



Galleries galore

Updated, reinvented, expanded – galleries and museums have been opening in London at a dizzying rate over the past year or so. Becky Wallower explores the concepts and designs that set four major new galleries apart

As curators steel themselves for an onslaught of budget cuts, the more than £75 million worth of new museums and galleries opened in London in the past 18 months may well become the last fruits of development programmes to appear for some time. But these freshly presented collections also provide a timely opportunity to compare styles, approaches and priorities.

Both national players and local London museums have made the news. Most recently and most significant for London studies, the Museum of London has opened its £20 million galleries of modern London: they fill the entire ground level of the facility (and a bit of the floor above) and take the visitor from the 1600s to the present day. Yes, in answer to the first question of many apparently, the fondly remembered Great Fire panorama is still there. Whether its new voiceover, multiple eyewitness sources and additional images make for an improvement is doubtless in the eye of the beholder. Is it rather diluted, and curiously less dramatic than before or will the multimedia additions enhance the experience for a new generation of panorama lovers? Many other favourite

displays have also been retained – the Victorian walk, for example – but sometimes in new settings: the Lord Mayor’s coach now has a window to the world at street level where a delivery bay used to be.

Not inappropriately given the collections in question, everything about the displays screams new. Although the designers, Wilkinson Eyre, were led by in-house specialists with extensive expertise in their fields, design nevertheless is very upfront and very up to date. A giant, specially commissioned elliptical LED and video display looms above café goers in the Sackler Hall, combining images of 24 hours in the life of the city with a stream of 200 statistics, from tides to flight arrivals, taken from RSS feeds and live links. In bright daylight, alas, part of it disappears, but it is eye-catching. In the foyer another new work, *London Wall*, is made up of 224 tweets and texts captured over a few days within a three mile radius of the museum: a social networker’s image of 2010 London. An iPhone app called *Streetmuseum* was also launched to coincide with the gallery opening. For 200 sites across London, viewers are



able to see the past emerge as an overlay on the present scene.

The collection displays are similarly new, up-to-the-minute, tangibly designed. Resin floors and other surfaces have images and objects embedded in them and display cases are sunk into the floor. A dreamlike recreation of an 18th-century pleasure garden provides the opportunity to show off the Museum’s outstanding costume collection, but the manikins have metal wigs and whiskers, and their hats are by fashionable designers Philip Treacy and Alexander McQueen. You can step into the graffiti-etched cell from the Wellclose debtors’ prison, or be enclosed by a blown up version of



TOP LEFT Iconic objects for all ages, including the Bill and Ben marionettes, feature in the World City displays in the MOL’s new Galleries of Modern London.

LEFT A walk-in Booth poverty map room tempts Londoners in to find out whether their own areas were graded well-to-do or semi-criminal in the late 1880s.

ABOVE Three underfloor displays like this were chosen from archaeological finds in the LAARC archives and designed by community groups, another puts shoes under your feet so that they can be seen as the wearer might have done. Photos © Museum of London

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the Booth poverty map, or revisit memories of wartime London with a bomb suspended above you. The modern square mile itself is the focus of another, rather sparsely filled, space, giving a little insight into City ceremonial and institutions. One of the more fascinating exhibits is The Ghetto, a model of the London Fields East squatted community from the 1990s. It makes for an unsettling contrast in class and concept with another intricately detailed time capsule, the Blackett doll's house from 1760.

Captions take a new approach too: they are related to objects by small images rather than numbers, and many use adjustable backlighting for clarity. Although not every object is described, their content is relatively detailed, and additional information sources tie displays together and set chronological context. Interactive displays, such as the one focusing on home life in the 17th century, can include sounds (a pot filling) and smells (wood smoke) as well as visual and tactile references. On a busy Saturday afternoon, the electronic interactives seemed to appeal to the children that most of them target only long enough for them to figure out how they worked, while adults explored the content rather more. Additional natural lighting has been brought in from the central courtyard, filtered by huge blinds showing key London figures and their pithy views on the capital.

The question, perhaps, is how will all this newness fare? Will it bring in fresh visitors or put off traditional ones? Become dated or invite further innovation? On the whole, it seems the MOL has scored a striking success: both spaces and displays are interesting and different, offering layers of London to explore through multiple visits.

The MOL has also recently introduced a new display in the corner

between prehistoric and Roman galleries called *Archaeology in Action*. Designed to shed some light on what archaeologists actually do (and what the museum's archaeology service brings to the party) it uses videos, objects from five key sites and a display on Elizabethan theatre finds to engage visitors. This new focus is good to see, and it's fine for a small display, but somehow manages to give the impression that archaeology is more about finds than the archaeological record.

On a more international scale, the Victoria & Albert Museum's £30 million plus multi-level journey through both medieval and renaissance periods, and the British Museum's rethinking of its medieval collection have offered exceptional insights into worlds that had become stereotyped. So protracted is the planning cycle, that the concepts for these and the MOL medieval galleries that opened in 2005, were coordinated to some extent. Lead Curator at the V&A, Peta Motture, explained, "As we were all collection driven, this happened naturally on the whole, but it did result in complementary language in our narratives, which helps tie stories together. It also facilitated loans that help complete the stories we are telling." With much material from archaeological sources, the MOL's gallery, of course, chronicles the history of life in London. The BM's collection represents 250 years of acquiring prime nationally and internationally important examples from across Europe, while the V&A's concentrates on the culture and people of the medieval world as seen through applied and decorative arts and design movements.

