

The Victoria and Albert Museum,
'Modern' Design and Audiences:
the New Art Display of 1901 and
Britain Can Make It Exhibition of
1946

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Abstract

My thesis is about the V&A's changing relationship with contemporary design in the first half of the twentieth century, and concerns the perceived differences of needs and behaviours of different audiences in relation to this. I have chosen two very different representations that introduced new design to the Museum. The first is the New Art Display of 1901, which featured a new movement from the Continent and US that was primarily intended for an audience of students, artisans and manufacturers of industrial design. The second is the Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946 which, although held at the V&A, was organised by the Council of Industrial Design. The Exhibition featured exclusively British design and aimed at a new post-war audience that represented the Council's ideal new British consumer. The Museum's intentions towards contemporary design and its effectiveness in areas of collection, display, and other public provision, in order to engage different audiences, is examined.

I introduce key design and social concepts that are relevant to the Museum's tradition of design reform from the mid-nineteenth century. In taking a design historical overview, I also bring to bear sociological, museological and cultural-political related disciplines. Because the case studies show different types of design my approach has been to establish a strong analytical parity between them in the structure of inquiry. One main theme is reform, which was the Museum's primary role in the nineteenth century and also relates to the institution's rearrangements of 1908-9 and 1947-51. Other themes are distinction and relocation, which concern how contemporary design was deployed to different audiences in different geographic and cultural locations in London: between the affluent cultural quarter of South Kensington and industrialised centre of Bethnal Green.

My research is largely intended to discover new knowledge and understanding of the V&A as it evolved in the twentieth century and, indeed, the twenty first. In so doing, I hope to provide new insights that may be relevant to policy in the presentation and interpretation of contemporary material as this continues to change and audiences do also. Furthermore, because the V&A was the prototype for other decorative arts museums in Europe and the US, my thesis may have wider applications to museology and cultural studies.

Key words

New, contemporary, 'modern' and modern design; Museum rearrangement; design and social reform; cultures of design and production; national identity, culture, and heritage; industrial and consumer cultures; commercial vs. "highly educational character"¹; transformation; distinction; relocation; social inclusion and diversity.

¹ NAL 'Report of the Committee on Rearrangement', BoE, 1908, Part 1, p. 4

Contents

Preface	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Author's declaration	iii
I Introduction	1
I.i Key Concepts	2
I.ii Methodology	5
I.iii Literature Review	10
Chapter 1: The 'New Art' Display of 1901	
1.1. Splendid Isolation	21
1.2. Exhibiting Design for a New Order	25
1.3. Representation and Reaction	30
1.4. Rearrangement and Division	43
1.5. Legacy	50
Chapter 2: The V&A and Contemporary Design in the Interwar Period	
2.1. Attrition and Atrophy	51
2.2. Towards a Contemporary British Style	58
Chapter 3: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946	
3.1. Brief Encounter	63
3.2. Mobilising the Exhibition	66
3.3. Representation, Reaction and Mass Observation	78
3.4. A Second Rearrangement but Still no Unity	98
3.5. A Phoney Victory	102
Chapter 4: Conclusion	109
Bibliography	114

Preface

My thesis charts the rapid unravelling of the V&A's industrial identity and role in design reform in the first half of the twentieth century with regard to contemporary design and its associated audiences. Through case study analysis of the New Art Display of 1901 and Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946, I examine the changing ideas and fortunes of contemporary design in the Museum leading to rearrangements in 1908-09 and 1947-51. Rearrangement is a main theme and serves as a metaphor for reform both in the Museum itself, and wider society: the technological advances and proliferation of mass production methods in the shadows of two World Wars that redefined industrial culture. Closely related are themes of distinction and relocation that defined the location of contemporary design in the Museum's structures of design communication. The case studies assess the extent to which contemporary design was a catalyst of change in the Museum that altered its identity in an attempt to assimilate to the changing culture of design outside its walls.

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People whose conversation or writing I have found inspiring are numerous but some stand out. Anthony Burton generously granted me an interview, which helped clarify some important areas of my study. His book *Vision & Accident* has been a constant source of reference. Without the help of the Design Council Archive and Dr Lesley Whitworth, in particular, I might not have found important evidence concerning the Council of Industrial Design's relationship with the V&A. I am also indebted to the Director of Learning and Interpretation at the V&A David Anderson, my manager Kara Wescombe, and former manager Barry Ginley; Veronika Harris in Training, and colleagues for their support. It is largely thanks to their considerable efforts that the Museum continues to engage new audiences and represent the nation in all of its diversity.

Finally, thanks to my parents Debbie and Gerald; "the outlaws" Dylis and Dave, as well as Jane, John, John, Doreen, and Maureen; friends and new friends I have made in the course of this study. I could not have produced this study without the support of my partner Nicholas Charnock, who read my thesis in draft numerous times, and whose great attention, patience, and humour have been appreciated more than anything.

Author's Declaration

1. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification.
2. The material in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Laura Elliott

12 December 2008

I Introduction

The early history of the Victoria and Albert Museum precedes the period this study covers, but it was towards the end of the nineteenth century that the South Kensington Museum, as it was then called, began to change its approach towards contemporary design and its associated audiences. This occurred as ideas about the Museum's identity altered in response to wider developments in industrial society on a national and international scale. In context of this study new design or 'modern' design, as it was also known, was made accessible to an increasingly educated and mobile mass design audience through trade expositions and department stores; museum displays, and exhibitions, which indicated different commercial or educational imperatives to successive Governments in their aims for design reform.

I examine the changing ideas and fortunes of contemporary design in the Museum through case study analysis of two public representations. First is the New Art Display of 1901, which featured the Museum's first collection of Continental Art Nouveau. Second is the Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946, which, this time, exhibited contemporary British design and was organised by the Council of Industrial Design. I examine how these exhibitions were received within the Museum's varied repertoire of 'modern' styles that spanned from the Victorian era to after the Second World War, to ask: what do they tell us about changes in the Museum's attitude to 'modern' design and audiences at these times?

I locate this period of the V&A's history within an existing tradition of Government led design reform that draws attention to nineteenth-century precedents, where evidence of continuity is balanced by the unique circumstances of the early twentieth century -- a time of turbulence and transition -- and the distinctive British society that emerged. I examine the intentions behind staging the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition in the Museum to consider whether they were viewed as marginal to its development, or as more important markers that corresponded with the changing needs of its audiences. I further question whether the Museum's ideas of 'modern' design can be interpreted as constructed around the different social identities of its audiences. Finally, in the first decade of the new millennium, I ask to what extent these debates retain influence on contemporary issues in the Museum.

I. i Key Concepts

The representational contexts of the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition are highly complex, since both were the product of several interested parties which were sometimes in conflict over the value of historic and contemporary styles. These were also seen to pertain to characteristics associated with the national and the foreign, and included elements of the avant-garde as well as mass production; elitism and populism, that indicated different audiences. This complexity and multi-variability needs to be taken into account in considering key concepts used to describe aspects of their representation; developments in the V&A and contemporary industrial design; and different audiences they targeted, rather than fixed ideas of what these were.

The Victoria and Albert Museum

My study traces a fascinating period in the Museum's history that begins in 1900, a year after it was named the 'Victoria and Albert Museum' by Queen Victoria as she laid the foundation stone of its new facade building. The event marked the beginning of a decade of radical transformation leading to the Museum's first major rearrangement in 1908-09¹. It continues up to the aftermath of WWII and the Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946 as a second rearrangement was anticipated in time for the centenary celebrations of the Great Exhibition: the Festival of Britain of 1951. Prior to 1899, I either refer to the 'Museum' in quotes or refer to its proper name at the time.

'Modern' design

As the Museum changed so did ideas about what its role in the industrial arts and society should be, with implications for its relationship with contemporary design and its associated audiences. The New Art Display mainly comprised of furniture with some examples of textiles, metalwork, glassware and ceramics was acquired by the Museum as evidence of a new 'modern' Continental design movement for the purpose of stimulating British industry, and was considered distinct from British design and craft movements. The Britain Can Make It Exhibition also promoted new 'modern' design to

¹ In referring to the Museum, it is necessary to consider how it evolved, and continues to evolve, from changing collections, buildings and titles. It was first founded in 1852 as the Museum of Manufactures with collections from the Government's Normal School of Design of 1837 (later the Royal College of Art) and the Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1857 it was named the South Kensington Museum and moved into its first purpose built residence in Brompton: a modern industrial building that acquired the nick-name "the Brompton Boilers" on account of its industrial appearance.

stimulate the economy but, this time, it was exclusively British and included a wider range of fashion and new technological gadgets as well as decor and furnishings. Tracing the Museum's changing use of the term 'modern' design is, therefore, viewed as a valuable aid to historical research of the Museum itself: the New Art Display serves to introduce, and to act as a foil for, developments that culminated in Britain Can Make It. I therefore distinguish the Museum's terminology from more mainstream definitions by placing it within quotes: 'modern'².

Audiences

In 1852 Henry Cole declared his intention that the Museum would be "an impressive schoolroom for everyone"³. As the Government's leading institution of design reform it addressed the entire nation as its audience⁴. Its relationship with the British public was therefore multi faceted: it both pertained to and served the public; it was devoted to their education and welfare; it represented them as a nation; it was largely maintained at their expense and increasingly, as the vote widened, by their political support. From its earliest incarnations as the Museum of Manufactures (1852) and, later, South Kensington Museum (1857), the Museum claimed a special affinity with students, artisans and manufacturers of the industrial arts. Indeed, it was for their benefit throughout Britain's industrial centres that the Circulation department was established to loan and tour small displays. This audience were also seen as activists in procuring greater access to education through public museums and other establishments, as in the founding of the Bethnal Green branch in 1872 testifies⁵.

Historically, Britain's industrial centres varied greatly from one another where as early as in 1835 Alex de Tocqueville observed that the city of Birmingham "has no analogy with other English provincial towns"⁶. By 1900 London itself presented a city of

² For a more recent reference to modernism see Wilk, C. (2006) *Modernism: Designing a New World 1914-1939*, which defines modernism within a socio-political context that traces the infiltration of Germany's Bauhaus in the early 1920's into the mass markets of the US and Europe in the 1930's.

³ Cole, H. Board of Trade Annual Report H.M.S.O. 1852

⁴ From 1853 the Museum was part of the Science and Art Department: a subdivision under the Board of Trade for Britain and Ireland (then part of the UK). During the 1880's recommendations from Royal Commissions looking at technical education in the UK, led to the formation of the Board of Education in 1899 into which the Science and Art Department was integrated.

⁵ Henry Cole announced in a speech in 1865 his plan for the old 'Brompton Boilers' to be dismantled into three sections to form branch museums in London's industrial areas. Only the residents of Bethnal Green applied, selling their charity lands to purchase a site. Their proposal had also included a technical school and library, but only the museum materialised causing the matter to be raised in Parliament in 1882. See Burton, A. (1999) *Vision & Accident*, V&A, p. 122; Kriegel, L. (2007) *Grand Designs, Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Times*, Duke, p. 178

⁶ De Tocqueville, A. 1958, (ed) *Journeys to England & Ireland* London, Faber & Faber Limited p. 94

enclaves of social, economic and cultural diversity⁷. The area of Brompton, renamed South Kensington when the Museum moved there in 1857, was purchased by the Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition partly from the Exhibition's profits. The site grew to become a cultural quarter of institutions of learning in the arts and sciences, which was largely inhabited by highly affluent and educated population. On the other side of the river to the east of London, Bethnal Green was renowned as a centre of manufacture in furniture and textiles, with a predominantly low income artisan and labouring population⁸.

It is interesting to compare the social differences of the two areas when considering what different design historical imperatives they may have signified to the Museum. Bethnal Green's manufacturing industries fuelled consumption all over Britain, the Empire and the world, attracting traders and labourers from apposite locations. It was also a place where people seeking refuge: the Irish from famine; Slavs and Jews fleeing the Russian pogroms, settled⁹. As such, the area attracted the interest of early social researchers, whose work became influent to organisations concerned with the reform of industrial society during the period of this study¹⁰. South Kensington's population was similarly swelled by foreign labour: Royal palace servants and courtiers, artists, entrepreneurs and refugees¹¹. However, according to Moncure Conway's *Travels in South Kensington of 1882*¹² it was the Museum, rather than South Kensington's inhabitants, that encapsulated the diversity of the world. From a more recent perspective, scholars such as Tim Barringer have suggested this world view was more indicative of the Museum's imperialism in which "the museum struggled to impose order over a cultural field of bewildering diversity."¹³ The Museum's awareness of, and engagement with, audiences of both areas is of interest when considering terms of material and social exchange between the two sites. However, of more immediate concern are those audiences that experienced the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition.

⁷ Taylor, S. 1993, *A Land of Dreams: A Study of Jewish and Caribbean Migrant Communities in England*, London, Routledge.

⁸ Kirkham, P. (1987) *Furnishing the World*, Journeyman Press

⁹ This cultural diversity was reflected in the area's political leadership at the time of the New Art Display in 1901 Sir Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhownaggee was the Indian born Conservative MP for Bethnal Green (1895-1906). See Anwar, M. "The Participation of Ethnic Minorities in British Politics" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 27, 2001.

¹⁰ Studies of the East End by Charles Booth and Beatrice and Stanley Webb, in particular, became influential to the Fabian Society and newly formed Labour Party. Beatrice Web set up the Co-operative Wholesale Society, which after WWII became a model for the Government's Council of Industrial Design's Utility Scheme. Her method of keeping a diary of her social research observations was also employed by Mrs Judith Henderson in her study of the 'S' family for Mass Observation's study of Britain Can Make It.

¹¹ See Hobhouse, H., 1986, *Survey of London, Vol 42: Kensington Square to Earl's Court*, pp. 77-98.

¹² Conway, M., 1882, *Travels in South Kensington*, London.

¹³ Barringer, T, 1998, 'The South Kensington Museum and the Colonial Project' in Barringer and Flynn, 1998, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*

I.ii Methodology

I review the secondary literature to search for main themes as well as gaps in knowledge, and to position my own study within the field. Findings are then related to analysis of the case studies that form the main body of the study. These are based on primary evidence of key individuals and organisations involved, exploring their beliefs and aspirations for the Museum to assess changes in their attitudes to design and audiences in relation to 'modern' design.

To begin with I chose to study the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition from a number of other possibilities, primarily because of their proximity to the Museum rearrangements of 1908-09 and 1947-51¹. These periods of rearrangement presented the opportunity to test the exhibition's cultural reception in the Museum, and to assess whether, and in what ways, they pointed to decisive changes in its approach to design and audiences. It is of interest that the formal recommendation for the first rearrangement did not include 'modern' design, which resulted in the removal of the New Art collection². The case for the reintroduction of contemporary design re-emerged during the second rearrangement following the success of Britain Can Make It when the Museum gained the attention of a new-post war audience.

My objective has not been to compare these exhibitions as they are not alike in any way: not in the design they showed, their organisation or scale, rather I am interested in how they were *received* as 'modern' design within the Museum, where its setting is viewed as instrumental to repositioning, not only contemporary design within British material culture, but contemporary British culture itself. However, continuity between the case studies can be found in their structure of inquiry where each is divided into main sections that consider first, the nature of the design exhibited; second, their exhibitionary intentions and primary audiences; third, their representation and audience reaction; and fourth, their influence on subsequent Museum rearrangements. By using this approach I have aimed to achieve a parity of information and assessment criteria between case studies.

Providing images of exhibitionary aspects of the case studies has proved challenging. Where plenty of photographs of Britain Can Make It can be found in the Design Council Archive, and are accessible online through the resource for visual arts (vads), no images of the New Art Display at South Kensington, Bethnal Green, or the other

¹ My original proposal included the Boiler house project 1980-89 and Creation of the Twentieth Century Art and Design Gallery which opened in 1992.

² Report of the Committee on Rearrangement 1908

venues where it was displayed, are known to exist. Instead, I was able to use some images from the Paris 1900 Exposition from where the collection was originally acquired. These images show how objects were first seen by the Museum's representatives and convey some understanding of their intentions behind its acquisition. This seemed particularly relevant since an article about the display in the *Magazine of Art* of 1901 which reviewed the display mentioned that "those of our readers who were unable to go to Paris at the time of the Exhibition will doubtless welcome the opportunity now afforded of closely examining this work"³. To provide an impression of the New Art Display's arrangement in the Museum, I have cited original text from the V&A's 'Press Notice'⁴ describing its intentions, content, and layout that, together with contemporary images of the collection from the V&A's image library, impart a reasonably accurate and detailed impression of the display.

Primary sources on the history of the Museum largely come from the V&A's National Art Library (NAL), which contains published resources relating to the history of the V&A; Archive of Art and Design (AAD), and the V&A Archive at Blythe House which dates from the foundation of the first Government School of Design in 1837 and from 1992 has held Government correspondences and papers dating from 1844 to 1958 although I have included other papers from the Public Record's Office at Kew. This information relates to Museum acquisitions; the organization of V&A displays and exhibitions, including those by the Circulation department; and the policies and development of the Museum as well as inventories, ephemera, architectural plans and photographs of the Museum, objects and volumes of press cuttings relating to the V&A and the art-world. Other sources include Siegfried Bing's *Artistic America, Tiffany Glass, and Art Nouveau* (1970) (ed) which is a compilation of published articles first published at the turn of the century based on his visit to America in 1895⁵. Bing was a Parisian art dealer and promoter of Art Nouveau after whose commercial gallery in Paris *La Maison de L'Art Nouveau*, it is said, the movement was named. His significance in this study is based on the Museum's collection of New Art, which was mostly acquired from his celebrated pavilion L'Art Nouveau Bing at the Paris 1900 Exposition Universelle.

Evidence for the Britain Can Make It case study mainly comes from the Design Council Archive (DCA) at the University of Brighton which holds records on the Council of

³ *Magazine of Art* 1901, p. 466

⁴ MA/2/N V&A 'Press Notice', 1901, "New Art Furniture at the Victoria and Albert Museum", 1901

⁵ 'Artistic America' was first published in *La Culture Artistique en Amerique* in 1895; 'Louis C. Tiffany's Coloured Glass Work' in *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk* in 1898; 'L'Art Nouveau' in *The Architectural Record* in 1902; and L'Art Nouveau in *The Craftsman* in 1903. See Bing, S. 1970 (ed) *Artistic America, Tiffany Glass, and Art Nouveau*, MIT Press.

Industrial Design. Since I had suspected it was likely that a more meaningful relationship existed between the V&A and Council of Industrial Design in staging Britain Can Make It than has been previously suggested, it was a moment of affirmation when Dr Lesley Whitworth of the Design Council Archive confirmed the existence of a file titled 'Regarding the position of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Council of Industrial Design'⁶. In the file were correspondences between the Council, Museum and other leading institutions, regarding plans for a new permanent gallery of contemporary industrial design in the Museum to coincide with its first post-WWII rearrangement and Festival of Britain in 1951.

Finding primary evidence of the V&A's attitude to audiences has also proved to be challenging as although visitor numbers were studiously recorded since Henry Cole was Director of the Museum, the practice of surveying audience's attitudes did not exist at the time of the New Art Display. Neither has it been possible to know how many people or what kinds of people visited the display at South Kensington, Bethnal Green or other venues it was lent to because visitor numbers were only recorded for general entry to the Museum rather than particular displays, exhibitions or collections. Instead, I have analysed correspondences relating to the display's marketing and outreach role that give a good indication of what audiences the collection was intended for. By comparison, an extensive audience survey was carried out for Britain Can Make It by the social research organisation Mass Observation (MO). The survey aimed to measure audience's tastes by social class, age and gender, though not by ethnic, racial, cultural, sexual orientation or religious identity that, given the organisation's special interest in Bethnal Green, would have also been useful. A discrete piece of research by MO observer Mrs Judith Henderson of a visit by a 'Mrs Samuels' from Bethnal Green to the Exhibition provides a rare insight from this audience's perspective. Mass Observation still exists today and the archive (M-O A) is kept at the University of Sussex.

In order to deploy what amounts to a history of the V&A from a design historical perspective with sociological implications, this study is organised in four main chapters. Each chapter is subdivided into sections under headings that evoke the history of the period. For example, Chapter 1 is headed 'Splendid Isolation' -- a term traditionally associated with British foreign policy at the turn of the century -- to convey the received orthodoxy of the Museum's stance towards Continental reform movements in design that the New Art Display represented. The display's different stakeholders and

⁶ DCA File 118 series number 26 1945, 1946 and 1947 'Regarding the position of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Council of Industrial Design.'

their agendas are brought to the fore taking a number of influences into account, these influences being widely varied, ranging from the belief in the design's ability to stimulate British industry to a basic distrust of 'modern' design. Paul Greenhalgh's analysis of Art Nouveau is of special interest since he was Curator of "Art Nouveau 1890-1914", which was the V&A's first exhibition of the style since 1901 and commemorated the Paris 1900 Exposition Universelle⁷. He describes an international style that encompassed within different national traits both high and low culture in a way that contrasts with Nancy Troy's view of a more avant-garde movement at the exclusive end of the craft market in Continental Europe⁸. The idea that Art Nouveau may have been received differently in Britain: as of primary interest to industrial populations, is a comparatively new proposition.

Since the New Art collection was delegated to the care of the Museum's Circulation department, Circulation's role in maintaining a link with contemporary design and its audiences provides a thread of continuity between the case studies. The department's changing fortunes, from a *distanced* and marginal position to a more central status, is of interest. However, the scale of my thesis has not allowed for Circulation to be included as a case study here, but is an area for future study as there has been a lack of work in this area of the Museum's history and it is especially relevant to my interest in audiences.

Chapter 2 represents a segue between the two main case studies and mainly employs secondary literature to chart how relations between the Museum and contemporary industrial design sector in Britain were perceived in the inter-War period when modern design -- by this time recognised as an internationally defined style and quite distinct from Art Nouveau -- was still a relatively new and niche market for manufactured goods in Britain. Chapter 3 examines the second case study of the Britain Can Make It Exhibition in the first year after WWII when contemporary design was given an entirely different reception and in light of the Council of Industrial Design's efforts to deploy the Museum as a national platform to influence mass taste. Although the Exhibition itself has been well documented from a number of perspectives chiefly, by Penny Sparke 1986; Patrick Maguire and Jonathan Woodham 1997; and Lesley Whitworth, 2006 and 2008, it has not previously been examined in context of the Museum's history, which is the new focus here.

⁷ Greenhalgh, P. 2000, *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*, V&A

⁸ Troy, N. (1991) *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*, Yale

The concluding chapter takes findings from thematic inquiry and the case studies and moves them into the heart of the discussion about how the Museum's attitude to design and audiences, in general, was altered by the presence and absence of 'modern' design. It also relates to the social make up of Britain, where economic, social, and cultural-political, aspects raise a number of fundamental issues about contemporary design, where further exploration of the effects of the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition – on the high street and in people's homes – may have amplified these impacts. There is some evidence from interviews Mass Observation carried out with retailers and householders on this subject. However, since the main focus of my study is the Museum's changing attitude to contemporary design, I have not covered this area in any depth. Finally, in writing this thesis, I have not intended to criticise the Museum's inability to integrate contemporary design and audiences within its structures of collecting, research and design communication. Rather, my aim has been to examine the particular circumstances that led the Museum to develop in the way that it did, at this point in time, compared with attempts towards the end of the century to re-establish contemporary design and audiences within a more central position⁹.

⁹ I refer here to the reintroduction of contemporary collecting and display from 1974 under the V&A's Director Roy Strong; Daniel Libeskind's radically contemporary but unfulfilled Spiral building; and the Contemporary Programme, which was set up to attract a younger and more diverse audience.

