

A Vision Translated – a review of the Museum of

London's new prehistory gallery

Lesley Smith

The story of the London's first peoples told primarily through artefacts: this was curator Jon Cotton's vision for the new prehistory gallery at the Museum of London.

They would be set in a bright, elegant and spacious, minimalist design providing a sense of the 'big sky that would have been the experience for people in prehistory'.¹

I was excited by this vision. It relied on the senses to work, to figure out the story from the 'very' objects that this past had left behind. Visitors would not be prejudiced in the interpretations of this story by over-elaborate reconstruction tableaux. However I was also a little wary: is this asking too much of what is in the main a material record comprising a load of 'old rocks', some rather rough bits of pottery and some rusty looking bits of metal?

The lighting in this new gallery is bright, and the objects come to life. A long, tall display case winds round the perimeter wall of the main gallery area, emulating the breadth and length of the Thames. Lit by pale blue lights, flints, skulls, daggers and swords hang imperceptibly as if floating in water, uncluttered by labeling or other display paraphernalia. Because the objects are isolated they can be seen as individual objects. The metal work is not rusty and the 'rocks' are aesthetically beautiful and impressively worked. Because they can be viewed individually their individual intrinsic value becomes apparent, enabling an appreciation of the value each object held for the past people who had lost or ritually disposed of the items.

The initial entry into the gallery is also effective. A cinematic style video provides a frantic aerial sweep through London's 450,000 years of changing climate and landscape. Within two minutes I have been transported to the beginnings of prehistoric 'London before London'. As I walk through this first corridor area, I am followed by the sound of the icy wind of the video. Frosted panels of human and animal footprints are on the

one side, and a tall display case with the skulls and bones of animals and humans – including a large and impressive aurochs skull – on the other. I have the sense of spacious landscape, complete with the humans and animals that inhabited this world.

The central gallery area houses banks of low display cases featuring collections of different types of artifacts. The labeling is minimal and context offers few clues. The decision to display these different classes of objects together has seemingly less to do with functional association, and more to do with their 'placements' together in the archeological record/excavation. My imagination is allowed full rein. The individual displays are therefore effective.

However I am finding it hard to maintain my concentration, due to the overuse of low display cases. With nowhere for my eyes to rest as I move around, my mind and concentration begin to wander. I need visual points of reference and there are none. And because this area is also very bright, much of the dramatic effect of the river wall is lost. The watery glow needs to be appreciated from a distance as well as close-up.

There are many elements of Jon's vision that work. And I am pleased with the overall story – after all much of it is of my own making, gently aided by the objects. There are a few things that don't work well at present and require a little tinkering. For instance, the incised wooden panels of excavation plans are a very interesting, different and visually accessible illustrations of excavation trenches, although for the initiated they would be meaningless without some explanation. Also, whilst minimal labeling is satisfactory within the overall display, I was curious to find out more, and I felt it is a missed opportunity in not including in-depth information on the computer terminals at the gallery's exit.

Overall this is a brave and largely successful attempt to make prehistory accessible and inspiring and I welcome it.

1. J. Cotton 'The Twilight Zone – revisited' LAMAS lecture. Museum of London 16 January 2001.