The scope and size of the new installations varies hugely. The V&A has used former office and gallery space, both small and massive, and recovered unused external areas to form ten interconnected galleries covering 1300 years of culture, with 2000 works ranging from fragile textiles and

TOP Treasures like the Becket casket are given new space and focus in the V&A's new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries.

RIGHT The V&A's huge new daylight gallery, recovered from open areas between buildings, makes a stunning space for architectural items, including Sir Paul Pindar's Tudor house front. It is installed so that it stands away from the wall, offering a view of the internal panelling and carving revealed when earlier restoration was undone.

manuscripts, to tiny ivories and jewels, to imposing architecture and sculpture. The BM had only one large gallery to house the art and architecture of 450 years, and the need to represent something of its huge world-class collections of coins, medals and other artefacts as well as important, unique treasures like the Lewis chessmen, and the Royal Gold Cup.

Despite these disparities, both national museums have stressed continuity rather than step changes through time, and Europe itself is treated as emerging from shifting, interrelated traditions rather than a series of separate cultures. With only the finest examples from the era on show, medieval Europe appears to have shaken off any backward or inward looking image, and become something quite brilliant, with craftsmanship and skills representing a wealth of new ideas. Getting as far away from the crowded old glass case regime as possible, both museums have used an integrated approach – with different materials, scales and cultures mixed together in displays. Although there is a rough chronology running through the two, both have also chosen themes – devotion, nobility and international trade and exchange for example – around which to group objects.

And it is the object that is key in both cases: the examples on display are often breathtaking, and whether long-held favourites such as the Becket

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LEFT Bright colours focus attention on themed cases with integrated displays in the British Museum's Medieval Europe Gallery. **RIGHT** The BM's citole, a unique guitar-like English musical instrument from c. 1300 that accompanied love ballads - possibly royal ones. **FAR RIGHT** The British section of the Ceramics Study Collection at the V&A.

Casket at the V&A or newly exhibited pieces like the BM's Canterbury astrolabe quadrant, displays in both museums succeed in making you want to look, or look again. The designers have gone for spacious, bright, less-is-more displays in both cases, but with notable differences in approach. Where the BM has gone for unexpected splashes of blue and red – reflecting the polychrome of buildings and objects that is now so often lost – the V&A's designers MUMA have made use of extraordinary materials such as floor-to-ceiling onyx panels, glass and steel

against a neutral or dark palette to present the objects in a new light. The lighting in the BM, mostly inside the cases to avoid shadows, is especially good. The V&A features daylight as much as is possible, and includes light-sensitive objects in the integrated groupings by clever placement, lighting them only on approach, or using doors or drawers. With space more limited, cases in the BM include information panels as well as descriptive labels so that levels of information are available together, whereas the V&A has wall panels, videos and other information

sources in the gallery, but only labels in their displays (the unexpectedly poor legibility of some of their gold and reversed-out labels is a recognised issue which is being re-addressed). New technology also separates the two, with interactive displays punctuating each gallery at the V&A, but omitted from the BM's limited space. And only the V&A has activity rooms for children to try on clothes, draw a profile, or rub a brass.

The processes of preparing works for new displays yielded unexpected discoveries. Opening the BM's Hildesheim portable altar for cleaning for the first time since its acquisition in 1902 revealed 39 tiny parcels of relics, including a bone of St Benedict wrapped in Byzantine silk. The V&A's army of experts and technicians found a virtual world in the fabric of the 7th/8th century Egyptian tunic as they analysed patterns made by bodily fluids, and investigated where the sheep that provided the wool had grazed in life. In some cases, objects discovered to be

...and Clive Orton finds that Greenwich finally has a focus

My memories of visiting Greenwich go back to a primary school class visit to the Cutty Sark. For almost as long, I have felt that Greenwich, as a tourist attraction and more recently as a World Heritage Site, has consistently 'punched below its weight', despite millions of

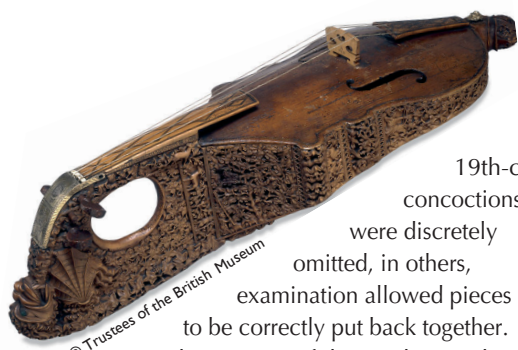
visitors annually. Several reasons for this could be put forward: the declining popularity of naval history, and hence of the National Maritime Museum, the predominance of the Cutty Sark in the popular image of Greenwich, combined with a perceived difficulty of access, and even the desperate shortage of public toilets. In the past, one could have added uncertainty about which parts were open to the public, and a faint air of sleaziness that seemed to hang over the town area. But above all, what has been lacking is a central focus, which could integrate the disparate elements of the World Heritage Site for the benefit of visitors, who may be confused by the multiplicity of street signs.