The V&A's exhibition and accompanying book: *Art Nouveau. 1890-1914*, (2000) was intended to commemorate the centenary of the Paris 1900 Exposition Universelle from where the Museum's New Art Display was first acquired. Curator Paul Greenhalgh explained that an important intention behind the exhibition was to position the style within the modern movement:

"We felt that the style itself had held the beginnings of modernity proper--that it was not just a weird aberration in the nineteenth century, or a false start to the twentieth century. So we set about trying to prove that by reassessing the intellectual heritage as well as the artistic heritage of the movement... It is our view that Art Nouveau was the first modern style. It was the first style to be promoted by mass communications and the first style to have ambitions to change the shape of the city. It was the first self-conscious attempt to create something that looked modern. It was self-consciously trying to anticipate the future."¹

Indeed, Christopher Wilk (1997) has proposed that the V&A's relationship with twentieth century contemporary design began with the New Art Display of 1901. The institution's relationship with contemporary design has long been debated among a number of interested parties from Museum Directors and design historians to journalists². Similarly, the national reception of contemporary design has also been the subject of debate³. However, these institutional and national contexts have not previously been examined in relation to each other, which may, as Burton suggests, be partly due to the Museum's retreat from contemporary design:

"The propagandists for design reform in the 1930's... simply left the V&A out of their view of the history of industrial design... When writers like John Gloag, Noel Carrington, Geoffrey Holme and Anthony Bertram looked at the history of industrial art, the V&A might as well not have existed"⁴

¹ "Conversation with V&A Curator Paul Greenhalgh", 'Anatomy of an Exhibition', National Gallery of Art Washington www.nga.gov/feature/nouveau/feature

² For a Museum perspective see Strong, R. 'Modern Design: the V and A Pulls up its Socks' in *Designer* May 1978 p 4-7; for a view from the History of Design see, Code, E. D. 'Designs of the Times? The Twentieth Century Gallery at the Victoria & Albert Museum' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 6 No. 2, (1993), pp. 133-136 Oxford University Press; from Government see Minutes of Select Committee of Public Accounts, 19th March 2001 'Examination of Witnesses Dr Robin Young and Dr Alan Borg'; and for Press commentary see Gibbons, F. article, 'V&A given a 6 month deadline to re-invent itself' in *The Guardian* 3rd April 2001.

³ See essays by Maxwell Fry, Gordon Russell, James Laver, Elizabeth Denby, A.B.Read, Robert Atkinson, Frank Pick and the editor in Gloag, J. 1946 (ed) *Design in Modern Life*, London: George Allen and Unwin; Saler, M. (1999) *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: 'Medieval Modernism' and the London Underground*, Oxford University Press; Fry, M. (1969) *Fry, Art in a Machine Age: A Critique of Contemporary Life through the Medium of Architecture*, London: Methuen.

⁴ Burton, A. (1999) p. 189

However, in 1936 the emulated design historian Nikolaus Pevsner speculated about a possible link between the Museum's role in Britain's withdrawal from the international contemporary design scene. In so doing, he brought attention to the New Art Display:

"As far as Britain is concerned, it will have been noticed that, after she had created the style in the eighties she disappeared out of this survey. The reason is that she kept away from Art Nouveau as soon as it became the fashion. When in 1900 some objects of Continental Art Nouveau were presented to the Victoria and Albert Museum, a letter of protest was sent to *The Times* signed by three architects of the Norman Shaw School and with Arts and Crafts sympathies."⁵

Pevsner voiced his frustration with what he perceived as a lack of inquiry into the matter, "English writers have not failed to acknowledge this fact; but hardly anybody has tried to explain it"⁶. It was not until the 1980's when the history of the V&A became a subject of growing interest among scholars, and particularly the Museum's staff, that the question of contemporary design was raised again by two significant developments⁷. First, in 1974 the then Director of the V&A, Sir Roy Strong had the contemporary objects re-integrated into the main Museum's structures of collecting and display. This meant the 'modern' objects sent to Bethnal Green from the 1880's began to return to the Museum. Second, during the 1980's the Conran Foundation's Boiler House Project⁸, which was an exhibition programme dedicated to contemporary industrial design, drew attention to the Museum's nineteenth century industrial heritage⁹.

While these histories focussed on different aspects of the Museum's collections or its buildings, a comprehensive account that asked the whys and wherefores of it all was required. Baker and Richardson's *A Grand Design* was published in 1997 to accompany a touring exhibition of the history of the Museum by the Baltimore Museum of Art and, soon after, Anthony Burton's *Vision & Accident* became the first comprehensive history of the Museum to be published by the V&A in 1999. Interestingly, both books renewed inquiry into the history of contemporary design in the Museum as Daniel Libeskind's strikingly contemporary Spiral building, was anticipated to reinvent the V&A for the 21st Century and the Contemporary Programme was subsequently introduced to integrate contemporary shows with the permanent collection.

⁵ Pevsner, N. (2005) (ed) p. 90

⁶ Pevsner, N. (2005) (ed) p. 18

⁷ Cocks, A. S. (1980), *The Victoria and Albert Museum: The Making of the Collection*. Leicester: Windward; Physick, J. (1982), *The Victoria and Albert Museum, the history of its building*, London: V&A; Wainwright, C.

⁸ The Boilerhouse held a series of exhibitions of international modern industrial design which led to the creation of the Design Museum.

⁹ For example, one article stated "The Exhibition's Director Stephen Bayley sees the project as continuing a long British tradition of awareness of the importance of design, going back to the foundation of the V&A, which was always intended to reflect the commercial spirit of the times." In 'Shedding Light on Design in V&A's Boiler house' extract from *Draughting & Design* 11/02/1982.

Vision & Accident portrays the Museum's relationship with contemporary design as a long drawn out and deepening crisis which began when a significant number of 'modern' manufactures were sent on a temporary transfer from South Kensington to the Bethnal Green museum in 1880, with new implications for audiences of both areas, "If the transfer of such material benefited the working men of Bethnal Green, it must by the same token have disadvantaged any working men who wanted to make use of South Kensington"¹⁰. Whether such an outcome was intended, the move precluded the South Kensington Museum's association with these audiences. According to Burton, this change in the Museum's approach arose from a conflict of vision he perceives between Henry Cole's utilitarianism and Curator of Sculpture Charles Robinson's more scholarly ethos¹¹. At the heart of this conflict was the material arrangement of the collections that allowed 'modern' manufactures to be displayed alongside historic work that was more highly regarded as 'art'. The situation came to a head when the Government held an inquiry into the Science and Art department, which was the Museum's name of office, from 1896 – 97. The result according to Burton was, "... a new estimation of old art (which was admirable and precious) as against modern art (which was disagreeable)... It was to assuage the pain of connoisseurs and scholars that the modern art was cleared out of South Kensington"¹².

Although on the surface the issue seemed to concern solely the quality of design, Burton reveals that it actually signalled important changes for the Museum's audiences:

"In these circumstances, it was likely that the museum would begin to think of itself as addressing, not the general public, but a very particular public of votaries, fit though few. This gradually came to pass, and eventually the museum moved away from artisans and manufacturers towards collectors and connoisseurs."¹³

Subsequently much 'modern' material was removed from the Museum and sent to Bethnal Green. This 'purgation' settled the ideological ground for the Museum's rearrangement in preparation for the public opening of its new building in 1909; an event that also decided in favour of a more scholarly and somewhat less utilitarian approach towards design and audiences. It is more specifically within this history of the Museum, rather than the national perspective, that Burton also relates the events of the New Art Display.

A Grand Design explores the history of the Museum in themes ranging from design education; the forming of collections; nationalism and Empire, from diverse perspectives of a number of scholars, including Burton, under the grand metaphor of

¹⁰ Burton, A. 1999, p. 129

¹¹ Burton, A. 1999, pp.57-74

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

design as ideology. In his article 'Collecting the Twentieth Century' (pp. 345-354) Christopher Wilk argues the "the attribution of the Museum's retreat from contemporary collecting solely to the (George) Donaldson affair is too simplistic,"¹⁴. This refers to the New Art Display, where George Donaldson was an expert of antique and contemporary furniture who contributed a number of pieces of Art Nouveau furniture he acquired from the Paris 1900 Exposition to the Display and has since been credited for the collection. Although Wilk acknowledges the Display was a 'significant factor' in the Museum's reticence in dealing with contemporary design, he largely frames the issue within an atmosphere of heightened nationalism.

"The Museum's new emphasis on historic British, specifically English design... both reflected a new form of romantic nationalism and mitigated against attention being paid to contemporary design. This nationalism surely contributed to the antimodernism of British culture (still prevalent today), which, in general, was hostile to the influence of modernist, specifically foreign, architecture and design."¹⁵

This new focus on national heritage in South Kensington's structures of research, collection, and display, is similarly observed by Charles Saumarez Smith:

"This was motivated by a sentimental appreciation of the relics of old English life, which were being swept away by urbanization... It was also the period in which the idea of England as an entity, with distinctive characteristics of language, landscape, and tradition, was more sharply differentiated from a broader belief in the imperial destiny of Great Britain"¹⁶.

Kara Olsen Theiding contributes to these insights her fascinating analysis of Britain's reception of Art Nouveau at the turn of the century¹⁷. However, she shifts attention away from nationalism and the meanings of the display of foreign commodities, to their psychological impact on the fin de Siecle of British design reform that orbited the Museum. In so doing she imparts the sense that the Museum's collections were not only instrumental to stimulating a secure sense of national identity, but also in managing a sphere of political influence in an increasingly plural and disparate yet, at the same time, interconnected global economy. From these vantage points the Museum can almost be viewed as an instrument of state propaganda devoted to distinguishing a selective national heritage of design and kindling national sentiment.

¹⁴ Wilk, C. in Baker and Richardson (1997) p.347

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ See Smith, C. S. 'National Consciousness, National Heritage, and the Idea of "Englishness"' in Baker and Richardson, (1999) pp. 275-284

¹⁷ Theiding, K. O. 'Anxieties of Influence: British Responses to Art Nouveau, 1900-04' in *Journal of Design History* (2006) Vol. 19, No. 3, London: Design History Society.

Lara Kriegel's book, *Grand Designs: Labour, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (2007), places the V&A within the history of design reform in nineteenth-century Britain, where the interests of Government, design, education and the founding of national collections became interrelated:

"liberal political reform provided its very conditions of possibility... , for the committee that spurred it on was forged by members of a reformed Parliament, most notably the radical William Ewart, and sustained by middle-class civil servants, especially the utilitarian Henry Cole. The nascent relationship between art and Government in the nineteenth century has been a concern of institutional, cultural, and architectural historians since the 1970s. As they examined state patronage and imperial city building, they placed South Kensington at the center (sic) of a nineteenth-century reform movement that shaped aesthetic education and grand collections alike."¹⁸

In viewing museums as the cultural manifestations of state formation and nation building, Kriegel also brings the role of labour to the fore, asserting that the working class "played decisive roles in shaping South Kensington... driving the form of its collections, providing logic for its geography and even informing the character of its critiques"¹⁹. She further suggests that "the exhibitionary complex was a contested locale" in which labourers were active agents who "used their positions to gain access to museum collections"²⁰. This can be seen to be the case in Chapter 1 of this study, when several institutions requested the New Art collection on behalf of their artisanal working class audiences; and in Chapter 3 in the Council of Industrial Design's efforts to engage working class audiences with Britain Can Make It.

The idea of museums as instruments of improvement of the working man is one of a number of representations examined by Barringer in *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*²¹. Barringer locates his study within a comparatively small body of work that has examined the relationship between art and labour²². By examining the history of aesthetics *through* the history of labour; how its identity and meaning in the representation of art became attached to manual labour in the making of Victorian Britain and its empire, *Men at Work* explores the Victorian cult of labour in art, particularly as espoused by the Pre-Raphaelite and British Arts and Crafts movements. In the process, Barringer asserts a dialectical relationship between visual culture and history, social and institutional behaviours and conventions, political practices and ideology.

¹⁸ Kriegel, L. (2007) p. 5

¹⁹ Kriegel, L. (2007) p. 7

²⁰ Kriegel, L. (2007) p. 7

²¹ Barringer, T. (2005) *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*, New Haven and London

²² For example, Francis Klingender's (1947) *Art and the Industrial Revolution*; and E. P. Thompson's (1955) *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* Lawrence & Wishart

Barringer examines artistic taxonomies in relation to labour: in the creation and organisation of cultural representation within institutions and public life, though not in relation to the Museum. However, both *A Grand Design* and *Grand Designs* position the Museum's representation of labour within its social economic as well as ethnic colonial dimension as examined, in the former, by Partha Mitter and Craig Clunas:

"with nineteenth-century public museums applying taxonomies of fine and applied arts to all artistic traditions, non-Western sculpture and painting were classified as decorative arts, which further confirmed their "ethnographic," rather than aesthetic status. The situation was more complex at South Kensington. In an institution founded to foster the decorative arts, the distinction between fine and applied arts was more ambiguous..."²³

This approach is helpful when considering the Museum's view of the East End: an area long associated with immigrant labour, as a primary audience of contemporary design both as Cole's *ideal artisanal visitor* and, later, as the Council of Industrial Design's *ideal post-war consumer*.

Studies of nineteenth century fin de Siècle literature of the East End, show it was thought to contain dangerously unstable elements of deviancy and crime that were linked to immigration²⁴. It was also represented in early social research as a place of exotic fascination where the *Other*: the cockney, Jew, Slav, and Irish, lived²⁵. Drawing from this literature, Ben Gidley²⁶ examines "the immense drive of the "lowest" elements of the proletariat, especially in the East End, to represent themselves; and the accompanying rise of a genteel "socialism" in the drawing rooms of the West End." This movement, he argues, "laid the foundations for British urban sociology"²⁷. Indeed, Charles Booth and his team pioneered the practice of combining statistical analysis with ethnographic method, which would later be used by Mass Observation to survey Britain Can Make It²⁸. Booth described the inhabitants of the East End as 'savage' residual people in residual places, referring to the bottom class 'A' of his scheme as 'residuum'²⁹.

²³ Mitter and Clunas in Baker and Richardson (1997), p. 221

²⁴ Two best sellers were Henry George, (1881) *Poverty and Progress*; and Rev. Mearns, (1883) *Bitter Cry of Outcast London*

²⁵ See Ledger, S. & McCracken (1995) (eds), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge University Press; Stokes, J. *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century*, St. Martin's Press.

²⁶ Gidley, B. (2000) *The Proletarian Other: Charles Booth and the Politics of Representation*, Goldsmith's College, University of London

²⁷ Gidley, B. (2000), p. 3

²⁸ Beatrice Webb took a job as a trouser finisher in a Jewish sweat shop in the East End to observe people in their environment by taking notes in a diary; later, Judith Henderson's work for Mass Observation required her to encourage visits by the Samuels family of Bethnal Green, where she also recorded findings in a diary.

²⁹ Booth, C. (1891-1903) *Life and Labour of the People of London*

"A. The lowest class, which consists of occasional labourers, street sellers, loafers, criminals, and semi-criminals... little regular family life... homeless outcasts... of low character... Their life is the life of savages... They degrade whatever they touch, and as individuals are perhaps incapable of improvement"³⁰

Beatrice Webb, or 'Potter', as she was then known by her maiden name, also used terms that alluded to ethnicity and class to describe the East End's residents as: "the aborigines of the East End"³¹. She would use a range of ethnic identities to characterise people she observed: "The worse scoundrel is the cockney-born Irishman. The woman is the Chinaman of the place, and drudges as the women of the savage races"³². In another interesting association of terms, Beatrice noted how the East End also attracted the attention of "men of intellect and property" first, in the philanthropy of Lord Shaftsbury and Owen Chadwick; second, in the aesthetics of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin; third, in the social science of John Stuart Mill, members of Toynbee Hall and the Fabian Society; and, finally, in the growing state regulation of social life³³. When considering Beatrice's promotion of the Co-operative Wholesale Society or the influence of Toynbee Hall, the rise of socialism and the Labour party can be seen to have played an important role in British design politics³⁴. The association was visible during Britain Can Make It, in the Labour Government's appropriation of design reform through the Council of Industrial Design; and social research through Mass Observation, which is not to say their interests ran in the same direction, however.

While findings are more fully explored in Chapter 3, some background information on Mass Observation is useful for locating it within the sociological perspectives already discussed. Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan give a detailed account of how this unique and independent organisation provided the most far reaching survey of popular culture in Britain³⁵. It is also useful to consider, however, the change in the organization's autonomy during WWII when it was commissioned by Duff Cooper's Ministry of Information³⁶. The movement was founded by a radical left wing collective

³⁰ Booth, C. cited in Fried and Elman, (1969) pp 33-61

³¹ Webb, B. (1982) (eds) p. 134

³² Webb, B. (1982) (eds) p. 205

³³ Webb, B. (1948) p. 154-8

³⁴ Toynbee alumni are closely associated with the history of design reform in the V&A and include the civil servant Robert Morant, who set up the Committee on Rearrangement in 1908; and Clement Attlee whose post WWII Labour Government attempted to extend control of design by setting up the Council of Industrial Design. It is also worth noting that the Chairman of the Board of Trade that oversaw the Britain Can Make It Exhibition was Stafford Cripps who, though not a Toynbee member, was Beatrice's nephew.

³⁵ Calder & Sheridan (1984) (eds) *Speak for Yourself: Mass Observation Anthology, 1937-49*, Jonathan Cape

³⁶ What began as an anti establishment movement in the 1930's, during WWII became identified with Government so that by the time Mass Observation came to survey Britain Can Make It, the organisation's core idea of 'the masses watching the masses' took on a more sinister connotation of a surveillance society where it gained the nick name 'Cooper's snoopers'.

of the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, Surrealist film maker Humphrey Jennings, and the Surrealist poet and journalist for the Daily Mirror Charles Madge. Like Booth and Toynebee members, they practiced participant observation where industrial society became the object of scrutiny; the industrial labourer its subject:

"the tribal framework of society is emerging; already the details descriptions of how people are living, for instance, on municipal housing estates, are proving of value to architects. Political candidates have shown interest in the study that Mass Observation has made of the gap between political formulae and the everyday life of the people."³⁷

While these perceptions of social research were shaped around more general concerns with social reform, in observing working class cultures of society and production they closely parallel British design debates concerning the role of contemporary design in the search for a national contemporary culture.

Having previously studied cannibal culture in the Pacific, Harrisson announced his intention to study industrial populations in Bolton or "Work town" as he referred to it, using a similar method. Later in an interview Harrisson reflected, "I was determined to return to study the cannibals of Britain."³⁸ Consideration of this sociological concern with labour in classificatory systems of artistic production provides a more complex dimension to the process of distinguishing 'art' from 'applied art'. As earlier discussed, the nature of labour was seen to determine value of the culture of production and of the object itself. The process of distinguishing 'art' as the highest form of cultural production from 'lower' cultures became a raging debate in the nineteenth century, and was one of the major criticisms used against the V&A's arrangement by John Ruskin:

"at Kensington ...fragments of really true and precious art are buried and polluted amidst a mass of loathsome modern mechanisms, fineries, and fatuity, and have the souls trodden out of them, and the luster polluted on them, till they are but as a few sullied pearls in a troughful of rotten peas, as which the foul English public snout grunts in an amazed manner, finding them wholly flavourless"³⁹

Ruskin loomed large in reform movements in design and political spheres, and was influential to the founding ideas of the Labour Party⁴⁰. The distinction he makes here between "true and precious art" and the "mass of loathsome modern mechanisms, fineries, and fatuity" in the Museum that he associates with an English public he calls

³⁷ Harrisson, T. interviewed by Parker, R. in *The Guardian*, 14/09/37

³⁸ Harrison, T. in an interview with Nevin, C. in *The Guardian*, 19/03/2005

³⁹ Ruskin, J. cited in Burton, A. 1999, p.154

⁴⁰ See Thomson, T. (2006) *Political Economy and the Labour Party, the economics of democratic socialism, 1884-2005*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge

"foul", reveals an association of such objects with such audiences. Indeed, South Kensington's 'modern' collections were not the only material to be relocated to Bethnal Green. Its first public displays comprised of two collections from the Great Exhibition: Food and Animal products. The Food display explored the composition of various types of food and its nutritional value, while the Animal Products display mainly comprised of decorative pieces including jewellery embellished with hummingbird feathers and ornate ivory hair combs. The removal of these collections from South Kensington to Bethnal Green has a certain resonance with Ruskin's words, the implication being that by removing these inhuman and *polluting* bodies from the Museum, a greater purity of artistic distinction could be achieved.

Debates about modern aesthetics converged on the issue of decoration which was used to signify elements of the national and foreign; the civilized and uncivilized; rational and irrational; pure and impure; diseased and healthy, which relates to Theiding's analysis of terms used to criticize Art Nouveau, as if it were a foreign infection that might contaminate British design. What some saw as deviance others perceived as freedom from Western convention but in each scenario decoration marked the boundary between the 'deviant' and the 'pure' in design. *Men at Work* draws attention to similar distinctions in the representation of labour in art, in images that impart notions of wholesome purity in rural or historic settings. A more positive association may be found in Kriegel's portrayal of labourers as conscious and active "protagonists in the design reform movement"⁴¹.

It is interesting to compare concerns with labour in studies of design reform in the nineteenth century, with how emphasis was placed on the rise of consumerism in the twentieth. The search for a new culture of design became the focus of growing tensions between a mass international market and traditional national modes of authority. It is D. L. Le Mahieu's (1988) view that the new commercial culture, represented in newspapers, radio, television, and popular entertainments, reflected the emerging democratic precedents of the age⁴². Responses were mixed. Some design activists attempted to engage with commercial media to influence the public's tastes. Michelle Jones (2003) provides an account of the collaboration that developed between the Council of Industrial Design and the BBC in 1946 in representing the value of 'good design' in educational programmes as well as studio sets⁴³. Others resisted what they perceived to be a new culture based on popularity. The idea of a cultural elite's

⁴¹ Kriegel, L. 2007, p. 7

⁴² Le Mahieu, D. L. (1988) *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴³ Jones, M. 'Design and the Domestic Persuader: Television and the British Broadcasting Corporation's Promotion of Post-war 'Good Design'', *Journal of Design History* (2003) 16 (4) pp. 307-318

resistance to the devolution of its authority to a new populist one, is thought provoking and indicates debates about the place of contemporary design in the Museum with regard to its more commercial associations.

*Towards a Participatory Consumer Democracy: Britain, 1937-1987*⁴⁴ is a summary report of research findings from a project examining the Council of Industrial Design's attempts to engage a mass public with large scale exhibitions of which Britain Can Make It was the first. The report considers the Council's distinct role as one that was potentially all encompassing:

"The breadth of the Council's social and economic agenda, its state-funding, and its conceptualisation as a body that could engage with distinct, and potentially competing constituents of interest, (industry, education, general public and retail) in the furtherance of its aims,"⁴⁵.

Britain Can Make It's 'success' is critically assessed by two publications. Penny Sparke's (1986) (ed) *Did Britain Make It?* takes a retrospective view from the design conscious 1980's to examine whether the Council's aspirations were met. She concludes that although the exhibition had limited success in raising the public's awareness of design, "a reassertion" of its original aims in contemporary life could succeed but "this time presented within a more sophisticated understanding of the structures upon which they depend."⁴⁶ Possibly the most authoritative account of Britain Can Make It is by Jonathan Woodham and Patrick Maguire (eds) (1997) *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain*, which re-assesses the exhibition's 'success' in light of the politics of design reform in the selection of exhibits that accorded with the Council's social and cultural agenda. Recently, Lesley Whitworth (2007) has provided fresh insights by looking at the role and impact of the Council's Housewives Committee⁴⁷. The contradictions that existed between the Government funded Council's efforts to exert its influence on an industry and audience looking forward to freedom and choice are also considered.

⁴⁴ Part of the ESRC/AHRC 'Cultures of Consumption' research programme (April 2003 to September 2005). Publications include: Whitworth, L., 'Anticipating Affluence: Skill, Judgement and the Problems of Aesthetic Tutelage' in Black, L. and Pemberton H. (2004) (eds.) *An Affluent Society?: Britain's Post-war 'golden Age' Revisited* Aldershot: Ashgate; Whitworth, L., 'Inscribing Design on the Nation: The Creators of the British Council of Industrial Design', *Business and Economic History On-Line*, (2005) Vol 3: (<http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2005/>).

⁴⁵ TPCD: Britain, 1937-1987, 'Findings'.

⁴⁶ Sparke, P. (1986) *Did Britain Make It? Design in Context 1946-86*, London: Design Council, p. 167

⁴⁷ Whitworth, L. 'The Housewives Committee of the Council of Industrial Design: A Short -lived Experiment in Domestic Reconnoitring', in Darling, E. and Whitworth, L. (2007) (eds.), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1940*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

These studies return to the question of how the role of labour and the working class audience changed in the twentieth century, by re-examining Kriegel's covenant between institutions of design reform, the Government, and audiences, as this responded to wider national change that increasingly indicated the consumer instead of the labourer as a new 'protagonist' in developments. If it has considered the role of the V&A at all, the body of work relating to Britain Can Make It has only regarded it as a venue for proceedings, however, in Chapter 3, I examine evidence that suggests the Museum was at the forefront of the Council's long term exhibition strategy, which brings a new perspective on this point.

