flight of steps that you passed earlier. Continue up to the top of the stairs and go to the National Art Library. The Library is open Tuesday–Saturday 10.00–17.00 and Wednesdays 10.00–20.00. At other times, you can view the Library through the doors.

## National Art Library

Level 3

Built 1879–84



The Library is a series of interconnecting rooms designed to meet the needs of the readers.

It was one of the first buildings in the V&A to have electric light installed as part of the fittings. The iron and glass roof and the large windows facing into the Garden make the most of the constant north light. The cases and bookshelves were purpose built.

The decoration is in the Classical Revival style of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy. It is above eye level, to avoid being a distraction, and the upper gallery still has its original plasterwork and ornate railings.

Leave the National Art Library and turn left. Go down the short flight of steps into the Sacred Silver & Stained Glass gallery (Rooms 84 and 83). Go straight through these rooms and turn left at the end into the Silver galleries.

## Silver Galleries

Level 3, Rooms 65–69, 70a, 89

Built 1864–9



This run of galleries is in the Classical Revival style, based on 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian interiors. The rooms were originally meant for the display of ceramics. The frieze, running just under the ceiling, gives the names of the great pottery and porcelain centres around the world.

The two pillars at the entrance to the gallery, near the Ceramic Staircase, are cast iron clad with moulded ceramic tiles. The other columns in the gallery were also like this. Originally, the galleries had windows on both sides and a tiled floor.

Continue through the Silver galleries until you reach the Ceramic Staircase at the end.

## Ceramic Staircase

Levels 1 and 3, Stair I

Built 1865–71



This highly decorated staircase was intended to be an example of the good design and manufacture that the Museum wished to promote.

It is covered with mosaic, painting and moulded ceramics. Classical in style, this decoration includes ancient Roman gods, masks and symbolic figures such as Art and Science.

These were considered appropriate for an institution dedicated to education.

Critics claimed that the moulded figures were badly modelled and the masks were lopsided. However, the fame of the staircase spread and other museums wanted to copy the style.

The trail ends here. To return to the Grand Entrance, turn right at the bottom of the Ceramic Staircase into the Renaissance 1400–1600 galleries (Rooms 17–20). Continue through the galleries to the end. Turn left into the Sculpture galleries (Rooms 21a–23). You will soon come to the doors into the Garden that you entered earlier. At this point, turn right through the Shop to reach the Grand Entrance on Cromwell Road.