At last, this need has been met by the opening of a new 'portal', *Discover Greenwich*, in the Pepys Building, just

opposite the Cutty Sark. The building itself is of interest, starting life as a racquets court in the late 19th century before conversion to a mechanical engineering laboratory in 1905–06; it still shows traces of its engineering past if you look closely. The centrepiece of the exhibition area is an interactive glass model of the World Heritage Site, which provides a brief overview from which one can move out to one of eight themed display sections, many of which in turn encourage the visitor to go and

LEFT Mayor Boris Johnson pulling a pint at the recreated brewery. Beer was originally piped directly to the Royal Hospital where a Pensioner's ration was three pints a day. **OPPOSITE** Returned to Greenwich after 450 years are two wooden figures, later named 'Gin' (shown here) and 'Beer', which once formed part of the buttery screen of the Tudor Palace hall. Photo © Richard Riddick.





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19th-century concoctions were discretely omitted, in others, examination allowed pieces to be correctly put back together.

The process of dismantling and undoing the earlier restoration of Paul Pindar's Tudor Bishopsgate house uncovered panelling and carving that had been hidden in the decades it was suspended from the museum shop wall.

On a visit to both museums with the Finds Research Group, interest in the detailed level could be expected, and most were agreed that the displays were outstanding – even where omissions were lamented. Inevitably, bar a pilgrim badge here or a homely pot there, both museums are showcasing creations of and for the élite, things worth preserving over the centuries. They may not be very representative of life as experienced by most people, but they certainly inspire and captivate, and are a massive step forward in improving perception of such complex periods.

Phase 2 of the V&A's new £11 million ceramics galleries reportedly had curators from every department pitching in at all hours to get 26,000 objects – almost the entire study collection – placed in their elegant glass

towers on time in June. The collection is vast, sparkling and awesome. On the top floor as before and extending the full width of the V&A, daylight now streams in to the galleries, showing off newly revealed architectural features and a restored parquet floor. The crowded, cluttered 100-year-old bronze and glass cases have mostly been replaced with a dramatically different installation with much to investigate.

A central timeline illustrated by masterpieces and thematic displays

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characterises Phase 2, which opened in 2009. A new vision of the ceramics emerges through new narratives – on the materials, technologies, history, design and use of ceramics and of the rich interplay between East and West. A new architectural ceramics gallery, for example, now highlights large scale fittings like tiles and stoves. The space devoted to pottery technology is perhaps especially fascinating for archaeologists. Starting with the geology of the clay, it illustrates every facet of production – forming, firing, glazing and finishing – across time, up through transfer printing and mass manufacture. The medieval tile kiln from Clarendon Palace is there, and drop-in studio afternoons offer a chance to watch demonstrations or make, decorate and fire your own pottery.

Phase 2's new densely packed, floor-to-ceiling wonderland offers a curator's eye view of arguably the richest collection in the world, ranging from 3500 BC to now, with further interpretive spin-off displays (reusing original bronze wall cases) examining historical themes in more depth. In the penultimate gallery to the west, the exceptional British collection is housed in a final arc of glass. It makes you want to scale the towers to see it all...

explore a chosen part of the Site, for example by themed walks around Greenwich Park and its neighbourhood. I was particularly fascinated by a display on how to fake a marble column using the *scagliola* technique – an 18th-century stone equivalent of today's chipboard, but rather more convincing. It was satisfying to see that an urban myth, the nuclear reactor *JASON*, actually did exist (a small model is on display).

There are, of course, plenty of activities for children while the grown-ups study the architecture and the history: costumes to try on (including an ambitious replica jousting helmet), games to play and building blocks for budding architects. Upstairs, the Clore Learning Centre will be much used by school parties, for whom a series of workshops starts in September. There is also an outreach programme of lectures, courses and study days for adults.

Next door is *The Old Brewery* – café by day, restaurant by night and bar at all hours. I found this an appealing area to visit when 'museumed-out', and the menu and the prices look very attractive. One's eye is immediately caught by the modern micro-brewery, resplendent in copper, whose products can be purchased in the bar. Tutored beer tastings are promised.

The Greenwich Foundation, the charity responsible for the buildings of the Old Royal Naval College, is to be congratulated on the imaginative conversion of this building, and for the difference it will make to the visitor experience. It is good to see it well established in the area before the Olympics hit the town in 2012. Perhaps the next step, after the dust settles, will be to extend the coverage to the neighbouring area of Deptford, which has never received the full historical attention that it deserves.



Discover Greenwich, Painted Hall and Chapel open daily 9 am to 5 pm, free admission. The Old Brewery open daily 10am to 5pm (café) and 6 pm to 11 pm (restaurant). Guided walks around Greenwich daily at 12.15 pm and 2.15 pm. Further information: 020 8269 4799 or oldroyalnavalcollege.org/.