One main theme to emerge from this review is the role the Museum played in design debates about finding an appropriate culture of contemporary British design. The Museum's rearrangements in 1909 and 1947-51, led to a refocusing away from the contemporary towards the historic that was largely, I argue, in response to new design that the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition introduced, which also indicated new arrangements of society in modes of labour, production, trade and consumption. Another theme is the transition in the role of labour to consumption in shaping the Museum's attitudes to contemporary work as well as its audiences at both South Kensington and Bethnal Green, and those industrial centres administered to by Circulation. Last is the theme of the Museum's artistic distinction in the way 'modern' design was deployed to different audiences where sociology, Government and design reform meet on a number of different levels.

Notably, in this study I have attempted to highlight the audience in the creation of the twentieth century Museum. What is being reflected is a Museum in transition, unsure of its role in the more democratic consumer culture of the twentieth century and the novel social and material forms this unleashed. I have tried to retrieve the audience from the anonymous collective, to place them in the foreground of events. Straddling a range of disciplines, my study fills an important gap between design and social history where discussion might proceed to more recent debates that include discourses of 'social inclusion' and 'cultural diversity', with new implications for the Museum's role in reforming design and society.

Chapter 1: The 'New Art' Display of 1901

1.1: Splendid Isolation

In 1896 a debate about British foreign policy in the Canadian Parliament prompted Minister George Foster to remark on how the "Great Mother Empire stands splendidly isolated in Europe"¹. I apply the term "splendid isolation" here to convey how the V&A's, and indeed the nation's, response towards new design movements that sprang up all over the Continent and US, and came to be collectively known as 'Art Nouveau'², has been portrayed by Pevsner and others. It is interesting to compare this view with how the Museum's relationship with the movement was viewed by its Director Alan Borg almost a century later:

"The V&A... was one of the key resources for Art Nouveau designers. Emile Galle, Victor Horta and Odon Lechner, for example, visited the Museum and were inspired by its collections. The numerous publications on the principles of ornament to come out of South Kensington, and the resources for the National Art Library, also impacted heavily on the style. So quite apart from having the appearance of the modern world, Art Nouveau was quintessentially modern from the perspective that it was created through contemporary means. Museums, public galleries and mass publications on art and design were just becoming established features of cultural life, beginning with Art Nouveau, they would become central to art and design production in the new century."³

In this chapter the Museum's relationship with Art Nouveau is re-examined from when a new permanent collection for the Museum was first proposed.

To begin with, the movement's origins were closely allied to Britain and its fin de siècle of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Indeed, Art Nouveau's foremost protagonist Monsieur Siegfried Bing admired these pioneers of new British design and displayed work in his gallery, although he was also critical of the movement's avant-garde for their refusal to work in the spirit of the age:

"The initial movement...began in England, under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites and the ideas of Ruskin, and was carried into practical affairs by the admirable genius of William Morris. But if insurrection arose against the frightful ugliness of contemporary productions, it did not declare the imperative need of a renewal of youth conformable to the modern spirit."⁴

¹ Foster, G. Speech in the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada, January 16, 1896 HMSO. For an account of British foreign policy at this time see Roberts A. (2000) *Lord Salisbury, Victorian Titan* Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd

² This has been the view given by Pevsner, Wilk and Greenhalgh

³ Borg, A. in Greenhalgh, P. (2000) *Art Nouveau 1890-1914, 'Director's Forward'*.

⁴ Bing, S. (ed) 1970, pp. 236-37

The range and nuance of expression use to convey this 'modern spirit' is of interest. Before the term 'Art Nouveau' came into vogue in France, 'Le Modern Style' (the modern style) was more commonly used⁵. The style is said to be named after Bing's commercial gallery in Paris: 'La Maison de L'Art Nouveau', which represented the movement in an eclectic array of new and traditional designs from cultures around the world. However, Bing was careful to distinguish this idea of 'the new' from the contemporary fashion for reproduction styles, for which he shared Morris' dislike of its regressive influence on design reform⁶. Those behind the V&A's collection: its progressive Director Casper Purdon Clarke (1896-1905), and benefactor and furniture expert George Donaldson, either called the style 'Art Nouveau'; or translated it directly into English: 'New Art', or else they called it 'modern'.

Despite the shared aims of British and Continental design reform movements, their attitudes towards production differed. Bing admired handicraft but he also recognised the potential of the machine:

"Through the machine, a unique concept can, when sufficiently inspired, popularise endlessly the joy of pure form, while preventing the distribution of a multitude of inept creations whose sole claim to being works of art stems from the presumable difficulty or skill involved in making them by hand."⁷

In Britain Morris and his followers in the Arts and Crafts movement strongly warned against the effects of machines. In *News From Nowhere* (1890) Morris responded to what he envisaged as soulless and mechanical visions of socialism symbolised by machinery⁸. But the handicraft practices based on medieval guilds he emulated led to high prices, which also conflicted with his socialist aims.

By comparison, Art Nouveau achieved rapid international commercial success at both the higher and rapidly expanding lower ends of the market in a manner described by Greenhalgh as "simultaneously vulgar and elite. It could be found proudly decorating new and noble museum buildings, State monuments and official architecture, as well as giving garrulous form to biscuit tins, bill posters, menu cards and children's toys."⁹ Art Nouveau redefined towns and cities all over the world and re-orientated them with signs and new modes of public transport; while posters advertising the latest show to

⁵ Duncan, A. (1994) *Art Nouveau, World of Art*, New York, Thames and Hudson, p. 7

⁶ Bing, S. (1970) (ed) pp 123-186.

⁷ Bing, S. (1970) (ed) p. 184

⁸ Morris, W. (1995) (ed) *News From Nowhere*.

⁹ Greenhalgh, P. (2000) p.15

canned food and cigarettes affirmed the style's broad commercial appeal¹⁰. Although, like their British counterparts, Continental reformers also emulated historical crafts, and shared their admiration for the Gothic especially, they also drew inspiration from a larger and more diverse cultural repertoire as Greenhalgh notes,

"The different movements contained within the Art Nouveau style used a variety of sources – the mixture in any one school, or indeed in any one object, was as eclectic as anything the nineteenth century had previously seen..., many later commentators – and especially historians of international Modernism – have portrayed it as reactionary and confused. It was neither. But its use of history was complex: its eclecticism was born not of a desire to exercise antiquarian skills or pay homage to tradition. Rather, its practitioners were attempting to reformulate the idea of style to enable them to deal with issues in the present and the anticipated future."¹¹

This cultural eclecticism has special relevance to the Museum's arrangement in the nineteenth century, with objects of different cultures and epochs displayed together. But as mentioned earlier (see page. 11) this had come to be viewed as an impediment to the Museum's artistic distinction leading up to rearrangement, and it is with this in mind that the reception of the New Art Display in the Museum is viewed in the next section. At the time of the collection's acquisition there is some evidence to suggest Donaldson anticipated its display might be problematic: "However much this New Art may conflict with our classical standards or ideas of architectural basis, I am forced to the conclusion that we are in the presence of a distinct development. Where it will lead to none I think can foretell."¹²

Although the collection has since been credited to Donaldson, it was Clarke who first proposed its acquisition to the Vice President of the Board of Education Sir William Abney on 22 June 1900:

"I propose that a sanction should be asked for the expenditure of a sum not exceeding £500 upon purchases in the Exhibition, also that Mr. Onslow Ford R.A. and Mr. George Donaldson should be asked to assist me in the selection. I have mentioned the matter to both these gentlemen and they will be delighted to help"¹³

In his proposal, Clarke stressed the close ties that existed between new British and Continental reform movements: "The most marked progress in decorative work has

¹⁰ Centres of Art Nouveau include Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Budapest, Buenos Aires, Brussels, Chicago, Glasgow, The Hague, Havana, Istanbul, Moscow, Nancy, Paris, Prague, and Vienna to name but a few. In Paris Hector Guimard designed the Metro tube station to co-incide with the Paris 1900 Exposition.

¹¹ Greenhalgh, P. 2000, p.37

¹² MA/2/N Letter from Donaldson to Clarke, 06/07/100. SK 18439

¹³ MA/2/N Letter from Clarke to William Abney proposing the collection 15/06/1900, BoE, SK 17425

been in the direction which Morris started, and since had been developed by the leading designers of the Arts and Crafts society. In fact, New English Art is spreading all over the Continent"¹⁴. Abney agreed to grant an acquisition budget of £500 whereupon Clarke, Donaldson and Ford made their way to the Paris 1900 Exposition Universelle.

As mentioned earlier, Donaldson was an internationally renowned expert in antique furniture and this was the second time he had been elected Vice President of Awards in Furniture at the Paris Exposition Universelle. The first was at the Exposition Universelle of 1889, where examples of New Art had won the highest awards in their class. Onslow Ford was a representative of the Royal College of Art's Advisory Council: a development of the Government inquiry of 1896-97 (see pp. 10-11), to advise on new acquisitions for the Museum. However, Clarke later reported to Abney that Ford had to cut short his visit due to ill health: a factor, as we shall see, which was later much overlooked in developments¹⁵.

The Exposition 1900 Universelle opened in Paris on 15 April until 12 November and attracted unprecedented crowds¹⁶. It was held in an atmosphere of national rivalry after Paris had seen off tough competition from Germany to host the Exposition. Rivalry with Britain also heightened as the Exposition celebrated the world's achievements, imparting a vision of progress for the new century, but was simultaneously viewed with suspicion as a platform for the Third Republic to disseminate propaganda of a new order¹⁷. These ideas were increasingly seen to spread by material exchange of architecture and design, first to the US and then Europe¹⁸. However, it should also be remembered that the collection fell within the normal practice of the Museum and had been sanctioned by the Board of Education. In this light, the New Art collection can be seen to have straddled traditional Museum practice and new ideological uncertainties. But it also shows that far from being isolated from the contemporary design scene on the Continent, the Museum was still very much engaged in the acquisition and display of new design. In the next section I will explore the intentions behind the New Art Display against the circumstances of the Exposition in order to understand what new ideas it was intended to impart and to what audiences in particular.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ MA/2/N Minute Paper from Clarke to William Abney 29/06/00, BoE, SK18439

¹⁶ 'From Our Own Correspondent' *The Times*, 11/04/1900

¹⁷ President Mitterand's inaugural speech at the Exposition referred to a new international world based on "human solidarity" across national boundaries, recorded by 'Our Own Correspondent', *The Times*, 15/04/1900

¹⁸ Gustave Eiffel was also the engineer for the Statue of Liberty which made as a gift from the people of France to the people of the United States in recognition of the friendship established during the American Revolution and was dedicated in 1886 as a symbol of American democracy.

1.2. Exhibiting Design for a New Order

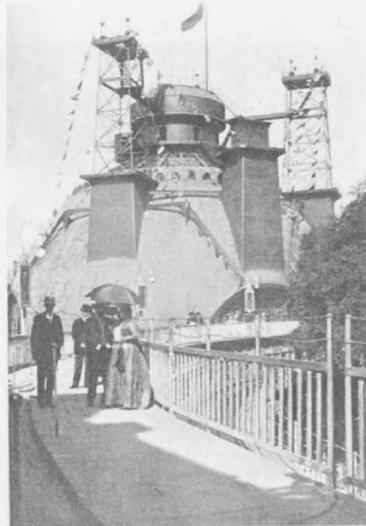


Figure 1 Escalator moving visitors along the street
Paris 1900 Exposition, V&A Image

This photograph is taken from the Paris 1900 Exposition and shows an escalator moving people from one area to another. It was one of a number of new inventions that included the new Metro and diesel engine, shown to aid public mobility. Such displays of progress were seen everywhere and represented the potential to transform the lives of ordinary people around the world. It is difficult to exaggerate the scale of the Exposition, which took over most of the centre of Paris with more than 76,000 exhibitors from all over the world attracting an international audience in the region of 55 million¹. The style that defined the Exposition was Art Nouveau². Donaldson had first been impressed by the style while judging at the Paris 1889 Exposition, but this time he was convinced he was in the presence of a genuinely new style of the age: "in those eleven years had sprung up a quite astounding expansion and development in the production of artistic furniture on fresh lines and denominated 'New Art'"³.

The pavilion *L'Art Nouveau Bing* drew interest from all over the world. However, according to Troy, during the Exposition Bing's style changed direction away from his signature eclecticism, towards a more "recognisably French conception"⁴. She described how this came about after years of attempting, but failing, to convince critics of the value of internationalist principles of artists like Henry Van de Velde. Another

¹ "Conversation with V&A Curator Paul Greenhalgh", 'Anatomy of an Exhibition', National Gallery of Art Washington www.nga.gov/feature/nouveau/feature

² The style defined a number of Paris' most prominent buildings that were constructed especially for the Exposition, including the Gare de Lyon, the Gare d'Orsay (now Musee d'Orsay), the Pont Alexandre III, the Grand Palais, La Ruche, and the Petit Palais.

³ Donaldson, G. in the *Magazine of Art* 1901, p 471

⁴ Troy, N. 1991, p. 34

factor seems to have been that his clientele were mainly drawn from the elite of Parisian society who preferred a more conservative French style.

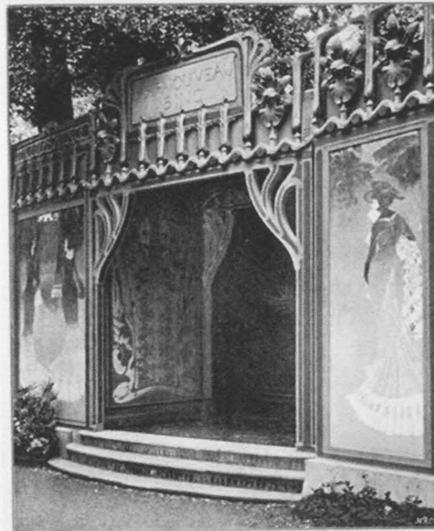


Figure 2 Exterior of L'Art Nouveau Bing showing decorative paintings by Georges de Feure, Exposition Universelle, Paris 1900, V&A Image: PC060024-01

The following images of two interiors show this more conservative French Art Nouveau designed for upper middle class lifestyle. The first, by George de Feure, features chairs and tables reminiscent of the Louis XVI style, with tapered legs suggesting a feminine lightness of the French court. The second shows a bedroom by Eugene Gaillard and shows the undulating curves characteristic of the Rococo period.

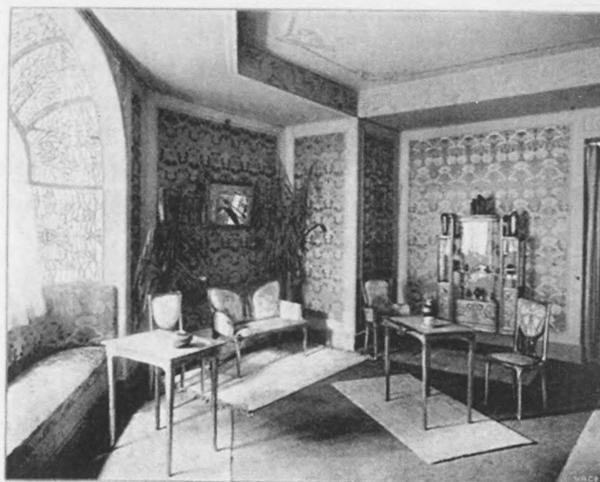


Figure 3 Interior at the Paris Exposition 1900, by George de Feure V&A Image: PC060022-01

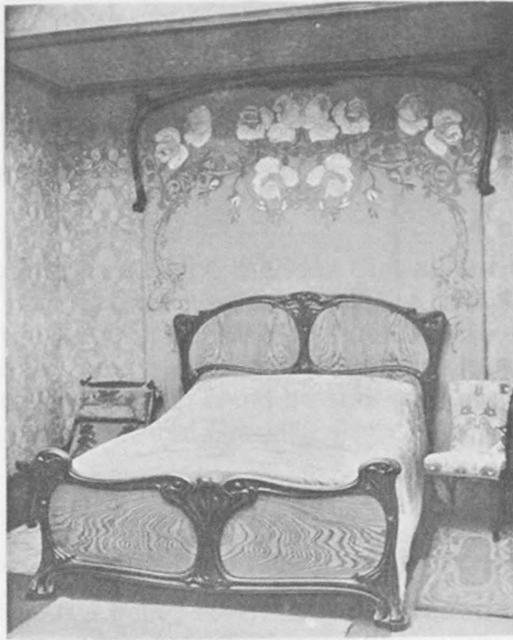


Figure 4 Bedroom by Eugene Gaillard, L'Art Nouveau Bing Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900, V&A Image PC059285-01

However, Troy's analysis does not concur with evidence of purchases from Bing's Pavilion for the V&A's New Art collection, which contained work from all over the Continent and the US, though, not Britain. But it may help explain why the collection was later viewed by its critics as French. Patriotism was also at the heart of Donaldson's motivation whereupon, perceiving the budget too small to achieve the best representation of the style possible in his offer to Clarke to personally select and pay for a larger selection of furniture to contribute to the Museum's collection,

"Feeling the great importance of this opportunity to render a substantial service both to the Museum and the country, I have great pleasure in not only confirming my offer to devote any time necessary for the proper selection of objects, but in addition, I will supplement your grant by a donation of whatever money may be required to make an adequate representation of the objects illustrating the "New Movement".⁵

Donaldson attached no conditions to his gift but he did outline how he thought the collection should be used: "it will be a permanent historical record of this period, and the collection, by circulation to the great centres of the Art industries, may assist manufacturers and designers to keep pace with their Continental competitors."⁶ This implied a number of conditions that would influence the collection's future designation since "a permanent historical record" implied a home in the Museum. Furthermore,

⁵ MA/2/N Letter from Donaldson to Clarke 06/06/1900, BoE, SK18439

⁶ Ibid

Donaldson's wish that the collection should travel to Britain's industrial centres indicated it would be administered by the Circulation department. In deciding which audiences would most benefit most from seeing the collection Clarke described to Abney how Donaldson intended this should be manufacturers, designers and artisan, which had also been the Museum's primary audience when Henry Cole was Director.

"he (Donaldson) was strongly impressed with the idea that all our manufacturers, designers and artisans in the furniture trade should visit the Exhibition and mark the progress made within the last few years, but as it was impossible to bring the people to see the work he considered the next best thing would be to make a good selection which, through our Circulation department, could be sent to the great centres of this trade in England, commencing with Bethnal Green"⁷.

Given that general Museum practice at this time was to move 'modern' design to Bethnal Green and in spite of the area being specifically referred to as an industrial centre to which the collection should travel and be displayed, there is no evidence to suggest the Bethnal Green museum was considered for the collection's permanent home. Another inconsistency was the collection's administration by Circulation, which usually kept and toured small portable objects of ceramics, glass, and metal work, rather than the Furniture and Woodwork Department. Instead, Donaldson's furniture was to be kept with these smaller 'modern' objects the Museum had acquired from previous French Expositions, and which Clarke pointed out had proved much in demand from Circulation:

"Such purchases have been made for the Victoria and Albert Museum at previous French Exhibitions, and especially in 1889, where glass and pottery purchased by Mr Armstrong and myself, have been greatly in request by the Circulation Division ever since."⁸

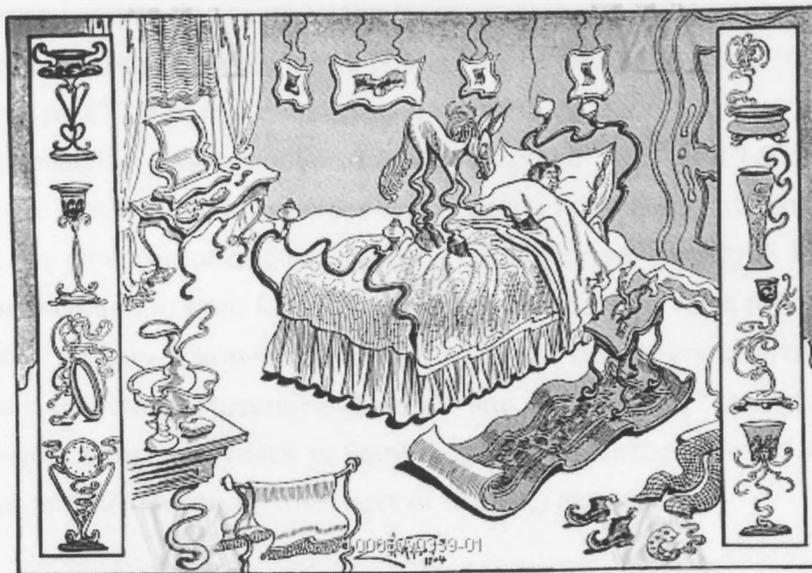
Correspondences between Clarke, Abney and Donaldson show that the New Art collection was appropriate within the V&A's remit and was made with the Board of Education's sanction and under entirely normal circumstances. However the extraordinary circumstances of the collection's provenance from Bing's pavilion did contain seeds of trouble for the V&A. There was also the risk through material exchange of being seen to spread republican propaganda, particularly as Clarke and Donaldson had expressly proposed the collection's primary audience would be artisans, designers and manufacturers: in short, the classes most closely associated with

⁷ MA/2/N Letter from Clarke to Abney, 23/06/1900, BoE, SK 17425

⁸ MA/2/N Letter from Clarke to Abney, 22/06/1900, BoE, SK 17425

republican revolution. Although this is purely speculative, there is clear evidence that the collection was intended to point British industry in a new direction. Though stated with the best of patriotic intentions, this conveyed a negative image of British design as comparatively backward. Although the Museum had previously collected 'modern' manufactures from world Expositions, and most commonly from those held in France, 1900 signalled a new era in which contemporary design would play an increasingly important role in determining the V&A's representation of Britain's place in design reform history, both in terms of its past and its future.

1. 3. Representation and Reaction



Viewed by Laura Elliott on 6/11/2008

Figure 5 A Warning against Art Nouveau, by Harrison. Print on paper
London, England, 1905. V&A Image: 1000BW0359-01

"Who would wish to sleep in such a bed, to face such a settle, to sit in such chairs as are assembled in what was the Tapestry Room at South Kensington?"¹ This was the question Lewis Foreman Day, an influential commercial designer and authority on decorative art, asked in a letter in *The Times* in which he criticized the New Art Display². The print shown above was published in Britain in 1905 just four years later and typifies the reaction of Day and his peers among South Kensington's design establishment. It is a satirical characterization of the Art Nouveau style in which principles of order in design are subsumed by chaos. The scene depicts a bedroom that is unstable and chaotic: a horse with wobbly legs jumps on a man in bed surrounded by wobbly walls and commodities portrayed as utterly devoid of good design. To understand what formed such an impression we need to examine what ideas the New Art Display was intended to communicate, and to what audiences in particular.

Prior to the New Art Display's public opening in 1901, the Museum sent a circular to a selection of art schools and museums in the chief manufacturing towns of the country to inform them of terms of borrowing the collection³. They had historically been

¹ Letter from Lewis F. Day in *The Times*, 15/07/1901

² Day published many books for students on the principles of ornament, including *Instances of Accessory Art; Original Designed and Suggestive Examples of Ornament* (1880); and had just written *The Art of William Morris* (1899).

³ MA/2/N Letter from Liverpool Municipal Technical School 02/07/1901, BoE, SK 15249

ministered to by Cole's Circulation department and also represented Clarke's and Donaldson's intended primary audience of designers, artisans, and manufacturers. They replied with letters of request to the Museum to borrow the collection and there was every indication that it would be as popular as Circulation's other 'modern' loans had been in the past⁴. A number articulated reasons in relation to their audiences work that the collection was intended to fulfill. Liverpool Municipal Technical School applied "in order that the manufacturers and artisans may see what other nations are striving for in the direction of original design"⁵. Birmingham Industrial Polytechnic wished it to be included in their larger industrial exhibition "to raise funds for the establishment of bursary scholarships for the sons and daughters of artisans"⁶. An application from Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art stressed "cabinet making is at present of considerable importance in Edinburgh"⁷. The Department of Agriculture and Dublin Science and Art Museum (then part of the UK) also applied.

