

## Compare and contrast

IT WOULD BE hard to imagine two more different exhibitions than those that opened in London in October: *Gilded Dragons* at the British Museum and *London Eats Out* at the Museum of London. The first is a very traditional exhibition – individually labelled objects in glass cases, with just enough linking texts and maps to put them in historical and geographical context, and plenty of empty spaces for the admiring public. A recipe for tedium, perhaps, but totally redeemed by the objects themselves: an amazing collection of artefacts excavated in China in the past 30 years, many never seen before in this country. Most date to the Tang dynasty (7th–9th centuries AD), with some earlier material, dating back to the Han (3rd century BC – 3rd century AD). Chinese skills at metalworking are demonstrated by gold, silver and bronze artefacts of great beauty, set off by the cool magic of jade. For me, the ‘stars’ are the ceramic figurines, some so large that they escape the glass cases, with an incredible level of detail and unbelievably life-like. All this at a time when western Europe was in the depths of its Dark Ages, restoring a sense of world perspective and making this a very respectful exhibition. An excellent antidote if you had a tinselly Christmas or a tacky new millennium.

Not far away, we can celebrate the ephemeral pleasures of eating out in a world city. Designed around five large box-like structures, each representing a century from 1500 to today, this is an exhibition that raises questions, makes new connections and almost invites further research. Clearly the designers had their problems, from a lack of information in the earlier centuries to a superfluity in the later. Topics that do not fit comfortably into any one period are covered thematically in poster displays filling the wall spaces between the ‘boxes’. I particularly enjoyed meeting objects that I’m sure I have seen gathering dust in the reserve collection, here set into a social as well as functional context. Right in the middle are a bank of very nice computers, where we can browse the web pages of the exhibition itself as well as of one of its sponsors – a rather surreal touch. On the way out, we can refresh ourselves in a 21st-century juice bar provided by another of the sponsors (at depressingly 21st-century prices). Above all, this exhibition is both fun and open-ended, making us think about the social, cultural and even sexual connotations of the artefacts and ecofacts that are all too easy to ‘file and forget’.

## Any more artefacts, please?

LIKE SO MANY museums, the London Transport Museum in Covent Garden has never had the space to display more than a fraction of its collection of historic vehicles and other items. All this has changed with the opening in October of the museum’s Acton Town Depot, formerly an operational Tube depot. A Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £2.75m helped the museum with its Total Access Project – a scheme to offer total access to its collection of artefacts and archives. More than 370,000 items not previously on display at Covent Garden are now stored together under a giant roof where they can be conserved and opened up for public display. They include a locomotive from the world’s first underground railway, the first ever Routemaster bus, and the world’s only spiral escalator.

The Depot is only open for guided tours and on special open days. Guided tours must be booked in advance and places are limited. Tickets are £9.50 (concessions £7.50). Open days cost £6.95 (concessions £4.50), and run from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on 6 February, 19 March, 14 May, 16 July and 3 September. For more information phone 020 7379 6344 or visit [www.ltmuseum.co.uk](http://www.ltmuseum.co.uk).

## Spitalfields Roman Coffin

IN RESPONSE to the letter in the last issue of *London Archaeologist* (Autumn, vol. 9, no. 2), the scallop shell design on the lead coffin from Spitalfields is a common motif on Roman lead coffins, especially in south-east England. The scallop shell is associated with the pagan belief of the journey of the dead to the underworld or isles of the blessed. The shell was later adopted as a Christian symbol and became the motif of the badge worn by pilgrims who visited the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The deceased was female, in her early twenties. The nature of the grave goods that accompanied the stone sarcophagus containing the lead coffin in date this wealthy burial to about mid to late 4th century AD. The sarcophagus and coffin are on permanent display in the Roman London Gallery at the Museum of London from Christmas onwards, together with the head, reconstructed for the BBC TV’s programme *Meet the Ancestors*. The skeleton will only remain on display for a year.

Jenny Hall

## European Visual Archive Project

THE EUROPEAN Visual Archive Project (EVA) is a two-year project partly funded by the European Commission, with partners in London, Amsterdam, Antwerp and Germany. The aim is to enhance access to European Heritage through digital preservation of archival collections, in this case photographs from 1900 to the present being digitised and displayed on the World Wide Web. The initial stage is to establish a large enough digital databank of photographs from London and Antwerp to examine the best methods of digitisation, levels of description and presentation on a website. A total of 20,000 photograph images will be available to researchers on-line, with the aim of extending this to other European public archives. The website can be found at [www.eva-eu.org/](http://www.eva-eu.org/).

## Royal Society of Arts Archive

IN JULY 1997, the RSA was awarded £700,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to preserve its unique archive. The grant was one of the largest to be made to a purely archival project. Work began by constructing state-of-the-art strongrooms, complete with temperature and acoustic control. When cataloguing is complete in 2002, a wealth of material on the RSA’s pioneering role in industry, arts, design and education, will become available for the first time.

## Tebbutt Research Fund

THIS FUND was established as a tribute to the life and work of the late C. F. Tebbutt, OBE, FSA, and applications are invited, from individuals and groups, for grants towards research, including associated expenses, into any aspect of the Wealden Iron Industry.

It is anticipated that approximately £100 plus will be available from the fund, and any interested person should write a suitable letter of application giving details of themselves together with relevant information concerning the research envisaged. Please bring this fund to the notice of your tutors and lecturers concerned with archaeology/history as we are anxious that the money available should be fully used.

WIRG has recently acquired a section of railings from St Paul’s Cathedral, and research into the construction, etc., is an example of a subject that is eligible for grant.

Applications should be sent, not later than 31 March 2000, to Shiela Broomfield, Hon. Sec. WIRG, 8 Woodview Crescent, Hildenborough, Tonbridge, Kent TN11 9HD.