The early history of the Circulation department is of interest to understanding how this network of industrial centres linked to the Museum was formed and sustained. Burton describes how as early as 1855 a "circulating exhibition"⁸ was created at Marlborough House that was shown in 26 towns⁹. He relates how from 1864 the Museum sent bespoke loans out to different locations based on their special interests. In 1881, the Government produced a *Report on the System of Circulation of Art Objects*, up to 1880 which found that 258 collections had been circulated around the country¹⁰. In the first half of the twentieth century most of the Museum's twentieth century collections were acquired by Circulation as relatively inexpensive objects that were viewed as suitable for loan to other institutions. Generally, smaller objects of ceramics, glass, posters or textiles were collected for ease of transport and assembly so that a good selection could be displayed in a single case, while few large objects were included such as furniture or sculpture; hence the New Art collection's examples of furniture were not typical of Circulation's collections or ideally suited to its practice.

The V&A's press notice conveys Donaldson's ambitions for the collection:

"On learning that the Victoria and Albert Museum had insufficient funds... Mr. Donaldson wrote to the President of the Board of Education and offered to purchase a selection of the best examples of "New Art" furniture in the Paris Exhibition of 1900,

⁴ MA/2/N Letter from Clarke to Abney, 22/06/1900, BoE, SK 17425

⁵ Ibid

⁶ MA/2/N Letter from Birmingham Industrial Polytechnic 22/06/1901, BoE, SK 14427

⁷ BoE, 27/09/1900, Donaldson File, SK 33730

⁸ Burton, A. 1999, p. 104

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Science and Art Department, *Report on the System of Circulation of Art Objects on Loan for Exhibition as carried out by the Department from its first establishment to the present time*, London: HMSO, 1881

and to present them to the Victoria and Albert Museum. His object was to exhibit them in the first instance at the Museum and then to send them for exhibition successively to our chief manufacturing towns in order that the manufacturers and artisans of this country could see what other nations are striving for in the direction of original design not based upon past productions. This offer was gladly accepted and the collection is now arranged in the Tapestry Court of the Art Museum."¹¹

The following description and images convey the orientation of objects as the visitor entered: "The largest and most striking example seen on entering is the side of the room with a settle in marquetry with ingenious selections of natural woods, lending themselves by their grain or marking to the designs of the trees, figures, etc."

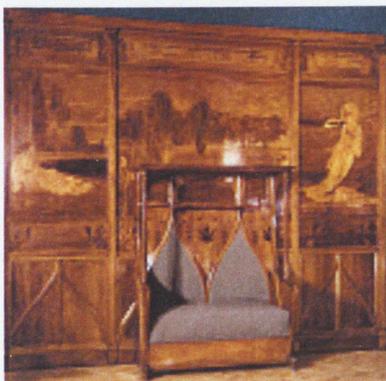


Figure 6 Settle and panelling by Carl Spindler manufacturer: J.J.Graf, Paris Exposition 1900.

"Visitors to the Paris Exhibition will remember the rooms furnished in the new style by Monsieur Bing and will recognize the chairs and table as coming from his workshop."¹²



Figure 7 Chair designed by Eugene Gaillard, manufactured by Bing's workshop
V&A Image 2006AW1175 Museum no. 1981-1900

¹¹ MA/2/N V&A 'Press Notice', "New Art Furniture at the Victoria and Albert Museum" 1901

¹² Ibid



Figure 8 Chair designed by Otto Eckmann, manufactured by Bing's workshop.
V&A Image 2006AW0783 Museum no. 2009-1900

"The Bedroom suite, consisting of a bedstead, wardrobe and commode, all enriched with carving and inlay of flowers, was manufactured by MM. Perol Freres."¹³ (no images available). "The work of Monsieur Louis Majorelle of Nancy, who has obtained the highest distinction in France, is represented by three cabinets of unique form, a table, an arm chair and two trays."¹⁴



Figure 9 Cabinet by Louis Majorelle
V&A Image 2006AJ6733, Museum no. 1999:1 to 4-1900

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid



Figure 10 Armchair designed by Louis Majorelle
V&A Image 2006AP2627, Museum no. 2001-1900

Next were described "Three chairs with seats and backs of leather cut and embossed with "New Art" ornament are from the hand of Monsieur A. Darras."¹⁵



Figure 11 Chair designed by A. Darras
V&A Image 2006BF8634, Museum no. 1989-1900

¹⁵ Ibid

"Monsieur Émile Gallé of Nancy, so well known for his admirable art work in glass, has been turning his attention to the manufacture of furniture in the new style and his work may be seen in five specimens of furniture, namely a tea-table, a chest of drawers, a lady's work-table, a screen and a tray, all inlaid with flowers and leaves. The chest of drawers is further inlaid with a large butterfly partly in mother-of pearl."



Figure 12 Fire Screen by Emile Gallé
V&A Image 2006AT0966, Museum no. 1985-1900



Figure 13 work table by Emile Gallé V&A Image 2006BB3710
Museum no. 1986:1-1900

"A writing-table, two chairs and a stool in light wood, with gilt metal mounts and plush coverings are from the workshop of Monsieur E. Bagues."¹⁶ (no images available) "One end of the room is given up to furniture from Hungary and Norway. The work of the former country is represented by two large cabinets, a table and two chairs, designed by Herr Edmund Farago..."¹⁷



Figure 14 Chair, cabinet and table by Edmund Farago, Paris Exposition 1900
Museum no. 143-1901, V&A Image: 2006AP7911-2

"Between the Hungarian cabinets is a large open tapestry hanging from the tapestry works at Kristiania, and over Monsieur Gallé's furniture is a woven picture of Spring after a design by Monsieur E. Grasset." (no images available).

Four display cases were filled with V&A acquisitions of textiles, glass, ceramics and metalwork:

"The four show-cases contain small objects of art in metal, pottery and glass, illustrating the new movement. One of the cases is filled with the lustrated glass of Lotze of Klostermühle, and the painted and cut glass of Monsieur Emile Galle of Nancy. A second case contains examples of the wares made by Herr Zsolnay of Fünfkirchen and Prof. Max Lauger at Karlsruhe. "

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

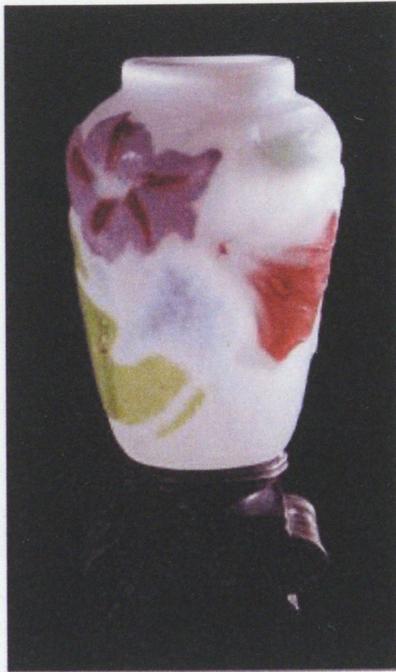


Figure 15 Glass vase by Gallé
V&A Image 2006AP3935, Museum no. C.1211-1917



Figure 16 Ceramic vase by Herr Zsolnay
V&A image no. 20066AP5684, Museum no. 1950-1900

"The third case has a miscellaneous collection of pottery from Copenhagen (Royal Porcelain Factory), Rorstrand, Rookwood (Cincinnati) and Boston (Grueby ware). The work of the French potters, MM. Chaplet and Bigot is also represented in this case. The fourth case is filled with metal work, chiefly in the form of door furniture; many of the designs are by Monsieur Charpentier. The specimens of silver mounts for the bedroom furniture are made by Monsieur Bing after designs by Monsieur Colonna"²⁰

²⁰ Ibid



Figure 17 Ceramic vase by Elizabeth Wilcox, Rookwood pottery, USA
V&A Image 2006BM6657, Museum no. 1689-1900



Figure 18 Silver furniture mounts from Siegfried Bing's La Maison de L'Art Nouveau, 1900
V&A Image 2006AN9900-4, Museum no. 2F-1901

When the display opened Donaldson's prediction of 'conflict' with national standards of design erupted when a spate of letters of complaints were received by Museum, The Times and other publications. These mostly came from the design establishment that orbited South Kensington, such as the RCA, Norman Shaw School, and several British architects. But much criticism seemed to stem from certain impolitic features of the display. Its location in the Tapestry Court was said to oust the previous arrangement by William Morris and former Museum Director Professor Middleton, which was mentioned in a letter of complaint from the Royal College of Art's Advisory Council and signed by Walter Crane, Graham Jackson, William Richmond and Onslow Ford.

"The Council regret that the beautiful tapestries and furniture arranged as they were in the Tapestry Court by the late Professor Middleton and the late Mr. William Morris have been concealed or removed to make space for a so-called 'New Art' collection under the title of "The Donaldson Gift".²¹

Ford had earlier represented the Council in accompanying Clarke and Donaldson to Paris to make the collection but had cut short his trip having been taken ill. The letter was highly damaging not least because of the Museum's close relationship with the RCA and because the Council had been set up in order to prevent further ill judged acquisitions by the Museum²². The letter further complained of faults in design that went against the College's teachings:

"the pictorial treatment of intarsiatura, the concealment of the constructional form by the lines of the design, and the character of the wood carving, are all the kind against which the teaching of the Schools is consistently directed; and the Council consider that if these pieces of furniture, tapestries, posters etc., are offered to Art students and furniture designers as patterns of work to be studied or imitated, they will do nothing but harm."²³

A second *faux pas* was that the New Art Display did not include British design, nor was it shown in relation to it. The only British presence was a stencilled frieze running round the room by Mr T. T. Blaylock, an RCA student, which must have contributed to feeling that the 'New Art' had been promoted above British design.

"Apart from the feeling that a great collection had been degraded, one's impression was patriotic, in the sense that it seems hardly fair to our British makers of modern furniture that they should not be allowed equally good opportunities of displaying their wares at South Kensington."²⁴

The V&A's press notice for the display stated work from Bing's Pavilion was much in evidence in the display, but his commercial gallery represented international design that included new British design in Style Liberty, Scottish School and Arts and Crafts. As previously mentioned, Troy's analysis of his change towards a more conservative French style at the 1900 Exposition may explain why it was seen as mainly French design. However, the New Art Display was international and showed work from Norway, Hungary, Germany and America which was mentioned in the *Magazine of Art* of 1901. Rumblings of dissent grew louder as the display drew further critical attention

²¹ MA/2/N Letter from the RCA's Council of Art to the Board of Education, 22/06/1901, SK14542

²² *Second Report from the Select Committee on Museums of the Science and Art Department; together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index.* 23/07/1897, para. 7824.

HMSO

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Watney, V. Letter to the Times 06/08/1901

from several influential members of the arts establishment, including the Royal Academy (RA), British architects and names associated with the Arts and Crafts movement.

Lewis Foreman Day had previously visited the Paris 1900 Exposition and subsequently wrote an article titled 'L'Art Nouveau'²⁵, which was published in the *Art Journal* in 1900. According to Theiding, "Three leitmotifs emerge from Day's article: corruption, anarchy and nationalism in art. These three motifs recur throughout the debates and all evince anxiety about the stability of social and political bodies."²⁶ Theiding gives an account of the various "multi-layered"²⁷ metaphors of "disease and the body, and of decaying morality"²⁸ included in Day's rhetoric and notes in general how "the fear of foreign influence in design were localised to the early years of the twentieth century precisely because they were the product of political and aesthetic concerns first raised by the Paris Exhibition of 1900"²⁹. Day wrote to *The Times* objecting to the Display, first of all against the principle of admitting 'modern' work into the Museum, "The policy of admitting into the national collection the work of living artists and especially of producers actively engaged in trade, is at best doubtful."³⁰ His critique turned personal as he derided Donaldson's gift, paraphrasing his intentions,

"Perhaps as events prove, it has not been an unmixed evil that the "funds for allocation," to quote the paragraph (he is referring to the V&A's press release), were not sufficient to permit of relaxation in severity. There may or may not be need for a museum "where manufacturers and artisans of this country might see what other nations are striving for in the direction of original design not based upon past productions" though that was not the end to which the South Kensington Museum was established."³¹

Day then argued that although not all historical work was good, it had the advantage of being "sifted" by time, "as a consequence the national collection is composed, and must be composed, largely of old work, all the more valuable because it holds up an ideal of art and workmanship which competitive trade has done much to degrade"³². He further implied that the collection may not have been made under legitimate circumstances since, he claimed, RCA's Advisory Council had not been consulted in making the collection, "It is not for a moment supposed that artists like Mr. Walter Crane, Mr. Onslow Ford, Mr. Graham Jackson and Sir William Richmond are responsible

²⁵ Day, L. F. 'L'Art Nouveau' in *Art Journal*, 1901

²⁶ Theiding, K. O. in *Journal of Design History*, (2006) Vol. 19, No. 3, p.217

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Theiding, K. O. in *Journal of Design History*, (2006) Vol. 19, No 3, p. 227

³⁰ Day, L. F. *The Times* 15/07/1901

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

for admitting into the very best of society these ill-mannered specimens of upstart art."³³ This was particularly unfair given the Museum had made every effort to ensure the Council was represented, but could not possibly mitigate against Ford becoming ill at the last moment. Day's somewhat convoluted argument moved onto the dangers of 'modern' acquisitions and their corrupting effects on student's, and finally concluding, "The cause of quarrel with this "new art" is, not that it is new, but that it is not sober or sane enough to be endorsed"³⁴.

Another letter published in *The Times*, written by three architects of the Norman Shaw School whose sympathies also lay with Arts and Crafts, claimed the New Art was "neither right in principle nor does it evince a proper regard for the material employed"³⁵, the letter went on to give a most serious warning, "In its present position it is in danger of being looked upon as a recognized model which has received the approval of the authorities for study by students and designers." A number of letters of complaint also appeared in the pages of *The British Architect* and the *Architectural Review*. One attributed the origins of Art Nouveau to popular entertainments of a suspect foreign nature:

"It is the result of the example of a very different kind of artist. Those who went to see the Japanese troupe lately performing in London will remember that fully half the popularity of the entertainment was due to the dancing of Loie Fuller...It is to the Continent undoubtedly that we owe the "art nouveau," and the idea sprang from the forms produced by the gyrations which Loie Fuller imparts to her garments as she twirls them in the limelight."³⁶

In defence of the embattled New Art Display, the editor of the *Magazine of Art* wrote to *The Times* highlighting its international scope:

"It should first be observed that it is wrong to speak of the collection as exclusively "French." It is not only French, but German, Hungarian, Scandinavian – indeed, it represents fairly well the wave of art-taste (sic) which has submerged the whole of Europe."³⁷

The editor also attempted to convince readers of the style's British roots:

That this wave received its first impulse from the efforts of Mr. William Morris, Mr. Walter Crane, and their associates of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society cannot be

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Letter from John Belcher A.R.A., Reginald Blomfield, Mervin Macartney and Edward S. Prior in *The Times*, 15/07/1901

³⁶ 'Z' in letter to *The Times* 1901

³⁷ Editor of the *Magazine of Art* 15/08/1901

denied. To regard this 'new art' as foreign, and the introduction of it into England as 'unpatriotic', is, therefore, incorrect."³⁸

But the counter attack was not sufficient to stem the damage done to the collection's reputation. Under pressure, the Board of Education produced a 'Notice for Issue to Managers of Exhibitions and Museums, to which the New Art collection may be sent on loan'³⁹. The notice repeated almost verbatim the 'faults' earlier cited in the RCA's Art Council's letter. Clarke, however, advised caution on this point on the grounds that other objects in the Museum's collection might also be brought into disrepute:

"I do not think it would be prudent to issue this notice without a considerable cutting down of paragraphs 2 + 4. – Paragraph 3 would be open to a great amount of criticism owing to the statement that "pictorial treatment of inlaid woodwork and concealment of constructional forms by lines of the design are novelties", as instances of both of these so – called faults can be found in examples of 17th and 18th century furniture in the museum collections."⁴⁰

Criticisms of the New Art Display cited all number of problems ranging from warnings against the contamination of British design to dislike of foreign design, particularly French. The displacement of the Tapestry Court to make way for the display was mentioned a number of times, together with arguments in defence of British designers, particularly Arts and Crafts, indicating the most common grievance was upset national pride. But given Art Nouveau's close links to new British design as well as the unremarkable circumstances of its acquisition, the strength of reaction against it seems largely inexplicable. We may speculate it was the threat of foreign contamination or republican ideas that caused concern; or a dislike of the style's eclecticism that was at heart of the problem. What is certain is that the Museum was left reeling from the experience and largely ceased acquiring new work from this point onwards⁴¹. But what has been overlooked by commentators is the interest from the regional institutions, on behalf of their working-class audiences, they implies an altogether different reception. Evidence suggests this audience was uppermost in the Museum's plans for the collection's future role in preparation for its forthcoming rearrangement, which is discussed next.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ MA/2/N 'NOTICE for Issue to Managers of Exhibitions and Museums, to which the New Art collection may be sent on loan', BoE, 12/07/1901

⁴⁰ MA/2/N Letter from Clarke to Abney, 16/01/01, BoE

⁴¹ See Peter Trippi's 'Industrial Arts and the Exhibition Ideal' in Baker and Richardson, 1997, p. 88

1. 4. Rearrangement and Division

Foreshadowing the Museum's rearrangement is the history of its branch museum in Bethnal Green. Kriegel describes Cole's aim that South Kensington's primary audience would be his "ideal artisanal visitors"¹, but that his choice of location in South Kensington was criticised for being too far away from where they lived. By 1865 South Kensington had outgrown the 'Brompton Boilers', which were replaced by new permanent brick Italianate style buildings. Yet more room for expansion was yet required. Cole's solution was twofold. By dismantling the Boilers new district museums could be created in the north, east and south of London, which could also accommodate the overspill from South Kensington. In so doing, Cole's 'ideal artisanal' audience was also repositioned in London's museological topography as, according to Kriegel, it "brought increased prominence to working men as cultural consumers and political subjects."² However, the terms of material exchange between institutions recast them as workers once more when a large amount of South Kensington's 'modern' material was sent on temporary loan to Bethnal Green in 1880, "it is evident that working men greatly appreciate this opportunity of studying examples of ornamental Art bearing on their work."³

Conversely at South Kensington 'modern' examples were considered inappropriately arranged next to classical masterpieces and were regarded by Ruskin (see page 17) among others with increased disdain. Food and Animal Products acquired from the Great Exhibition also sat uneasily with South Kensington's audiences and were sent to Bethnal Green when it first opened, presumably for the education of its audience in nutritional health rather than manufacture. However, the quality and condition of some of these specimens gave the museum, which had been a focus of civic pride for its one million artisans reported to be living nearby⁴, a reputation as an "asylum for South Kensington's refuse"⁵. Indeed, where Cole's programme in design reform was concerned, it is difficult to see how these collections recommended themselves to the task of producing better workmen; or, indeed, better designers since the transfer of contemporary work meant the Royal College of Art had increasingly limited examples to refer to at the South Kensington Museum. Conversely Bethnal Green's workers,

¹ Kriegel, L, 2007, p. 178

² Ibid

³ BGM 'Arrangement and Development' S.F.22 A hand written inventory of collections that were decanted to the Museum from 1880, "all lent from South Kensington: 1) Collection of Modern Art Manufacturers produced since 1850. Several thousand examples consisting of furniture, metal work, glass, pottery, jewellery", 14/07/1887.

⁴ AAD/ED84/46 *Report of Proceedings at a Deputation to his Grace the Duke of Marlborough*

⁵ NAL 55.CC.32 *Fun*, 6/07/1872, Alan Summerly Cole Newspaper Cuttings, vol. 1, pp. 58-59

who produced the kind of cheap reproduction period styles Cole and Morris railed against, surely had more to learn from seeing quality period production.

The Museum's focus shifted considerably during this time from concerns with design reform to concerns with its own artistic identity in lead up to the opening of its new façade building in 1909. During this time the Museum's identity, collection and arrangement, took precedence in internal discussions. A comprehensive gallery rearrangement was planned, which reinvigorated debate around what purpose the Museum should serve and for what audiences in particular. It also presented the opportunity to distinguish the collections by clearing out those that were deemed problematic or of lesser value. The Museum's new Royal brand and neo-Renaissance style building signalled what direction it would take. Clarke led the Museum through the first five years leading up to rearrangement until his departure in 1905. During which time he initiated the New Art collection, which leads me to consider whether he intended the Museum to maintain a contemporary presence.

Clarke was succeeded by Arthur Banks Skinner who subsequently lost control of proceedings to the Secretary of the Board of Education Robert Morant, who set up a Committee on Rearrangement in 1908. Morant personally selected manufacturers and designers to sit on the Committee, among them Lewis F Day, J.C. Wedgwood M.P., W.A.S. Benson, and the future Director Cecil Harcourt Smith, in the Chair. By this time Day had made his opinion on the status of 'modern' work in the Museum known. On the question of arrangement, other members had visited museums and galleries arranged in the new thematic style in Europe, but they elected to maintain a material based arrangement⁶,

'while certain of the collections-as, for instance, those of pottery, furniture, metal work, glass, &c.-are calculated to afford instruction and assistance of the greatest value to those engaged in the commercial production of such objects, other collections, such as those of paintings and of sculpture, serve a purpose of a highly educational character indeed, but of a different kind and responding to a different need.'⁷

Instead, the Report focussed on demarcating different types of design to different types of audiences where "those engaged in commercial production", were classed as having a different need from those of a more "highly educational character", that indicated the middle and upper classes. In distinguishing between these audiences, the Report can be further linked to debates around different cultures of production or

⁶ Burton, A. 1999, p. 163

⁷ NAL 'Report of the Committee on Rearrangement', BoE, 1908, Part 1, p. 4

consumption, and their immediate references of and contingencies upon material culture. At this point the Report acknowledged the right of both to exist within the V&A but later the ground shifted to deny the right of commercial design (and its contingent audiences by default) to exist within the Museum at all. For example, in referring to collections deemed of primary commercial value like the Indian textiles manufacturers often studied and imitated, the Report concluded that the Museum could 'never' serve with such purposes: "It is clear that such a use of the Museum was not contemplated in the Regulations; and the Committee would urge that the Victoria and Albert Museum is not, and never can be, a Museum of Commercial Products."⁸

The agenda next moved onto the question of what constituted art, and proposed that the primary value of objects was not to be commercial or historical, but artistic:

"In the past history of the Museum, a large number of objects has accumulated which fulfils neither of these purposes. In some cases objects have been acquired which at the time of acquisition had some commercial or historical interest, but of which the interest never had any relation to art, and has now ceased to exist."⁹

The new emphasis on art, as distinguished from artisanal, considerably distanced the Museum from contemporary industry, commerce, and Cole's primary artisanal audience. However, Clive Wainwright assert that the Museum's 'original' acquisitions policy actually endorsed the collection of 'modern' design based on contemporary production methods:

"There is no clear picture of the Committee's attitude to the use of machines in the production of the objects. It would seem that as they were for a Museum of Manufactures, where the first aim was the education of the public at large and particularly students of the School of Design, then modern and innovatory production methods might have been stressed."¹⁰

The Report's recommendations had significant implications for the New Art collection, which had been selected and displayed with working class audiences in mind. The collection's association with contemporary production and working audiences further confirmed its 'modern' commercial status. This could explain why, when Donaldson made his offer to the Museum, he made a point of saying he was retired from business and that he stood to gain no commercial advantage from the collection¹¹. The evidence suggests that the driving force behind the Report was Day, since it was he

⁸ NAL 'Report of the Committee on Rearrangement', BoE, 1908, p. 19

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Wainwright, C. 2002, p. 30

¹¹ MA/2/N Letter from Donaldson to Clarke proposing his offer in 1900

who first raised the debate in his letter to the Times in 1901, which it reiterated almost word for word:

"the principle of admitting modern specimens presents grave difficulties;...the admission of the work of any one living manufacturer or craftsman would not improbably expose the administration to attack from others, and even to the charge of advertising for ulterior ends."¹²

The Report was published on 21 November 1908 with the recommendation that the Museum should not admit 'modern' work under 50 years old and that it should also adhere to a material based arrangement. This decision came as a disappointment to many who protested that such a decision of national importance should not have been made without wider public consultation¹³. The feeling was that the opportunity to establish a more modern historically themed display had been lost.

Instead, greater clarity would be achieved by dividing the Museum in two to form separate institutions of science and art; and then by further dividing the art collections into 'modern' and 'historic' with the former placed at Bethnal Green, which had further implications for the division of the V&A's audiences.

The New Art collection became a casualty because its strongest claim had been the commercial advantage Clarke and Donaldson aimed to give British manufacturers. To add to the collection's misfortune, the Report addressed the future of the Circulation department, under whose care it resided. Circulation had been the focus of the Government inquiry earlier discussed when a Select Committee was set up to look into the running of the Museum. It had been recommended that something needed to be done about Circulation due to reports among other issues of bad acquisitions, which the Report of 1908 brought attention to¹⁴:

"in respect of the future relation of the work of this section to that of the Museum it is interesting to note the following paragraph in their report:-
"It will probably be found necessary to make Circulation as distinct as possible from the Museum"¹⁵

The implication that Circulation should be distanced from the rest of the Museum further weakened the position of the New Art Collection. Plans for its removal called

¹² NAL 'Report of the Committee on Rearrangement', BoE, 1908, pp.19-20

¹³ Burton relates how in the *Daily Telegraph* the Director of the Wallace Collection Claude Philips, asked for "some opportunity for a general expression of opinion...The whole question is too momentous, too much the concern of every Englishman, to be decided in this summary fashion." In Burton, A. 1999, p. 163

¹⁴ Burton, A. 1999, p. 145

¹⁵ Ibid

for an investigation to see what conditions had been attached to Donaldson's gift. A memorandum to the Director of the Museum from T.G. Lehfeltdt who was the Head of the Bethnal Green museum at the time, reported that there was no evidence of any promise or written contract stating that the collection should stay at the V&A. Lehfeltdt recommended the collection be moved to Bethnal Green with the rest of the modern exhibits, referring to the damaging letter from the Advisory Council of the RCA of 1901, which was evidently still influential:

"I have not been able to find in these papers any mention of a promise to Sir George Donaldson that the "new art" furniture which he gave should be exhibited in the new galleries or in the Victoria and Albert Museum at all. On the other hand Sir William Abney writes (R/P 18439/00) "Mr. Clarke (Sir C.P. Clarke) informs me there are no conditions attached to the gift." As Modern objects they would naturally be shown at B.G.M with the other Modern exhibits. I would call your attention to the memorandum (R/P 14542/01) signed by Sir William Richmond and others criticizing adversely this collection."¹⁶

The letter confirmed that Bethnal Green museum was viewed by the Board of Education as the proper place for 'modern' exhibits. Additionally, Lehfeltdt hinted that the collection was unsuitable for South Kensington because it showed faults the Board would not want to give its approval to:

"It appears to me that in striving after originality the makers have committed cardinal mistakes in design, construction and decoration, and setting aside the question of space, I do not think it would be justifiable to show the collection at South Kensington, for by doing so the Board would be giving the sanction of its authority to objects of very doubtful educational value"¹⁷

Given the collection's "very doubtful educational value", it difficult to understand why the collection was thought suitable for Bethnal Green. Another point was that a number of the letters of complaint about the display received in 1901, had argued that it should not be copied by British manufactures, which suggest clear inconsistencies in the reasons given for its move there.

These evidence of the terms of material exchange in exhibits from South Kensington to Bethnal Green provides considerable insight into relations between the institutions. In 1879, the *Daily News* reported that Bethnal Green was becoming a mere repository for South Kensington's unwanted exhibits: "it is grievous that an institution established with the best of intentions and successfully launched should be allowed to dwindle into

¹⁶ BGM/AM 4144 Minute Note written by Lehfeltdt. 16/06/1909 BoE

¹⁷ Ibid

a mere refuge for specimens and spectators who have no other place in which to find rest and shelter."¹⁸ In 1885, the Rector of Bethnal Green, Reverent Septimus Hansard, wrote a letter complaining that the Board of Education had not fulfilled its promise to provide a school of science and art, as well as a library to Bethnal Green,

'No attempt has ever been made to carry this promise into effect. When Mr. Bryce two years ago asked in the House of Commons why it was not carried out a little delay for inquiry was asked, and in the meantime the vacant room in the museum was filled with a lot of rubbish from South Kensington and a triumphant answer was at the appointed time given to Mr. Bryce to the effect that the promise was not carried out for want of room. The way in which the authorities have treated the East End, especially those hundreds of teachers and others who require and demand a school of science and art here in connection with South Kensington, is most discreditable to the department, which treats this part of London as too far east for justice and civilization.'¹⁹

Complaints about the treatment of Bethnal Green may be attributed to the exaggerated reporting by the press looking for a story or the Reverend's zeal in bringing attention to the lack of resources in his community. But this legacy endured until as late as 1920 when Cecil Harcourt Smith, then Director, remarked,

'Many of the Exhibits were displayed in a somewhat uneducational manner and did not seem to me suited to a museum in Bethnal Green. Many of the pictures seemed to me of a most indifferent artistic quality and the greater part of the objects stored in the basement seemed to me of a kind which should not occupy space in any Government Museum unless it were a Museum of Horrors. I am also doubtful whether the Food and Animal Exhibits should play so prominent a part as they do in the Museum. On the whole, I cannot resist the impression that the Bethnal Green Museum has, to a considerable extent, been the dumping ground of the Victoria and Albert Museum.'²⁰

Returning to the Report of 1908, the Committee divided the arts into two categories according to their 'commercial' and 'higher educational' value, and assigned each an audience according to their relationship with it. Working class audiences were perceived to benefit from contemporary commercial designs that were designated 'modern' collections. These collections were then rejected outright in the statement that the Museum could "never be a museum of commercial products"²¹. Material exchanges between the V&A and Bethnal Green museum, from the parent institution's cast-off industrial building and collections, to its audiences, conferred on them a second class status that replicated existing social divisions in British society rather than

¹⁸ *Daily News*, 22/09/1879

¹⁹ Hansard, S. in *The Times*, 05/06/1885

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ NAL 'Report of the Committee on Rearrangement', BoE, 1908, p. 19

progressive reform. Questions that remain unanswered concern why the collection was not assigned to Bethnal Green to begin with as other 'modern' collections were; and why British Arts and Crafts, which by the Museum's own 50 year criteria should have also been classed as 'modern', being contemporaneous with Art Nouveau, was allowed to remain at South Kensington.

I suggest the New Art collection was not initially intended for Bethnal Green because it was seen as a prestigious acquisition given by Donaldson who was a prominent expert. In answer to the second, Saumarez Smith's observation that the national heritage movement, with which the Museum increasingly identified, was largely nurtured by Arts and Crafts, is compelling.

"A change in attitude came about under the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. During the 1880's and 1890's, there was a shift in interest on the part of scholars and antiquarians toward an appreciation of English domestic architecture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... this was motivated by a sentimental appreciation of the relics of old English life, which were being swept away by urbanisation."²²

Arts and Crafts collections remained firmly embedded in its collection and interior building design²³. The movement's advocacy of the Gothic as a solution to the modern world mirrored the direction in which the Museum re-invented itself for the twentieth century but, in so doing, reflected national concerns with the complexities of their time as Smith notes,

"motivated by a sentimental appreciation of the relics of old English life, which were being swept away by urbanisation. It was the period of the establishment of many of the public and private institutions ... for the preservation of English cultural life, including the founding of the National Trust in 1895."²⁴

Underpinning rearrangement was a concern with distinguishing and demarcating disciplines, art and audiences. In the final analysis, the New Art collection's move to Bethnal Green confirmed it was perceived by the Museum as 'modern' and, by this rationale, more relevant to working class audiences. The Report distinguished the Museum as an 'art' institution, which directed it away from Day's dread of cultural anarchy, perceived in both its Continental modernity and population of Bethnal Green represented as foreign, inferior and potentially polluting bodies.

²² See Charles Saumarez Smith 'National Consciousness, National Heritage, and the Idea of "Englishness" in Baker and Richardson (1997) p. 276

²³ For example, the 'Morris tea room' decorated by William, Marshall, Faulkner and Co.

²⁴ Smith, C. S. in Baker & Richardson (1997) p. 276

1. 5. Legacy

The Committee on Rearrangement broadly defined 'modern' design as anything 'less than 50 years old'¹ and closely related this to industrial manufacture for commercial purposes. The following excerpt shows how this construct of 'modern' design was then used to raise the question of the Museum's role in the new century:

"a further question arises in regard to the relation of the Museum to manufacture; that is to say, whether it is to be developed with the object of giving manufacturers and others the means of studying examples of all kinds of manufactures, modern as well as ancient, for the purpose of enabling the producers of this country to compete successfully with the producers of other countries; or whether it is to be developed with the object of illustrating and stimulating the growth of design and workmanship by the finest examples obtainable."²

Differences in interpretation can be seen in the way Clarke and Donaldson used the term 'modern' to distinguish design that was altogether new with modern industrial potential, and the Report's, which, in the future, would encompass a range of styles from the Victorian and Edwardian periods up to the late 1970's.

The Museum did not organise another display of 'modern' design until 1952 with the Exhibition "Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts", which Burton describes as a "quite daring excursion into territory from which the V&A usually recoiled."³ In the working of the Report 'Modern' design became an antitype against which the Museum and its primary audience were redefined. First, in becoming detached from contemporary industry and Cole's "ideal artisan visitor", the Museum's new "ideal visitor" had access to higher education, indicating the middle and upper classes and a general shift towards cultural consumption. Second, by amassing historical English decorative art works from an aristocratic heritage that was disappearing, the Museum appeared increasingly anachronistic at a time when the US developments in mass production of design brands for the home such as Hoover and mobility, most famously Ford's Model T of 1908. These developments signalled new modes of brand marketing, mass production, and consumption that took the lead in global industrial design culture⁴.

¹ NAL 'Report of the Committee on Rearrangement', BoE, 1908, pp. 19 - 20

² Ibid

³ See Burton (1999) p. 204

⁴ Ford's production methods started the car industry in Detroit that also gave rise to the Motown music industry.

Chapter 2: The V&A and Contemporary Design in the Inter-War Period

2. 1: Attrition and Atrophy

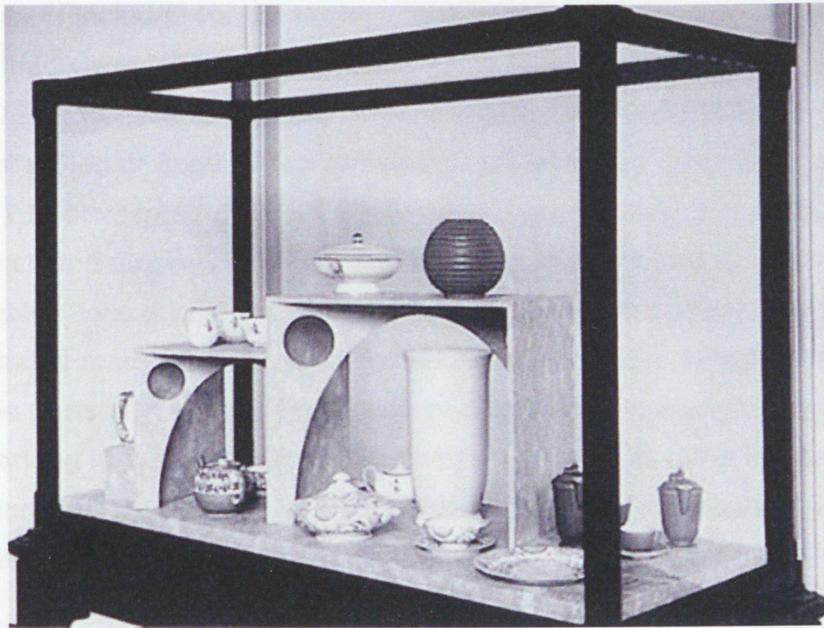


Figure 19 A display of contemporary ceramics about 1940, typical of the small travelling exhibitions of twentieth-century material mounted by the Circulation department. This case includes work by Keith Murray, Harold Stable, Pountney & Co., Spode, and Grays

During the inter-War years developments in contemporary design for mass production were emphasized by the way both Wars concentrated the mass mobilization of labour, materials, and production. Developments were to be ploughed back into the peacetime, which was the main theme of the Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946 discussed in the next Chapter. In relation to the Museum, it has already been noted from the Report of 1908 that Circulation had become a "distanced" department. This had implications for its collections and audiences as it continued to loan and tour small displays of 'modern' work like the one pictured above. Bethnal Green also continued to display 'modern' work to its primary audience of industrial workers. However, under Museum Directors Cecil Harcourt Smith (1909 - 24) and Eric Maclagan (1924 - 45) contemporary design was on the whole kept at a distance from the Museum¹. In 1914 Smith decreed that the V&A should refrain from collecting contemporary industrial design altogether². But this raised two important questions, the first concerned the

¹ See Burton, A. 1999, p. 189.

² Wilk, C. in Baker and Richardson, p. 346

industrial sector's need for a leading institution; and the second related to the Museum's industrial heritage and role in progressive design reform.

A number of new organisations emerged to represent the sector beginning with the Design and Industries Association (DIA). The DIA was founded in 1915 as a voluntary and independent membership of industrialists, designers, educators and writers whose founder members included Harold Stabler, Ambrose Heal, Cecil Brewer, and Harry Peach. They had visited the Cologne exhibition in 1914 and were impressed by the work of the Deutscher Werkbund, which they sought to emulate in Britain by fostering better understanding of good design between manufacturers, designers, retailers and public³. The DIA attempted different methods of disseminating and promoting modern design that included displays in shops, underground stations and its various pro-modernist publications during the interwar years. The organisations membership of over 200 included many of the biggest names in British industry such as Harold Curwen of the Curwen Press and Frank Pick of the London Passenger Transport Board who, both working in partnership and separately, achieved success in promoting well designed graphic art. Skipwith (2008) describes how this generation of Britain's most influential designers was inspired by the DIA:

"In the wake of World War i, they (Curwen and Pick), with Simon, Beddington and others who were inspired by the aims of the DIA in their fight against commercial ugliness and the 'shoddy', drove forward a technical and aesthetic revolution that in artistic terms was to define the popular face of Britain during the interwar years."⁴

Before the War, Smith had also proposed a new institution was required to represent contemporary industry, but it took until 1920 for this to happen when the British Institute of Industrial Art (BIIA) was set up by the Board of Trade. Meanwhile the Museum became increasingly detached from contemporary design as its new gallery arrangement became its principle focus. Saumarez Smith describes how this further encouraged compartmentalization of curatorial departments that tended to work independently of each other, with each developing its own methods and priorities⁵. The Museum's concern with its new 'highly educated' primary audience led to further organizational fragmentation as, although they shared an interest in scholarship in British heritage, each department tended to construct its own view of this:

³ The Deutscher Werkbund was established in 1907 with the aim of improving design standards in industry and everyday life.

⁴ See Skipwith, P. "The Curwen Press's Illustrators: Rebels Against Commercial Ugliness" in *Apollo Magazine* (7/01/2008)

⁵ Smith, C. S. in Baker and Richardson 1997, p.279

"The Department of Furniture had close contacts with landowners and viewed the country house as the cradle of fine design; the Department of Ceramics was interested in the more popular aspects of pottery figures; the Department of Textiles—because of the necessity of storing, classifying, and looking after different types of fabric and costume—had a strong interest in techniques of production."⁶

However, it was also this departmental autonomy during the 1920s and 1930s that enabled the Department of Engravings, Illustration and Design to collect some contemporary work, in particular, in printmaking and etching, which was a professional interest of Keeper Martin Hardie⁷. But apart from these isolated examples, contemporary design came to be viewed as external to the Museum's main operations, which, Wilk argues, was further underlined by the founding of the BIIA:

"This act may accurately be described as the single largest factor in discouraging the collecting of modern design within the V&A during the post-Donaldson period; the Museum did not merely sidestep the issue—which would have allowed for serendipitous collecting or even a change in policy—but, instead, helped to establish an alternative organization to exhibit and collect contemporary design."⁸

It is interesting to compare the Museum's attitude to the BIIA with how it viewed the Council of Industrial Design after the Second World War. Far from being concerned that the BIIA was encroaching on its domain as Director Leigh Ashton was with the Council in 1946, the Museum actively encouraged the BIIA, allowing it to organize a number of small displays in its North Court as seen in the picture below⁹.



Figure 20 The BIIA's 1931 exhibition of British & Foreign Posters in the North Court

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Wilk, C. in Baker and Richardson, 1997, p.347

⁸ Wilk, C. in Barker and Richardson, p. 346

⁹ These are listed as *Present Day Industrial Art* (1922); *Industrial Art Today* (1923); *British Industrial Art for the Slender Purse* (1929); *Lettering in the Various Crafts* (1931), and *Modern British Embroidery* (1932) in James, E. 1998.

Smith and Maclagan sat on several committees dedicated to industrial design, but they opposed renewing the Museum's relationship with contemporary design. Burton relates how this standoffishness was reciprocated by the industrial design sector: "In the 1930's it is clear that the V&A had lost interest in modern design, and modern designers and design critics had lost faith in the V&A."¹⁰ Maclagan's attitude to contemporary work was complex as he allowed some discreet collecting of established British avant-garde artists like Ben and Christopher Nicholson or Barbara Hepworth, but he told the Royal Commission of 1927 that he did not want the V&A to purchase examples of contemporary work.¹¹ Such apparent diffidence to the sector leads us to question why Maclagan held seats among the Governors of the BIIA and the CAI from 1933. He was also a member of the Board of Trade's Committee on Art and Industry¹², which wrote to him in 1931 to request that Circulation would continue to exhibit contemporary work, and further asked for an "Institute of Modern Industrial Art to supplement the work of the Victoria and Albert Museum."¹³

While the V&A's relationship with the contemporary industrial design sector atrophied, its partnership with the National Trust flourished. Economic change and tax reforms linked to land ownership and inheritance, had succeeded in bringing about a redistribution of private wealth which meant a large number of stately homes were neglected, sold or demolished¹⁴. In the 1930's the need for their preservation was brought to the attention of Government by the National Trust, which gave its support to tackling the problem. The Trust duly set up a Country Houses Committee under the Chairmanship of James Lees-Milne who became a close contact of the Museum and helped bring about a renaissance of English art in the Museum after the Second World War, which included the acquisition of some of England's most impressive stately homes in partnership with the National Trust¹⁵.

Meanwhile British manufacturers and retailers were seen not to offer a good choice of contemporary design for customers. At the high end of the market customers typically bought goods made by quality brand names such as Heals, Liberties and Gillow & Waring that mainly produced revival or historicist furniture using high quality materials

¹⁰ Burton, A. 1999, p. 189

¹¹ Royal Commission Interim Report, 1927, para. 2816

¹² It was also known as The Gorrell Committee

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Peter Mandler's *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (1999) examines how from the 1880's hostility towards the aristocracy grew and was largely vented at stately homes which meant interest in them declined for sixty years until after WWII.

¹⁵ Lee-Milne, J. (2003) (eds) *Ancestral Voices: Diaries 1942-1943*, Michael Russell

to achieve a crafted aesthetic¹⁶. Design for the mass market remained burdened with cheaply made imitation period styles, this was shown to still be the case in the post-war era during Britain Can Make It, from interviews with retailers by Mass Observation discussed in Chapter 3¹⁷. Some more daring British designers and manufacturers experimented with modern materials though not so much with form but, rather, tended to follow tradition that produced a distinctive hybrid quality. For instance, a *Roman Chair* designed by Ambrose Heal in 1933 (shown over the page) appears modern in respect of its chrome frame and cream leather seat but at the same time, its structure is familiar as an Italian Roman/Renaissance X frame.



Figure 21 Chair in Chrome with Cream Leather Seat designed by Ambrose Heal in 1933. V&A Image 2006AT8002 Museum no. W.25-1935

Such designs contrasted with the modern aesthetic produced by continental competitors, particularly, the Bauhaus in Germany. For example, a chair by Marcel Breuer made, around a decade earlier, appears more coherently modern with its signature cantilever 'sitting on air' form that presents an altogether more unified representation of new design.

¹⁶ However, even at the higher end of the market goods offered a limited range of traditional and period styles, without any choice of contemporary design. For example, see Harrods General Catalogue of 1929, Second-hand Furniture Department; Antique Furniture Department; and Modern (Reproduction) Building & Decorating Department.

¹⁷ See Attfield, J. 'Give 'em something dark and heavy': The Role of Design in the Material Culture of Popular British Furniture, 1939-1965' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 9, 1996.



Figure 22 Model B 32 chair by Marcel Breuer made in 1928
V&A Image 2006AU8940, Museum no. W.10-1989

A few firms such as Gerald Summers and Jack Pritchard's Isokon Company proved the exception¹⁸. When the Bauhaus was disbanded by the Nazis in 1933, Breuer and former Director of the Bauhaus Walter Gropius, came to Britain and worked for Isokon. Pritchard's experience in the plywood business coupled with Breuer's cutting edge modern designs created an international reputation for British modernism. Breuer recreated his radically modern forms in plywood to give a warmer, more traditional domestic appeal for the home intended to appeal to the British market. These years also gave rise to a generation of new British designers like Misha Black and Milner Gray who, together with the structural engineer Felix Samuely, worked on a number of commissions for the consultancy Industrial Design Partnership, which was founded in 1935, to specialise in areas of design from corporate branding to products and interiors. The accumulative effect of these new designers produced exciting new prospects for contemporary British design in making its mark nationally and internationally¹⁹.

After the BIIA closed in 1934 much of its collections of contemporary design, including the Margaret Armitage (nee Bulley) collection of mainly textiles, ceramics and glass of British and Continental manufacture, came into the Museum's care which Maclagan

¹⁸ See Martha Dees 'Gerald Summers and Makers of Simple Furniture' in *Journal of Design History* (1992) Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 183-205

¹⁹ Misha Black and Milner Gray went on to become associates of the Design Research Unit (DRU) which was founded by Herbert Read in 1943. After the War, it gained prestigious commissions that included Britain Can Make It in 1946; The Festival of Britain in 1951; work for P&O Ocean liners; and BOAE's London Airport among others

duly had removed to Bethnal Green²⁰. In 1934 the Government attempted to raise the profile of British design once again by creating the Council for Art and Industry (CAI). Where previously, the practice at British industry fairs had been that manufacturers would decide on what they wanted to exhibit, the CAI wanted to set standards by overseeing the selection of products. However, its first attempt received a poor review at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937 and caused considerable acrimony with manufacturers²¹. In the same year it carried out a survey on the influence of museums on modern industrial art in which Maclagan anticipated the V&A would be prominent²². Later, in his plans for rearrangement he expressed his desire to maintain the Museum's separation from the sector but acknowledged that such collections might have to be accommodated as a result of the Report's findings:

"The Council for Art and Industry (of which I am a member) under the Chairmanship of Mr Frank Pick is at this moment conducting an enquiry into the relation between Museums and Modern Industrial Art...my own preference would have been for a separate building immediately adjacent to but separated from the Victoria and Albert Museum... It is impossible to anticipate the recommendations the Council for Art and Industry will make as a result of the enquiry which has barely finished. But if the Council press for the constitution of some museum or block of galleries devoted to Modern Industrial Art we ought at any rate to consider the possibility of room having to be found for this in the Museum quadrilateral."²³

Although Maclagan's plans for rearrangement did not include contemporary design, the industrial sector's growing alienation from the Museum concerned Leigh Ashton who assisted Maclagan in his plans, but had grown increasingly concerned that the Museum had drifted too far from its original purpose, "The emphasis lay, in my view, in those years on connoisseurship and collecting; it had shifted a considerable amount from the original conception [of the museum], in which the objects were primarily exhibited for design and taste value."²⁴ When Ashton succeeded Maclagan as Director in 1945, the question was whether he would lead the Museum in a different direction.

²⁰ See Burton, A. 1999, p.189; Christopher Wilk also relates how Mrs Margaret Armitage (nee Bulley) agreed with Maclagan that she could add to the collection, which she did from 1934 until 1956 in Baker and Richardson (1997) p. 347

²¹ This was cited by the CoID in a memo regarding 'Selection of Exhibits', 1945, SK ID 312/45

²² MA/2/R 'Rearrangement & Development of Museum Collection' 1936-46 'Recommendations by the Sub Committee to Consider Reconstruction Plans for the Victoria and Albert Museum', p. 3

²³ MA/2/R Maclagan, E. 1937, Minutes on Plans for Rearrangement VA375 1980/1130, p. 16

²⁴ Ashton cited in Burton p. 196

2.2. Towards a Contemporary British Style

"The importance of aesthetic hegemony as a key concept of both private and state-sponsored design reform organizations in twentieth-century Britain remained unfractured by the disruption of the Second World War. With the establishment of the Board of Trade's Utility Scheme in 1942 the taste-elevating aspirations of the Design and Industries Association, the British Institute of Industrial Art and the Council for Art and Industry received a heady infusion of oxygen. In essence, this gave birth to a system of state-legislated design production which, for a number of years, affected many aspects of design in everyday life in Britain."¹

Utility was the first example of contemporary British industrial design intended for the private and public national market. It was born of the Wartime coalition Government and concerned with social stability and renewal based on the Board of Trade's stipulations of the necessary amount and quality of materials but where only the design of the furniture industry was controlled. Designs were drawn up by the Advisory Committee that included influential design reformers, Gordon Russell, John Gloag and Herman Lebus. In 1943 the first Utility Furniture Catalogue was produced showing furniture divided by five main living spaces: living room, bedroom, kitchen, and nursery and miscellaneous for items like bookshelves and storage. As plywood was only allowed to be used for war production, furniture was made of good quality hard woods such as oak and mahogany. Metal and plastic were strictly *off brief* as they were needed for munitions, so fixtures and fittings such as door handles were also made of wood.

Utility gave rise to new co-operative structures between producers, manufacturers and consumers under the central control of the Government. In the postwar period economic and ideological imperatives meant the scheme was continued in compliance with the Labour Party's manifesto of centralized socialist modernization. With the end of the War in sight the Government became increasingly concerned that contemporary British design should continue to be centrally organised and in 1944 the Board of Trade formed the Council of Industrial Design. After the War the Labour Government supported the kind of central planning that was found in Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS). Beatrice Webb's ideas had founded the CWS and her final book, written with husband Stanley in 1942, *The Truth About The Soviet Union*, celebrated central planning. The CWS was one model on which the Council of Industrial Design

¹ Woodham, J. 'An episode in post-Utility design management: the Council of Industrial Design and the Co-operative Wholesale Society' in Attfield, J. (1999) p. 39

considered Utility could be based after the war². But it also acted against the interests of forming independent taste which was an important aim of the Council:

"Perhaps the worst feature of the Co-operative Movement is that it has inspired a degree of loyalty in many of its active members which robs them almost completely of their sense of discrimination. The devoted co-operator will prefer to buy at his own shop even though a manifestly better buy is on offer in a free enterprise shop next door."³

Webb was against the idea that co-operatives should be independently run by workers in whose judgement she had little faith⁴ which was an attitude the Council adopted in its dealings with 'the trade'. Woodham describes how the Council responded when the relaxation restrictions over furnishing fabrics was proposed to the Board of Trade in 1946, "it would be disastrous if the design of fabrics for the Utility furniture scheme were allowed to be settled by the trade... that the trade should not have a free hand in this matter."⁵ However, 'the trade' was ahead of the Council in realising the Scheme's limitations in responding to the increased power of consumers:

"We had been passing through a period when rationing had been gradually and practically eliminated. ... The shopper was no longer the pawn of the trader; the shopkeeper who showed willingness to cater for her rather than their own desires would win. This was to be the start of the consumer revolution."⁶

The Council also anticipated this to some extent in staging its first major public exhibition: Britain Can Make It through which it planned to resurrect Britain's reputation in contemporary design:

"The criticism levelled at the British stand in the Paris Exhibition of 1937 may or may not have been fair; it is in any case essential that no such criticism should be levelled at the Exhibition now proposed, which must contrive to show that many of the industries producing the consumer goods of the future are, or are integrally related to, those which helped to win the war, and that they their roots in a powerful industrial economy belonging to a first-class Power."⁷

² Webb's ideas of social change by consumer co-operation led to the establishment of the English Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) and both she and her husband Stanley were immensely influential to the Labour party; Beatrice's nephew Stafford Cripps went onto become the Minister of the Board of Trade that initiated Britain Can Make It.

³ Conservative Political Centre, *Consumer Protection and Enlightenment* (London, 1960), p. 123.

⁴ Potter, B. 1891, *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

⁵ CoID quoted in Woodham, J. in Attfield, J. 1999, p. 41

¹⁹⁶ Jack Cohen, founder of Tesco, at a meeting of shareholders in July 1953, quoted by Maurice Corina in *Pile It High, Sell It Cheap* (London, 1971), p. 131.

⁷ CoID, 1945, SK ID 312/45

The Exhibition demonstrated its audience's desire for new designed products but also an antipathy to Utility which is discussed in the next Chapter. As early as 1943, people had begun to speculate about the end of the war and the Board of Trade established a design panel that was chaired by Gordon Russell to devise new ranges of Utility. In 1944 Russell was made a founder member of the Council of Industrial Design, which took a long term view of consumer education to disseminate its 'good design' message with the aim of achieving the public's support for the extension of Utility into peacetime.

The concept of Utility draws together a number of interfacing social, philosophical and aesthetic British traditions from the nineteenth century. It was the common name for working class dress and materials; and was also the name given to public services of water, gas and electricity. Philosophically, Utility was associated with British Liberal Utilitarianism based on the principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number"⁸. It was also linked with the history of the Museum as the Government's first foray into public design reform as recent biographers of Henry Cole testify to his long standing friendship with the leading Utilitarian John Stuart Mill. They similarly interpret his career may be read as one successful utilitarian project after another in terms of the reform of industrial design with the Great Exhibition and establishment of the Museum of Manufactures; the reform of the Public Record Office; and the creation of the penny post⁹.

Linda Coleing argues that Utility design during the War was "an experiment in ethical design and production"¹⁰, and Nigel Whitely similarly asserts that it had a strong ethical tradition that he traces back to the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris:

"Utility can be located in a tradition of design thinking which upholds the idea that there is an ethical dimension... It is a tradition that stretches back to the mid nineteenth century and forward to the present. However, just what it is that constitutes the ethical dimension had changed significantly over 150 years, and the focus has shifted from such concerns as the virtue of the maker, through the integrity and aesthetics of the object, to the role of the designer – and consumer – in a just society"¹¹

⁸ Derived from Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism philosophy and developed by John Stuart Mill, most famously in his great Utilitarian treatise, *On Liberty* (1869)

⁹ See Boynton and Burton (2003) *The Great Exhibitor: The Life and Work of Henry Cole*. London: V&A, pp. 35, 37.

¹⁰ Coleing, L. in Attfield, (1997) p.13

¹¹ Whitely, N. in Attfield, (1997) p. 190

The Council's reforming ethos was reminiscent of Cole's, in its efforts to improve the public's taste and rebuild society by the power of 'good design'. After the War the Labour Government maintained its control of Utility in order to create a new British social democracy: "The modernist commitment to the machine signified a move away from a concern with the maker or producer to the *object* produced within the context of a progressive, democratic, 'good' society."¹²

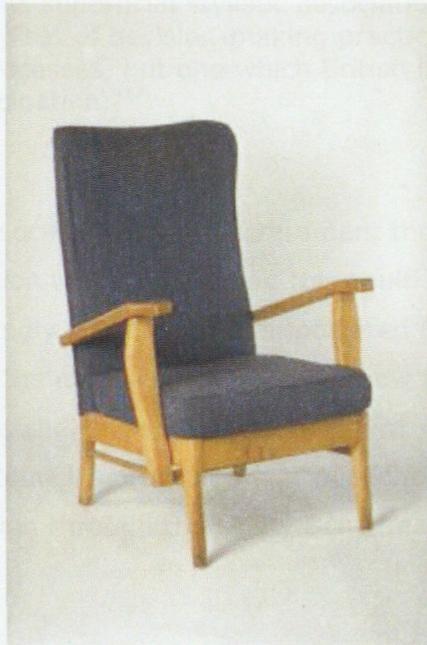


Figure 23 Utility high backed reclining chair
Museum no: W.13:1,2-1976, V&A Image 2006AT8018

However, this ideological view of Utility is refuted by Matthew Denney who argues that it is fundamentally misguided and ignores the practical social and economic factors that gave shape to the scheme during the war:

"Trying to associate Utility with either Arts and Crafts or modernist roots has only confused the issue, because neither theory is sufficient in itself to explain the various forms that the Utility furniture designs actually took in the various phases of its history."¹³

Denney illustrates his point by listing the various Government and supply requirements that directed Utility: in its first year Utility was directed by the Board of Trade, Ministry of Supply¹⁴; the Ministry of Health¹⁵; and only from late 1944 by the Council of Industrial Design. From this perspective, Denney's description of Utility as, "a complex

¹² Whitely in Attfield, (1997) p. 193

¹³ Denney in Attfield, (1997) p. 117

¹⁴ In November 1941 the Ministry only allowed supplies to manufacturers that adhered to its supply criteria.

¹⁵ Because of limited supplies of timber the Government introduced Standard Emergency Furniture in February 1941, which was administered by the Ministry of Health.

scheme of rationing, attempting to meet an ever-changing economic and supply problem"¹⁶ does seem convincing. Utility appropriated and adapted the modern form to British tastes and succeeded in acclimatizing the nation to further developments in modern design. Furthermore, it was moderately successful in educating the consumer as Lesley Whitworth proposes the main task for the Council from 1944 was that it should work as a catalyst for changing attitudes towards industrial design:

"...design that is shorn of its superficial stylistic associations and defined as a powerful and wide-ranging set of decision-making practices. It is an integral part of modern manufacturing processes, but one which British industrialists professed neither familiarity not fascination."¹⁷

Under the aegis of Attlee's socialist Labour Government the Council continued to control Utility but the question was for how long this could last. The main challenge was to convince an increasingly liberated and empowered British consumer to buy into Utility in the long term. In the next section I explore how the post-war Labour Government anticipated this challenge when the Board of Trade proposed Britain Can Make It as the first of the Council's programme of public exhibitions with the aim of extending its control of design through the Utility Scheme.

¹⁶ Denney in Attfield, (1997) p. 110

¹⁷ Whitworth, L. (2005) *Towards a Participatory Consumer Society*

Chapter 3. The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946

3. 1. Brief Encounter



Figure 24 Audiences queuing outside the V&A Museum's Exhibition Road Entrance, which is clearly sign posted in a contemporary style. DCA1220

Britain Can Make It was organised by the Council of Industrial Design and financed by the Board of Trade. It was to be the first in a programme of large scale exhibitions of contemporary design for a mass national and international audience. From the outset the Council considered: "The Victoria and Albert would not be able to offer the necessary space, and its site leaves much to be desired – unfortunately, since such an exhibition falls entirely within the special purposes for one,"¹ and turned its attentions to other options². Given the Museum's priorities with its long protracted rearrangement and imminent return of collections, it too was initially reluctant to be involved.

The relationship between the Council and the V&A leading up the exhibition has been recorded from the Museum's records by Doreen Leach³. Initial correspondences reveal a certain amount of vying for position as Director Leigh Ashton initially objected to the

¹ DCA File 312 'The British Exhibition of 1946; A proposal to the President of the Board of Trade', 1945

² Other buildings the Council considered were Olympia, Earls Court, Stafford House, a 'waterborne Exhibition' on barges on the River Thames and a temporary structure in Hyde Park. DCA File 312 'The British Exhibition of 1946; A proposal to the President of the Board of Trade', 1945

³ Doreen Leach 'Notes on the Material Contained in the Victoria and Albert Museum Archives' in Maguire and Woodham (1997) Part 4, 14/A. pp. 225-229

Council's plans to organise travelling displays on the grounds this would encroach on Circulation's role⁴. However, Ashton soon started to make more friendly overtures to the Council and even harboured hopes of becoming a member. When the Council struggled to find a suitable venue for Britain Can Make It, there is evidence to suggest Ashton offered to host it in the Museum⁵. Nevertheless, when Ashton finally agreed the exhibition could be held at the V&A, he insisted its publicity should state it was held there by order of Government:

"I believe the real motivating power is Sir Stafford Cripps, who has indicated that the exhibition, wherever it is held, must have top priority. If we are pushed into this exhibition, I have made it a condition that the announcement that it is to be held here, must be made as a Government statement"⁶.

John Gloag proposed that the exhibition should be aimed at a new post-war audience, "The Exhibition must aim at the new public, i.e. those coming out of the Services, and Industry must be urged to look upon it as a long term investment."⁷ The larger than usual publicity budget estimated at £40,000 was intended to attract this new audience, especially visitors from the East End of London:

"As the Victoria and Albert Museum is not a recognised exhibition centre and has probably never been visited for any purpose by a large proportion of the population of London (especially the Eastern half) it is considered necessary to increase accordingly the estimate for expenditure on press advertising and publicity on the hoardings and underground. The success of the Exhibition may turn upon our ability to induce the mass of people to accept the V&A as an appropriate place of resort for this purpose."⁸

The sociological importance of this audience's taste in contemporary design was highlighted by a unique survey by Mass Observation⁹. The exhibition's success would also depend on their relationship with the Museum. In 1952, the Chairman of the Council, an original member at the time of the exhibition, Gordon Russell reflected, "I argue with [Ashton] as to whether the Victoria and Albert Museum put the Council of

⁴ Ashton's objections were upheld, see Leach, in Woodham and McGuire, p. 225

⁵ MA/209 46/175: 'Special File' Letter from S. C. Leslie to J. P. R. Maud at the Ministry of Education, which cites Ashton's offer to host the Exhibition in the Museum, 03/01/46

⁶ MA/209 46/175: 'Special File', 'Council of Industrial Design, Accommodation in the Museum' letter from Leigh Ashton to Mr. de Normann of the Ministry of Works, 02/01/46; see also Burton, A. 1999, p. 204

⁷ DCA File 312 'Summer Exhibition' meeting minutes 16/11/45 regarding points raised by John Gloag at a previous meeting on 10/10/45.

⁸ DCA File 742 'Notes on Estimated Expenditure 1946 Exhibition' point 4 'Publicity'

⁹ Calder, A. and Sheridan, D. (eds) 1984, Speak For Yourself: A Mass Observation Anthology 1937-49, London, Cape

Industrial Design on the map, or the Council of Industrial Design showed Londoners where to find the Victoria and Albert Museum"¹⁰.

During the exhibition's planning stages in 1945, Russell expressed his view that it would be important to show Britain's tradition in good design and industrial heritage in the Great Exhibition: "here we have something which could be used most effectively against American propaganda"¹¹. He proposed that Britain Can Make It should emphasise "Britain, past present and future as Pioneers."¹² The connection between the Museum's heritage and its national role in the Council's longer term exhibition strategy is a recurring theme in this case study. It crucially concerns the Museum's rearrangement and question of whether it would proceed with pre-war plans, or allow itself to be led by the Council into the new post-war era. This chapter throws new light on the Council's relationship with the Museum, which shows they shared longer term plans for the exhibition's legacy of contemporary design, that gives more weight to this "brief encounter".

¹⁰ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 26/12/1952, p. 90

¹¹ DCA File 312 hand written draft note by Gordon Russell undated

¹² Ibid

3. 2. Mobilising the Exhibition

Britain Can Make It was proposed by the Board of Trade in 1944 with a grant of £240,000 for the Council to carry out Cripps's brief:

"This Exhibition will be British Industry's first great post-war gesture to the British people and to the world. I confidently believe that it will demonstrate the vigour, freshness, originality and skill with which our manufacturers are settling about their task of serving the home consumer and capturing a great share of the export trade. The British public will see what industry has planned for the living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens of the post-war home: the world overseas will discover that the brains, ingenuity and taste which long gave her lead will be kept."¹

On 19 December 1944 Mr. Hugh Dalton of the Board of Trade sent a letter to Sir Thomas Barlow confirming his appointment as the first Chairman of the Council outlining its main functions:

"The purpose of the Council is to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of British industry. Its main functions will be... to encourage and assist the establishment and conduct of Design Centres by industries, and to advise the Board of Trade on the grant of financial assistance to these centres; to provide a national display of well designed goods by holding, or participating in, exhibitions and to conduct publicity for good design in other appropriate forms;"²

Following in the tradition of the V&A, the Council was the latest and most ambitious enterprise by Government to reform design from a central institution. However, unlike the Museum, which was run by the Board of Education, the Council reported to the Board of Trade, signifying a change in the location of design reform and its primary audience, from education to commerce. The Council's similarities with the Museum and other institutions, most notably the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (C.E.M.A.), meant the Board of Trade was keen to begin a dialogue that would distinguish the Council's position. On 5 February 1945 Mr H. B. Wallis of the Board of Education replied to the Board of Trade's Miss Kilroy who had earlier phoned him to discuss this matter:

"You rang me a little while ago about the position in regard to the V. and A. Museum and the Council of Industrial Design... I find that papers on this point have been with Sir Eric Maclagan awaiting the return of Mr. Ashton, who is now in America and will not be back, I gather, for a few weeks. I do not know, therefore, what the reactions of the V. and A. are likely to be, but I rather expect that the matter will not

¹ AAD/1977/4 Cripps, S. 'Statement by the Board of Trade', The 1946 Exhibition of Design in British Industry, 1944

² AAD/1977/4 Dalton, H. Letter from Hugh Dalton to Thomas Barlow. 19/12/44, p. 1

be pursued. I would suggest that, unless Sir Thomas Barlow has anything of urgency which he wishes to discuss with the V. and A. people, it would be better to postpone a talk until Mr Ashton is back and the position definitely cleared up"³

On returning to the Museum, Ashton wrote to Barlow asking for clarification:

"I would be very grateful if you would tell me what is the position now about the relationship of this Museum to your new Council... I feel as you know very strongly that good design has never been produced except by artists who are conscious of the tradition of the past, and I also hold very strong views that a Museum like this one which was founded with the intention of furthering good design as one of its main objects should be represented or be in close contact with those who are hoping to bring the best in British designing to the forefront."⁴

Ashton acknowledged the Council's role and its relevance to the Museum. But unlike his predecessors Smith and Maclagan, who had been members of a number of industrial design organisations, Ashton was not invited to become a member of the Council. This was a matter that troubled him greatly not least because the Director of the National Gallery in London Kenneth Clark served (though as an independent member) as Chair of the Council's Designs Committee⁵. Ashton wrote to Barlow with his concerns to which Barlow replied with assurances that a close relationship with the Museum was desired by the Council:

"As you probably know, no member of the Council has been chosen as a representative of any institution or organisation. It is made up chiefly of industrialists because so much of its work will be to establish the right contact with other industrialists. I have however always looked forward to working very closely with the V. and A. and I understand that a way has now opened up. In view of the special need for contact between us, the Board of Trade is ready to accept an additional assessor from the Ministry of Education who will be a representative of the V. and A. You may know that the assessors are all representatives of Government departments (hitherto one from each of those concerned), who attend meetings but do not vote or take responsibility for decisions."⁶

Barlow then suggested Ashton should meet with him to discuss the matter further in the presence of the Council's Director C. S. Leslie. They met on 25 April 1945 whereupon Ashton accepted the position as Assessor for the Council from the Ministry of Education. Having secured Ashton's involvement, the Council was eager to establish an exhibition strategy with the Museum. Leslie wrote to Ashton: "I would like to have the opportunity of a talk with you about the possibilities of common action in the field

³ DCA File 118 Letter from H. B. Wallis to Miss Kilroy 05/02/45

⁴ DCA File 118 Letter from Leigh Ashton to Thomas Barlow 04/04/45

⁵ Burton, A. 1999, p. 204

⁶ DCA File 118 Letter from Thomas Barlow to Leigh Ashton, 19/04/45

of exhibitions of all kinds."⁷ Ashton replied saying he would like to discuss ways he could help in the process but was presently busy with the opening of a new Museum exhibition⁸. In the meantime, it seems, Leslie kept close watch on Ashton. When the typographer and advisor to the Government Francis Meynell, met with Ashton at the press launch of the exhibition, he reported his meeting back to Leslie:

"I went to the Press Show for the Exhibition at the V. & A. yesterday and had a chance of a talk with Leigh Ashton. I am confirmed in my view that he is (a) a really pushful (sic) chap with ideas of display very sympathetic to ours and (b) genuinely anxious to be co-operative."⁹

Meynell went on to say he thought they could help Ashton in "his politics"¹⁰ and described a dinner conversation he held with a senior Government official on the subject of institutional demarcation:

"I dined afterwards with John Maud, who is Permanent Secretary to the Lord President's Office and a member – I suppose by a long way the senior Civil Servant to be connected with it – of the Council of C.E.M.A. He asked me what I thought about demarcation and I said I thought there should be an early meeting between the Council, the V. & A. and C.E.M.A. to determine what those lines should be."¹¹

Maud agreed with Meynell and a conference was proposed to discuss the broad exhibitions policy between the institutions involved, but a letter from the Secretary General of C. E. M. A. Miss Glasgow to Leslie asked to postpone this until the Museum had been restored. She also mentioned the implications for the Arts Council's devolution away from the Ministry of Education and, therefore, relationship with the Museum, outlining the close connections between them.

"I have been some time following up the suggestion which you put to me for calling a conference of all those who may be concerned in the future circulation of exhibitions in this country. I have given the matter a good deal of thought and discussed it with my colleagues and, as a result, I want to suggest that we postpone the calling of such a conference for still a little time. There are still a number of points to be raised and settled, and the centre of everything, at present, is the return of the Victoria and Albert Museum to peace time activity. There is also the fact that early next year the Arts Council leaves the shelter of the Ministry of Education, and its present close

⁷ DCA File 118 Letter from C. S. Leslie to Leigh Ashton 09/06/45

⁸ DCA File 118 Letter from Leigh Ashton to C. S. Leslie 12/06/45; Ashton initiated a programme of four exhibitions a year, beginning with *Masterpieces of English Craftsmanship in 1945*, see Burton, p. 204; but a much larger and more controversial exhibition that year was of modern paintings by Picasso and Matisse which was organised by the Arts Council, see Burton, p. 203.

⁹ DCA File 118 Letter from Francis Meynell to S. C. Leslie, 19/06/08

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

family relationship with the V. & A., and becomes an autonomous body under the Treasury."¹²

In addition to establishing demarcations between institutions, these correspondences show a strong desire to work together. They suggest a sense of anticipation for new opportunities as well as awareness of the risks involved, and that the Museum was at the forefront of considerations about potential exhibitions. Having examined the ground of inter-working relations between Government, the Council, and the V&A, I will now turn to the exhibition's mobilisation in the Museum.

Evidence suggests it was Ashton who offered that the exhibition could be held at the V&A as Leslie reported to Jon Maud at the Ministry of Education: "the Council welcome Sir Leigh Ashton's suggestion that the Exhibition might be transferred to the V&A."¹³ A main incentive for Ashton was that repairs and alterations could be carried out in the Museum where negotiations with the Ministry of Works began soon after the offer was accepted¹⁴. Changes to other areas of the Museum were to follow. On 26 January 1946, Leslie wrote to Ashton to inquire whether publicity could refer to the Museum as the 'V&A' rather than Victoria and Albert Museum, since this shorter reference would be more attractive to the "masses of inhabitants of the Eastern half of London"¹⁵. Then on 21 February 1946, Leslie wrote to formally thank the Museum, expressing the Council's "pleasure in the thought that the Exhibition, and the extensive publicity which will attend it, may widen and intensify public interest in the long-term activities of the Museum"¹⁶.

With this in mind, Gordon Russell's earlier suggestion of an art historical approach showing Britain in a 'pioneering tradition' of design would have, perhaps, better suited the Museum's heritage and aims. It would have also avoided the difficulty of having a good selection of post-war designs ready by 1946, due to the absence of designers still being demobilised, as well as a general shortage of labour and materials; and countered more general issues with the general state of British design, "there are large sections of industry that don't know what good design is or how to go about producing it...Many people still think that we are not an "artistic" nation."¹⁷

¹² DCA File 118 Letter from Miss Glasgow to Mr S. C. Leslie 14/08/45

¹³ MA/209 46/175, 'Special File' Letter from S. C. Leslie to J. P. R. Maud at the Ministry of Education 03/01/46

¹⁴ See Leach, D. 'Further Sources for Researching the *Britain Can Make It Exhibition* 1946. A. Notes on the Material Contained in the Victoria & Albert Museum Archives' in Woodham and Maguire, 1997, pp. 224-9

¹⁵ DCA File 312 Letter from S. C. Leslie to Leigh Ashton, 26/01/46

¹⁶ DCA File 312 Letter from S. C. Leslie to Leigh Ashton, 21/02/46

¹⁷ DCA File 312 Hand written note by Gordon Russell not dated

Others, like John Gloag, argued "A clean break should be made at 1939, so that the exhibition should not be based upon what manufacturers did before the War, or on what they have already prepared for the production side of certain industries"¹⁸. However, Gloag's ambitions risked the hazard of negative propaganda if British manufacturers were unable to provide sufficient new goods as the Director of the Council of Industrial and Artistic Design (CIAD) warned:

"... there might be some danger if the large proportion of exhibits were, in effect, merely the best examples that could be found amongst pre-war productions, and they are a little apprehensive that British Industrialists might get the impression that we have not moved with the times. Quite obviously, if any large American Industrial Design organisations were to take advantage of an Exhibition of that kind – by sending out propaganda to British manufacturers – this would seriously jeopardise the prospects of exploiting the design talent available in this country"¹⁹

A conference was called on 16 November 1945 at the Council's offices at Tilbury House Petty France to discuss what was then referred to as the "Summer Exhibition"²⁰. It should be kept in mind that the Exhibition's brief had already been decided by the Board of Trade and that those who advocated a more historical approach, were unlikely to receive real consideration. In this sense the purpose of the conference can be seen as less do with deciding the nature of the Exhibition than it was to begin the crucial process of bringing the disparate factions of those who were most influential to industrial design together under the Council's control. Jonathan Woodham describes this conference as of "seminal importance in articulating the exhibition proposal"²¹. Council members and high profile figures in British design from various industries, critical forums and academia were invited including Leigh Ashton, the design critic John Gloag, design historian Nikolaus Pevsner, Herbert Read of the Design Research Unit, representatives of the Council's Scottish Committee and from the Central Institute of Art and Design (CIAD), Sir Cecil Wier the National Trades Press; Heal and Son Ltd and Hertfordshire County Council's Education Department among others.

The conference began by addressing some main points proposed by Gloag in a previous meeting where he had stressed the exhibition should be an opportunity for the Council to take a lead in industry and questions of design. He suggested that a team of independent industrial designers should be employed to design sets and new prototypes, citing Wells Coates, Brian O'Rourke, R. D. Russell, A. B Read, Misha Black

¹⁸ DCA File 312 "Summer Exhibition" meeting minutes 16/11/45 to discuss John Gloag's proposal at the last meeting on 10/10/45.

¹⁹ DCA File 312 Letter from Mr T. A. Fennimore to Gordon Russell 27/09/45

²⁰ DCA File 312 'Summer Exhibition' meeting minutes 16/11/45

²¹ Maguire and Woodham, J. 1997, p. 49

and Milner Gray. In response several options were discussed that proposed an exhibition of designs of the near or distant future. The name "Swords into Ploughshares: British Goods for the New Age" was suggested, others considered were "Power for Peace" or "British Made"²², and the venue at this stage the venue was still planned to be Olympia. The focus, title and venue of the Exhibition were yet to be decided but throughout, its purpose was clear:

"The primary purpose of the Exhibition is to demonstrate to the British people and the rest of the world the quality of postwar British industrial design, (to be unmistakably distinguished from arts and crafts) and to stake a claim to British leadership in the new age."²³

Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design*²⁴ had been influential in locating the modern movement within Britain's design tradition. Pevsner was, therefore, an ideal figure to interpret the Council's modernising message along national lines. Like Gloag he advocated new design but also sided with Russell in taking a design historical perspective on proceedings by suggesting the exhibition should show modern industrial design in relation to historical design and craft:

"He favoured Mr. Gloag's idea (a) because there should not be too much pre-war material... The inclusion of both haute couture and mass production couture would add considerably to the attraction. Suggested inclusion of a small show of 17th and 18th Century designs of undated quality which still appeal today. Crafts cannot be altogether excluded, as in some cases, such as pottery and weaving, they are so closely connected with Industrial Design."²⁵

It was agreed that fashion was to be a prominent feature of Britain Can Make It, and would include dress fabrics, as well as both male and female fashions. There was to be a main display consisting of a heart of articles representing the best of new British design in all commodity ranges, decided upon and grouped, by industries with a complementary display of fully furnished and equipped rooms. Shop and office equipment was to be another main feature. The works of the main industries were to show how technologies and materials developed in war could be incorporated in the peace time. There were also to be supplementary sections consisting of displays to "stimulate the imagination"²⁶ occupying smaller spaces based on themes "i.e. what design means; the task of export; the design process; Designers look ahead etc."²⁷

²² DCA File 312 "Suggested Names for the Exhibition", C. A. Mesling, 17/10/1945

²³ DCA File 312 "Proposed Exhibition" – Summer 1946 Draft Plan (2) p.1.

²⁴ Pevsner, N. 1936, *Pioneers of Modern Design*

²⁵ Burton, A. 1999, p. 204

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

The conference gives insight into the exchange of ideas and tensions that an exhibition of such magnitude as Britain Can Make It inevitably created in finding consensus on the proper balance of interests between what were often regarded as polar opposites: the traditional and modern; the institutional and commercial, and key stake holders and audiences respectively. By involving these various representatives the conference succeeded in engaging their support but this also pointed to the possibility of the proliferation of sub-divisions within the exhibition's organisation. It was proposed that the Exhibition Committee should be subdivided into an Executive Committee consisting of a Chairman, a Chief Exhibition Architect, Chief Display Designer, a Publicity Expert, and Business Consultant. It was also decided to employ as Mr. Dudley Ryder as Exhibition Manager²⁸.

This organisation presented a more bureaucratic but also more professional approach to the exhibition, where individuals were delegated roles within their particular areas of expertise. To the Museum, which traditionally relied on the judgement of curators and where audiences and industry were generally considered more as an afterthought in terms of consultation and publicity, this was a new approach.

Although economic success was a main consideration of the exhibition, its purpose was not primarily commercial; rather, it aimed to raise a general awareness of the importance of contemporary British design and the role of the designer to industry and consumers. Manufacturers who applied were to be selected by an expert Selection Committee. The Council's strategy was to subdivide the industrial sector under its own Committees where each was "charged with the responsibility of organising the flow of potential exhibits from that industry, and ultimately with collecting all commodities or prototypes at a given place and time for selection."²⁹ It was suggested individuals from some industries should be selected to act as "Advisors to the Council", and even to constitute an Advisory Committee or Panel which, much like the Council of Art and Industry (CAI) before it was given control of the selection process.

"The work of selection will have to be done by a series of small Selection Committees, preferably of three, and certainly of not more than five members. These would between them represent: (a) detailed knowledge of the particular industry; (b) authoritative standards of taste; (c) market judgment."³⁰

²⁸ DCA File 312/45 "Summer Exhibition 1946", Draft II

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

20 selection committees were appointed and some 3,385 manufacturers contacted the Council with details of over 15,000 commodities from which 5,259 items from 1,300 exhibitors were selected for display. Space was not to be sold to exhibitors but they were responsible for insuring their exhibits as well as organising their delivery and collection though not their display. Exhibits were also to feature the names of manufacturers and means by which they could be contacted. The selection and organisation of exhibits was designated to "Design Centres", which were teams of suitably qualified Industrial Liaison Officers with responsibility for exploring British industry and negotiating with industrialists to engage their support and secure commodities from them.

"The Design Centres section of the Council's Staff will be responsible for reporting on design possibilities and developments in particular firms or industries which may be of interest for the Exhibition. They can also commence negotiations with the industrial organisations with which they will be in touch, in order to enlist their help for the purpose of the exhibition."³¹

One area of uncertainty however, was the limited number of objects manufacturers would be able to lend and the condition of the Museum building, which has been portrayed as empty but serviceable³². There is evidence to suggest that, although most of its collections had been moved to safe storage during the War, the Museum only closed briefly and had otherwise remained open to the public with sufficient staff, collections, and a programme of displays that kept it operational³³. Indeed, preparations for Britain Can Make It meant the entire ground floor needed to be cleared of remaining collections. Over the page there is a photograph of Ashton overseeing this.

³¹ DCA File 312/45 "Summer Exhibition 1946", Draft II

³² See Maguire and Woodham, 1997; Sparke, 1986

³³ See Burton, p. 204; also Royale, K. "We had our first high explosive bomb last night. The Results as usual are surprising." *V&A Magazine*, Summer 2005, pp. 50-53



Figure 25 Ashton directing the removal of objects from the museum in preparation for Britain Can Make It. DCA0429

The Council employed designers James Gardner and Misha Black -- the latter was commissioned to design the display "What Industrial Design Means" -- who were charged with designing stimulating and informative sets to lead the visitor through a story of design: "Since there is no question of showing complete commodity ranges and no space will be sold, this Exhibition lends itself to a form of "story" treatment..."³⁴

New sound technology was to be recorded by Decca for a public address system that would inform visitors as they entered different sections, "You are now entering a hall of the future. While this is the last section of the Exhibition it is really only the beginning, because here British designers show things YOU may be using in the next five to twenty years"³⁵. Decca was to provide music to create a mood for different settings that included Calypso Music by William Alwyn; Beethoven symphony no 5 in C minor; Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance; and Stravinsky's Petrouchka Ballet Suite. For the section on Children's toys, music included Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream Music; Delibes Coppelia and Schubert's Marche Militaire. The exhibition was also to feature new devices to encourage audience participation such as a quiz coin display, a design quiz and public ballot held in the pottery section of the exhibition for the public to decide which of three cups and saucers were preferred³⁶. The Council's public propaganda was to be promoted with one section to be devoted to a documentary story of the organisation and its activities.

³⁴ DCA File 312/45 "Summer Exhibition 1946", Draft II

³⁵ DCA File 742, note on "Special Features for sound" 23/07/46 Point 2. At the entrance to the "Future" Section

³⁶ DCA File 516 27/03/53

A commercial "shop window" style treatment was envisaged that would be familiar and enticing to the visitor and, together with the varied range of objects from pottery to children's wear, posed further new ideas in display that resembled the rationale and layout of a department store rather than a traditional Museum. This also raised new questions of what to include in the selection process in ways that were more audience focussed:

"Certain of the apparel industries (e.g. shoes and ready – to wear frocks) have claims to inclusion in an exhibition of design. It will, however, be difficult to draw a line at any point in the whole range of these industries, including some and omitting others. Omission deprives the exhibition not only of an important range of goods but of a feature (in women's dress) specially attractive to the public. Inclusion raises a host of practical and administrative problems, some of them different in kind from those presented by other parts of the exhibition."³⁷

Then there were displays of different interiors for the needs of different families and individuals, consisting largely of stereotypical representations ascribed to various social-economic groups represented by their work, family size (working class families were portrayed with more children) education and leisure interests: "A Bedroom in a Small House in an industrial Town"³⁸ in which lived a family of seven was described as a "Railway Engineer on night shift, formerly of the English Army. His wife: house proud. Their five children"³⁹. This contrasted with "A Bedroom with man's dressing room and bathroom in large house"⁴⁰ for a family described as "County Borough Councillor: well educated, interested in modern art and literature".⁴¹ Where appropriate, commodities were to be shown in living or working spaces, from domestic kitchens to commercial offices, and were grouped together by industry. A special section was designed to show the relationship between new production methods developed during the War and the new consumer goods which resulted from them in peace-time punctuated by smaller annexes illustrating various aspects of industrial design for the visitor to refer to. A fuller account of these aspects and images of them are presented in the next section.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ AAD/1977/4 BCMI 'Parcel II' 'Furnished Rooms' List of sketches in Tilbury House Store SKID 782 (7/5/47)
CoID

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

It was decided goods should be selected by members representing a diverse range of experience and skills in line with the Council's Selection Policy, which was reviewed in a report on the Exhibition⁴²:

"The policy governing the selection of goods for the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition was to combine the greatest possible expertise of judgement with the greatest possible independence. For this reason the Selection Committee contained persons of standing who were expert judges and critics of design, persons representing the point of view of the instructed and well-informed consumer, and persons representing the best design knowledge in retail trade."⁴³

To avoid criticisms of vested interests, the Council had not included manufacturers in the selection process. Instead, it contacted over a thousand manufacturing representatives for information on their latest developments in materials and technologies: "The value of taking the manufacturers' technical and commercial knowledge into account had, however, been appreciated, and this was done through the appointment by each branch of industry of technical assessors to advise the Committees."⁴⁴ With the acrimony that ensued between manufacturers and the CAI from the latter's selection of the British display at the Paris Exhibition of 1937 in the back of their minds, the Council's guidelines for the conduct of Industrial Liaison Officers stressed the importance of maintaining good relations with manufacturers in selection interviews even if this meant deferring to their judgement for exhibits:

"One of the objects of the Exhibition and the Council's whole programme is to make it easier to sell well-designed articles by clearing away inertia and prejudice among retailers and the public... There should nearly always be an opportunity to find some common ground between a manufacturer with some belief in his work, and a Council set up primarily to help industry establish itself on a basis of greater efficiency and success"⁴⁵

Maintaining good relations with industry partners was a priority for the Council. Other sectors included education, the media, and museums, but during the exhibition's installation it became apparent that the Trade Unions, which had considerably grown in power since the New Art Display, similarly required the Council's attention if its aims were to be met. Relations were severely tested when a dispute arose that concerned the matter of union membership of the Council's exhibition designers. A meeting was held at the museum at the request of Mr. A. C. Torode, the General Secretary of the Sign and Display Trades Union, and Mr. T. Brown, District Organiser of the

⁴² AAD/1977/4 "Statement by the Board of Trade:, The 1946 Exhibition of Design in British Industry", p. 3 SKID 782 CoID

⁴³ AAD/1977/4 report on 'The Council's Selection Policy' 1946, SKID 782 CoID

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ AAD/1977/4, 'Notes for the Guidance of Industrial Liaison Officers.' 1945, SKID 782 CoID

Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers on the 14 August 1946. Also present were the exhibition manager Mr Ryder; members of the Society of Mural Painters; exhibition artists; and representatives of the Trade Union of Shop Stewards for Painters, Plasterers, Woodworkers and Labourers. During negotiations, the power of the Union to impede the Council's work was articulated in no uncertain terms:

"The situation could be very clearly defined, on which there could be no compromise, by saying that while there could be no question of forcing any artist to become a member of the Sign and Display Trades Union and there could be no question of preventing any such no-members continuing to carry out their work in the Exhibition, it should be clearly understood that unless some arrangement in the form of a compromise could be reached at this meeting, the shop stewards could immediately call for a general stoppage of work of all Trades Union members throughout the Exhibition."⁴⁶

For a brief moment the exhibition hung in the balance so it must have come as a great relief when the Union finally agreed to permit temporary membership for the duration of the exhibition.

The exhibition's mobilisation in the V&A represented new developments in design and display as well as methods of engaging industry and audiences. With the return of its collections and rearrangement looming, the Museum was ideally placed to capitalise on these practices Britain Can Make It inaugurated. In the next section I take a closer look at how these practices were received by audiences using evidence of the Mass Observation audience survey. The survey presented a further modern tool to the Museum that allowed the post-war public's attitudes towards contemporary design to be assessed; the question was whether it would grasp the opportunity.

⁴⁶ AAD/1977/4, 'Notes on a meeting held at the Victoria and Albert Museum' 14/08/46 SKID 782 CoID

3. 3. Representation, Reaction and Mass Observation

Britain Can Make It was held at the V&A from 24 September to 31 December 1946, and was officially opened by the new Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee, and King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. Of interest here is the manner in which contemporary design conveyed a new sense of Britishness to a new audience, and how this would be received within the Museum in light of its policy not to include 'modern' design. It is also interesting that although the Council wanted to engage a new audience, exhibits were only available to overseas buyers. These tensions between traditional and modern Britain, surface in considering Britain's trade position overseas, as Woodham notes:

"Where the overseas promotion of British identity in design was concerned there were two very different standpoints, both funded by the Board of Trade. One represented the 'good design' ethos of the COID, the other, more favoured, supported that of a historic heritage rooted in the past."¹

The Council hoped to raise the profile of British design by exploiting British victory in the War to promote its status as a leading nation in the reconstruction of the peace along with America and the Soviet Union. In reality, Britain had become dependent on American aid and was no longer regarded a leading nation in the new world order.

Labour's socialist aims for industry meant the Council's Utility Scheme resembled the Soviet rather than American model, which did not bode well either commercially or creatively. Utility exhibited something of the same ideology as Soviet design; its drab uniformity conveyed a sense of material deprivation that was reflected in clothing, furniture and furnishings, kitchen and tableware displays at the exhibition. Whether Utility's fusion of the national and continental; the old and the new, best represented British modernization is questionable, but the Council saw the scheme as vital to its long term objective of controlling design reform from the factory to the home:

"the project (BCMI) will secure to the Council an initiative in promoting and maintaining high standards, which it might well lose if industry's plans were allowed to take shape independently of the influence which will be conferred upon the Council by its power of selection for a notable national Exhibition. The Council's general programme for industry is a long term one. The plan for forming design centres must come into being slowly and its practical effects on production will be slower still."²

¹ Maguire and Woodham, J. 1997, p.95

² AAD/1977/4 1946 Draft II, p. 1, 1946, SKID 782 CoID

In considering the Council's aim for Britain Can Make It to project an exciting sense of transformation in the future, it might have been expected that in the "Designs of the Future" display -- which was the last section of the exhibition approaching the Cromwell Road exit -- for there to have featured futuristic prototypes of Utility. These would have conveyed a much stronger impression of the Council's aims to the public, and it is surprising that this was not attempted.

The exhibition's arrangement, which was made to look more like a department store of commodities contrasted with the V&A's traditional arrangement, recalling debates around the commercial nature of 'modern' design. The Council was conflicted over this matter because commercially successful goods did not necessarily meet their criteria of good design. To remedy this, they included the caveat that exhibits should primarily be orientated towards shaping a new market for "tomorrow's world":

"During the next few years, any goods that can be produced will be saleable. This offers an opportunity to which industry may rise - or a temptation to which it may succumb. We submit that national interest requires the Council to do everything possible to endure that the temptation of turning out poor or old fashioned design in the knowledge that it will sell at home and abroad is resisted, and the opportunity to attain new and progressive standards, without commercial risk, is grasped. The suggested Exhibition will set the current of industrial activity moving in the right direction from the outset."³

It was clear there would be no fudging of what 'modern' meant as this was intended to be as integral to the exhibition as its Britishness was. From as early as 1945 Cripps sent C. S. Leslie a letter that determined its pitch: "There is one thing I forgot to say about the Exhibition. No precious stuff. All manufactured goods - not handmade."⁴ Cripps didn't want modern products to be viewed as objets d'art either, which was the threat the setting of the V&A posed. The priority was to convey the message at home and abroad that British design was a force for progress in the World's markets. Britain Can Make It was to offer "Something of almost everything, at all price ranges" while disseminating the Council's 'good design' message through the Exhibition's brochure: "Design '46 includes only things that are fit for purpose, of good appearance, and pleasant to handle. Many of the things shown embody new materials and new processes."⁵

³ AAD/1977/4 1946, Draft II, p. 1, SKID 782 CoID

⁴ AAD/1977/4 Letter from Stafford Cripps 10/08/45, SKID 782, CoID

⁵ DESIGN '46 catalogue CoID, 1946, p.1.

Kitchens at both higher and lower ends of the market encapsulated these qualities as the pictures below show, with bright easy to clean laminate fitted units and practical storage solutions.



Figure 26 View of kitchen in a cottage in a modern mining village by Edna Moseley
Furnished Rooms Section DCA0979



Figure 27 View of the kitchen of a large well-appointed house by Maxwell Fry & Jane Drew
Furnished Rooms Section DCA0905

The exhibition was arranged thematically and organised along a route that took up the entire ground floor of the Museum as shown in the plan below:

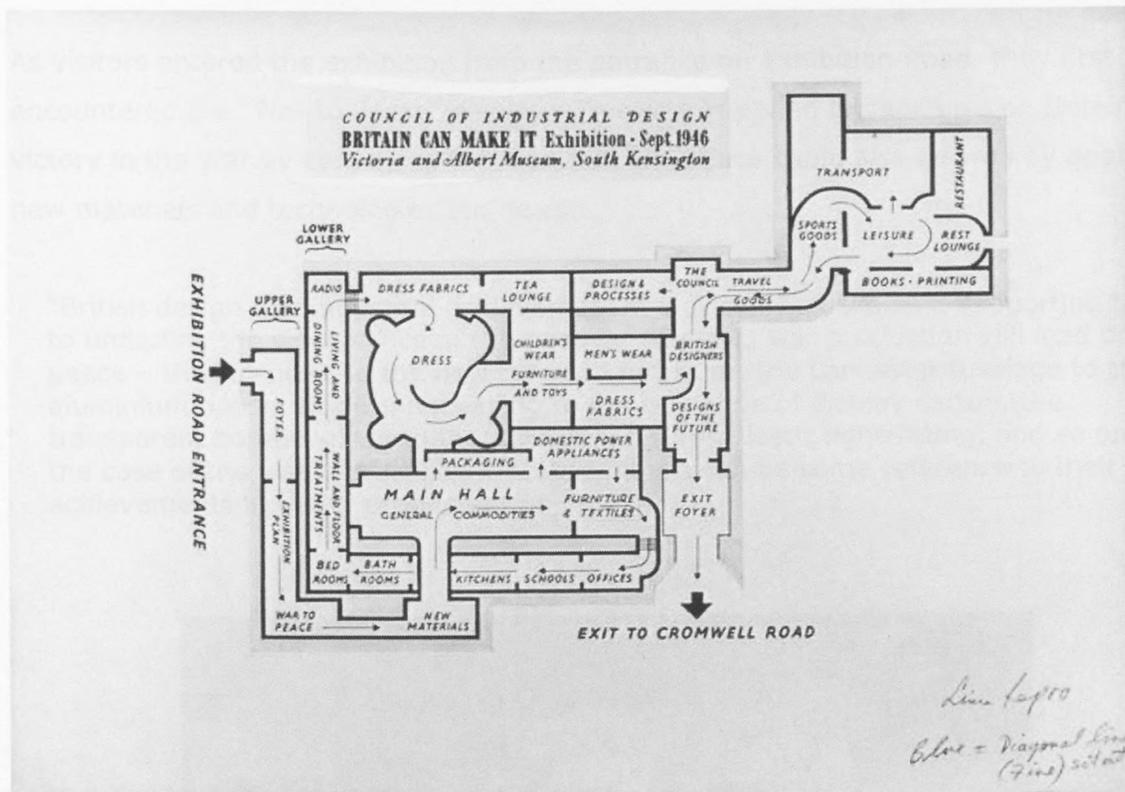


Figure 28 Circulation plan of Exhibition DCA0389

Displays were strategically placed so that the "Great British Designers" display led onto the Council's display, which imparted the idea that the two were co-joined. For the section "What Industrial Design Means", Misha Black, and Milner Grey produced a thorough portrayal of the industrial design process from the drawing board to market and consumption, where the designer was presented in a central role. Black was also careful to convey the Council's concern that modern values should be promoted through good design, and made this a central concept of Britain Can Make It.

The exhibition's overall design was entrusted to James Gardner. In an interview with Giles Verlarde published in 1986, Gardner reflected on museum displays and exhibitions before Britain Can Make It, "The tradition was to have a gallery with a walk way, a feature at the end and displays at the side"⁶. Gardner spoke of the changes that he and Black initiated, "In 1946 we had done the reverse thing, partly because of Cripps's anxiety to have an exhibition even if there were no exhibits. When the visitor came into the hall, he couldn't see any of the goods; he went round corners and, in and out,

⁶ Giles Verlarde interview with James Gardner in Sparke, P. 1986, p. 17

and it made it more exciting."⁷ Speaking of the V&A Gardner had found, "It was a very convoluted building"⁸.

As visitors entered the exhibition from the entrance on Exhibition Road, they first encountered the "War to Peace" display. This was intended to capitalise on Britain's victory in the War by conveying the idea that the peace could also be won by applying new materials and technologies to design:

"British design and industrial achievement in war can be used as a supporting theme to underline the significance of the postwar display... war production will lead on to peace – the Mosquito to the new plywood furniture, the Lancaster fuselage to the aluminium house, tropical packaging to the new type of display carton, the transparent bomber-nose to the delicately figures plastic light-fitting, and so on. In the case of the wartime civilian industries there can be some reference to their achievements in Utility production"⁹



Figure 29 Part of the 'War to Peace' display by Beverly Pick DCA1318

Next was the section on new materials that included plastics and aluminium, leading to the main hall which contained general commodities from where several sections featuring furnished rooms could be accessed. As well as school rooms and offices, there were domestic furnished rooms: living rooms, bedrooms, dining rooms, kitchens and bathrooms, designed for different socio- economic and family groups as well as single professionals. Nicholas Bentley's drawings of these individuals and family

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ AAD/1977/4 1946, Draft II, p. 1, SKID 782 CoID

groups were based on the poet John Betjeman's characterisations, and convey a particular social and cultural orientation of those conceiving the Exhibition.



Figure 30 Drawings by Nicholas Bentley of individuals and families characterised by social class based on descriptions by John Betjeman, on which room designs were to be based. AAD/1977/4

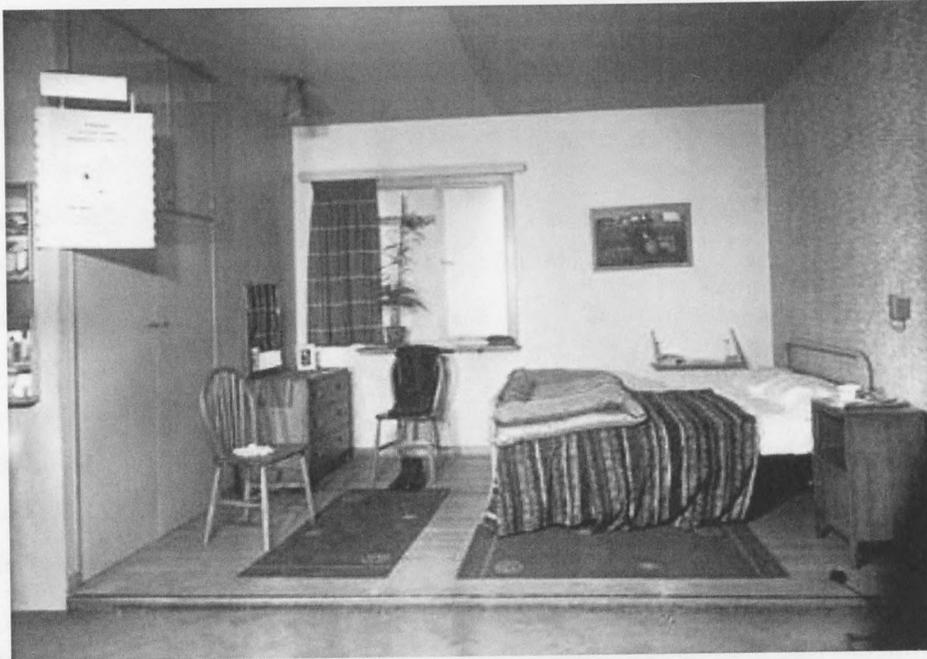


Figure 31 A bedroom in a farm cottage by D. L. Medd
in Furnished Rooms Section DCA1773

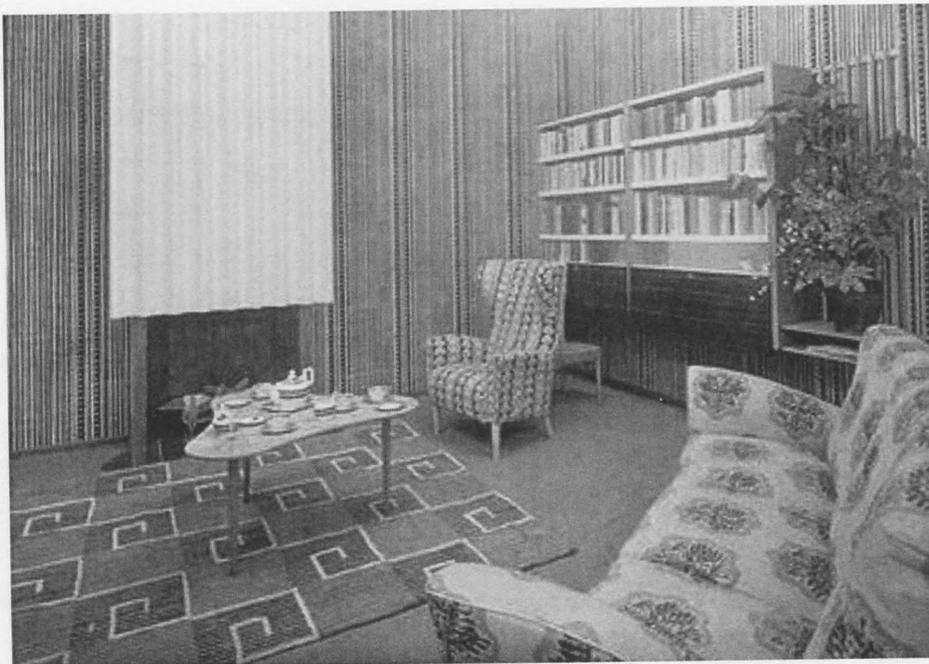


Figure 32 Living room in a Large Town House by R. D. Russell
In Furnished Rooms Section DCA0938

Britain Can Make It was almost universally hailed a great success. The number of visitors: 1,432,369, was unprecedented in the V&A and all the more impressive considering the population's limited leisure time and cash just after the War. The Government had invested considerably in the exhibition and in establishing the Council, and was interested in monitoring the public's reaction to new British industrial design as part of its wider programme of national reconstruction. The social survey organization Mass Observation was commissioned to carry out this work as during the War the Government had commissioned it to report on social welfare for the Beveridge Report¹⁰. Mass Observation used a number of methods to investigate the public's attitudes to the exhibition that comprised of postal and face to face questionnaires; observations and ephemera, including a design quiz to test audience's knowledge; interviews with retailers and households to see what difference, if any, the Exhibition had made to the nation's taste. Altogether around 2, 523 interviews were conducted.

The extra money spent on publicity proved worthwhile as Mass Observation reported most people in the country had heard about Britain Can Make It a month after it had opened. Their Report found that in London nine out of ten people had heard of it and in Birmingham, Portsmouth, Manchester and Nottingham, very nearly as many knew about it. Variations in this knowledge throughout the country were very small and appeared to have no relation at all to the distance from London. In answer to the question "How did you first hear about the Exhibition?" findings were as follows: 34% newspaper; 22% advertising; 17% B.B.C.; 12% Friends; 4% Business channels; 2% Cinemas¹¹. Despite this wide knowledge and the emphasis on publicity as the method of first hearing of the Exhibition, less than one-third knew who organised it. Even among the half who thought they knew 57% mentioned the Council; 13% the Board of Trade; 13% British Industries; 11% Government; 6% miscellaneous.

Of those who came to Britain Can Make It, fifteen per cent more women than men attended, which was expected as most men were still coming out of service. The audience profile was youthful with three fifths of all adult visitors under 40. Class composition varied more from the national average with 72% artisan skilled working class (C), compared with 14% middle class (b) and 14% unskilled working class (D).¹²

¹⁰ M-O A TC 26 1939-49, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, Part 4. Includes material on World War II and post-war reconstruction, including: Post War Hopes, 1944, and Beveridge Report Surveys, 1942-47 (grass-roots opinions concerning the Welfare State); Health, 1939-49 and Family Planning, 1944-49; Adult & Higher Education; Day Nurseries; Public Administration and Social Services in Wartime; Reconstruction.

¹¹ M-O A ID/903 TC 26 Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, Section A: 1. Background "Knowledge of the Exhibition" Table 1, p. 1.

¹² M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, Table 3, p. 3. The Report stated that the approximate proportion of people in the population of Britain was 20% class B; 40% class C and 40% class D12.

Observers were instructed to use an impersonal notation when identifying "human specimens" where they used the Government's A, B, C, D social class scheme on a declining scale where 'A' distinguished upper class professionals, 'B' indicated the managerial class, 'C1' related to white collar clerical and supervisory class, 'C2' represented the skilled manual artisanal class and 'D' represented the unskilled manual, unemployed and low income¹³. Mass Observation determined the social class of visitors by occupation as well as their own observations of visitor's dress, accents and other characteristics. For example, the formula M45D described a man of about forty five who looked or sounded unskilled working class (Category D)¹⁴.

Some visitors came for entertainment, "There was an awfully big queue at the cinema, so I decided to come here instead." "F20 Factory Worker"¹⁵. Another reported, "I had nothing else to do and my fiancé has had to go away for a few days. Sunday is such a dull day and I am fed up with pictures". "F23, Typist"¹⁶. Some had no idea of what was inside and came for entertainment alone, attracted by the queue where people had become so conditioned to queuing they expected something at the end to be worth queuing for: "Well, it will be something to make the eyes sparkle, as they say. Other than that I don't really know." "M45 married"¹⁷. It is interesting to see how many people had been enticed by the prospect of seeing something new without necessarily being interested in the commodity ranges or subject of design. Others were more interested but expected to be disappointed at not being able to buy any products: "I want to see what it is we're sending abroad and can't have ourselves. Anything that is good gets sent for export. Only rotten things remain for us to use." F40, housewife¹⁸. "I'm going to look at the things we can't buy yet." M55, tube train driver¹⁹.

Comment on the non availability of commodities on display was frequent inside the exhibition but was mentioned by only 4% of visitors leaving as a reason for disliking what was on show²⁰. Some people had come especially to see special items with 47% of men and 60% of women who came to see a special exhibit compared with 38% of men and 30% of women coming to see no special exhibit²¹. On the whole visitors were vague about what they expected the Exhibition to be like: "Don't know. A lot of things

¹³ T. H. C. Stevenson, a medical statistician in the General Register Office first devised the social class scheme in 1851.

¹⁴ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, p. 3

¹⁵ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, P. 11

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, Point 3: "Special Exhibits" P. 12

²¹ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, Point 3: "Special Exhibits"

Table 11. p, 12

I hope. I'm not particularly interested in any one thing. I want to see them all." "F21, seamstress"²²; "Havent studied it that much. Anything and everything I hope. I want to be surprised." "M48, railway clerk"²³. The most commonly cited reason for visiting was general interest but respondents did have other reasons: "To see the things because if you don't go and see you can't mix with people to talk about it."²⁴ The Report described such answers as "the prestige reason appearing – feeling that it was the "done thing" to see "BCMI"-that to admit one had not been would be to lose face."²⁵ Interest in future living and in production and progress were found to be closely combined, and together covered nearly one third of all answers. "I wanted to see what was available and the industrial developments that are taking place." "M30, R.A.F". "It's my intention to see exactly what Britain can turn out and to see what is being exported at the moment." "F26, Minister's wife"²⁶.

The greatest amount of spontaneous comment and approval was directed to the setting and lay-out of the exhibition rather than exhibits, "It was beautifully got up – the design and the way it was shown. And I thought the rooms were very attractive and the way they were shown." Housewife²⁷

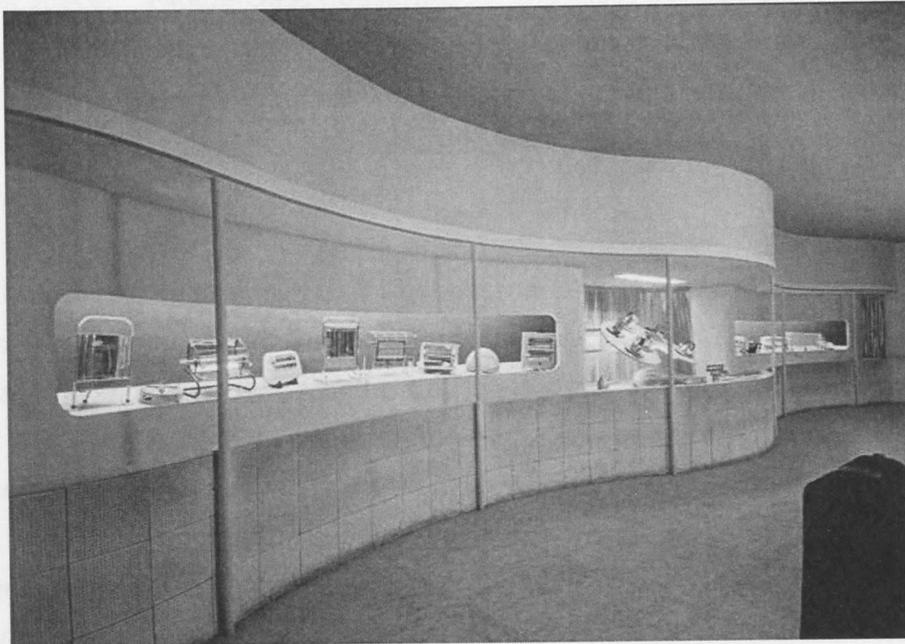


Figure 33 Display of Electrical Goods DCA1041

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46, P. 13

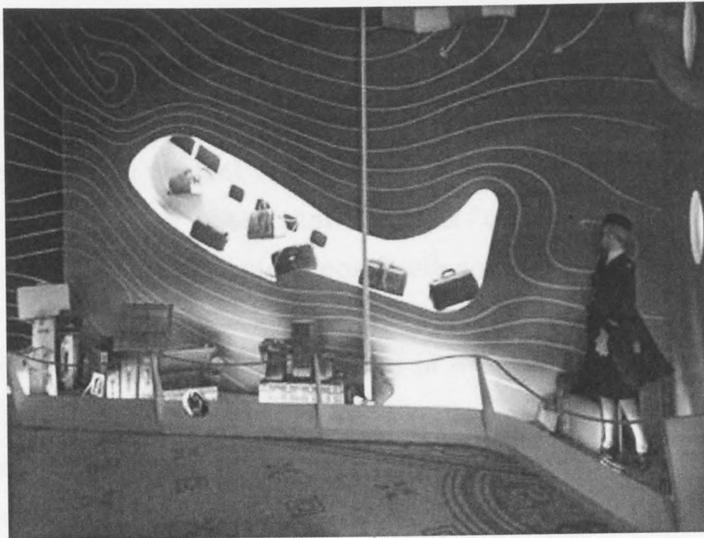


Figure 34 Display of Travel Luggage DCA1063

Many others specified some particular section or aspect of the exhibition that interested them most: "The different rooms. I liked the way they were spaced out, it gave you a pretty good idea of what things looked like and how a lot of things could fit into a small space." "Middle-class housewife"²⁸ The most popular exhibits were "Shopwindow Street" favoured by women and "Mechanical and Electric Goods", were favoured by men. The Fashion Halls were also popular; in particular, the sportswear section. Furniture was found to be a favourite with everyone, as people returned to normal home life once more.

However, in view of the Council's aim to show the best of new British design, comments were disappointing. An accounts clerk commented "I thought it was exceptionally good, this is the second time I have been round. I was rather rushed this time. But there is nothing out-standing about it, most of the designs were foreseen by us in pre-war days."²⁹ Those who were disappointed or who disliked the exhibition were more vociferous but there was very little agreement as to the reasons for disappointment. The two most common complaints were that there was nothing really new to see, and that everything was for export. But each of these reasons was only mentioned by one person in twenty-five³⁰. The wife of a manufacturer of children's clothes commented that "A lot of new designs are emulative of American stuff. The war has set us back in design, right back to pre-war and we're just trundling on after 1939 - we've been set back six years."³¹

²⁸ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46 P. 14

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ M-O A ID/903 TC 26, Report on "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition 26/11/46 P. 15

Similarly, attitudes to Utility were also found to be generally negative as one observer noted: "No one likes really plain ware... Others dominated by anti utility feelings, wanting something much more ornate."³² It seemed Utility was seen as old fashioned where it was noted "On the subject of the "Old Fashioned" people definitely prefer modern stuff."³³ One observer noted that the label "old-fashioned is an accusation"³⁴. Although the Report found most visitors positively commented on modern design, there were some who did not like it. A Regular Army officer age 30 said "I'm rather Conservative in views, but I don't like this kind of modern furniture. I prefer a chair to be conventional rather than comfortable. You know the type of chair one gets in most clubs - the leather bound kind."³⁵ On the whole the Report found that furniture was criticised by audiences for not showing anything that was truly new; for not being comfortable looking; and showing too many splayed legs as a feature of the 'modern' as seen in photographs of the furniture below.



Figure 35 Tables DCA1108



Figure 36 Chairs DCA1105

³² M-O A, Box 5/B 'Overheard in Pottery section'

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ M-O A Box 5/G 'Free Furniture Design interview 14th Nov with a male aged 24 employed as a 'Variety Artist''

The Council wanted evidence of whether the exhibition had begun to change people's tastes on the high street and in their homes. Mass Observation conducted a series of informal interviews with representatives from retail and households. A buyer from Harrods, which was in close proximity to the V&A, commented that it was too early to make an assessment,

"We haven't arrived at the point of detecting any change in people's tastes. Its too premature to say anything... Your explaining about changes in taste on account of B.C.M.I. is too far advance of the times. With regards to the new furniture its all Utility. There is a bigger demand for the new models coming out, than for the old, naturally. People are out to buy the new."³⁶

The buyer went onto say,

"This state of affairs was promoted by the B. of Trade which publicised these new models in the Spring (New Chiltern range). But the supply is extremely short. We haven't even been provided with catalogues and are, therefore, unable to sustain people's interest or to tell them anything about them. The retailers are only stocked with the old Utility. The demand for the old stuff has dropped. People are hanging onto their units until they can buy the new models."³⁷

Harrods's customers were traditionally the upper and upper middle classes but not the lower, however, responses from interviews with other furniture retailers: Story and Co, Fulham Furniture, Informals of Battersea and Barkers, told of a similar situation that it was too early to tell whether people's tastes had been changed since there was no real choice at the time and new Utility ranges were hard to come by. Times Furnishing Co. (Waltham Green) noted "We haven't noticed any tendency towards hanging on until BCMI goods come onto the market. The people are going more towards the new utility lines during the past 6 weeks. But they haven't, I don't think, been influenced by BCMI in anyway, because the demand was there before."³⁸

Retailers also speculated that customers were holding out for new models or that if they had bought the old Utility they were asking to exchange it for new lines as they became available, indicating a general expectation among the public that new designs would soon be appearing. The London Co-Operative Society reported: "We've had enquiries - the sway is the non Utility up there"³⁹ At this point the interviewer asked, "Have you found other people's tastes have been altered at all by what furniture they've seen at the Exhibition?" To which the reply was,

³⁶ M-O A, Box 5/F "Informal Interviews" 'Interview with Harrods Buyer' 18/11/46

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Interview with London Co-Operative Society 19/11/46

"Only in necessities – it's the labour saving gadgets that seem to have influenced them more than furniture – we've had quite a few enquiries for catalogues... now that the public have seen the stuff in the Exhibition I think they're more patient if they realise that the stuff is coming through slowly... it's no good promising anything to customers yet."⁴⁰

In an interview one retailer, Kensington Furniture, noted a change in taste towards modern furniture had occurred though not necessarily because of the exhibition, "In some cases yes, and in some cases no." When asked whether or not the exhibition had influenced the sale of Utility furniture, his reply more specifically noted to his experience in consumer trends,

"If people have plenty of money and are lucky enough to find a house, which must be furnished, then money's no object. They buy the non-utility good quality second hand furniture. On the other hand, you find people getting married with not a bean to spend, waiting until the better designs come out and the cheaper furniture comes... From my personal experience I've never heard mentioned BCMI in reference to Utility."⁴¹

Informal interviews with the public entailed observers arranging follow up visits to the homes of visitors who had answered questionnaires in the exhibition. However, the picture concurred with what was recorded from the retail sector, which was that people couldn't make changes to their homes due to the lack of goods available. One home visit was arranged with a Mrs Samuels who had visited Britain Can Make It with one of her children and an Observer from Mass Observation Judith Henderson, who had been keeping a diary of the "S Family", as she referred to them, of Bethnal Green⁴². The reasons why this family became the focus of a longer term study in connection with the exhibition is unclear. Perhaps they represented the Council's new audience. The study recalled the connection between Bethnal Green and new design that featured in Chapter One, only this time practices of consumption, rather than production, were of primary concern to the Government's design reforming mission.

On 20 November 1946 Mrs Henderson wrote to Tom Harrison of Mass Observation agreeing to undertake the research project⁴³. Henderson kept a diary of the "S. Family" describing their home: "looks untidy – glass door often broken, with plywood panel substitutes, drooping curtains inside. Indoors, it looks grubby and haphazard."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ M-O A, Box 5/F "Informal Interviews" Interview with Kensington Furniture 19/11/46

⁴² M-O A Box 5/K "Diary by Judith Henderson on the S. family"

⁴³ M-O A Letter from Mrs Judith Henderson to Tom Harrison 20/11/46

⁴⁴ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, P. 2

Mr S. was a machine tool maker, was often unemployed and suffered from an illness that affected his stomach, Mrs S. who took in casual needlework to supplement the family income, and their five children, "the elder boy, under-sized, pale"; "the second child... Is constantly hungry, asking for food,"⁴⁵ "the third child... Mother says he is often ill". She makes a point that he had attended school since he was four. The fourth and fifth boys were under four and the youngest had been admitted to hospital with suspected diphtheria. The family had had another baby girl who had died. They lived in a nine room house but Henderson mentioned that she never visited the upstairs rooms⁴⁶. Henderson recorded her visit to Britain Can Make It Exhibition with Mrs S. and her son Geoffrey, on 15 November 1946:

"Mrs S, had never been to S. Kensington before, or to any exhibition of a similar kind. She told me that she and her husband were anxious to go, to get ideas which might be useful to them in furnishing their own house. Her husband was unfortunately unable to go, we went without him...During the first part of the Exhibition she did not show very much interest, not attempting to read or listen to the remarks on design or to look at the little insets in the first hall. "

It seems Mrs S. might have spent some time adjusting to the exhibition's setting as "The first thing she commented on was the barrage balloon and the rubber gun – seemed glad to see those things again."⁴⁷ They visited "Shopwindow Street"⁴⁸, where Mrs S. said she liked the pearl handled cutlery, "but not in her household"⁴⁹; and the crockery which, she commented had "real class"⁵⁰ and thought "it ought to be put in a corner cabinet"⁵¹, which Henderson noted she did not have. Mrs S. did not look at glass or silver ware and moved on to packaging where she discussed cellophane wrapping, saying she had to wait long enough for food as it was and preferred to buy fresh. They then entered the "Heat, Light and Power" section where Mrs S. mentioned she liked the electric heaters and Hoovers. Looking at bathrooms, Mrs S. lamented she wished she had one. At the toy stand she found many toys "too intricate and fussy for the age-levels they were designed to please."⁵² In the Furnished Rooms section, Henderson noted she didn't seem interested in the illustrations or interiors of offices but that she did like the schoolroom, remarking it wasn't like one she had known.

⁴⁵ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, p. 4

⁴⁶ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, P, 6

⁴⁷ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, p.1

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, p. 2

In the Modern Miner's Cottage Mrs S. commented that the floor and shelving were in too light a colour "it was bound to get dirty at once"⁵³ Henderson noted Mrs S. would often point out an object to say that it was similar to what her sister or mother had, and that she would also like to have them, indicating a familial connection with design was important to her appreciation. This could also be seen in her like of embroidered textiles, which she practised, and designs for children. Mrs S. liked to engage with new ideas that were presented for the home as noticing that dining tables were not covered with a cloth Henderson recorded, "she thought it a very good idea"⁵⁴ and liked the divan which divided into three sections in one room since "you could move the sections around if one got worn"⁵⁵. Her practical critique of design extended to radios, which she found "most interesting – doesn't often get a chance to listen"⁵⁶; Women's dresses, "mostly too fussy and impractical"⁵⁷ although she did like one or two more tailored outfits; the Children's room she "liked the bedroom very much – nice for a child to have a room of her own"; Men's clothing "rather dull... she liked to see them in bright colours". At Black's display of Industrial Design she was singularly unimpressed "silly all this fuss about designing an egg cup. There was only one shape for an egg cup anyway"⁵⁸. She quickly passed through.



Figure 37 View of "Birth of an Egg Cup" display by Misha Black DCA0821

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, p. 3

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

Mrs S. disapproved of certain aspects of living rooms, "most of the fabrics too light – impractical for children."⁵⁹ In Travel bags and clothing she asked "This kind of baggage was only for very rich people wasn't it?"⁶⁰ When she came to some fabrics produced for the West African market Henderson noted "She said she liked them best of any designs she had seen, thought they must have better taste than us."⁶¹ Here, again Mrs S. gave a familial reference in saying, "Her husband's brother, who had been in Africa during the War, had found the same thing – many of the things they made were lovely – much better than ours; not really savages at all."⁶² In sports and hobbies she liked roller-skates commenting that her eldest child had a pair.

In Furniture Mrs S. was interviewed by another Observer who asked her to point out what she liked, and by this time it was notable that her confidence had greatly increased, "she was quite willing to oblige and talked readily"⁶³. Afterwards she told Henderson "I've never had my opinion asked for before in such things, so I thought I'd have my say."⁶⁴ Mrs S. confided in Henderson that choices needed to be made very differently with a large family as to how things would last and told her she intended to "get her home more presentable-looking when the children get a bit older"⁶⁵. They finally visited the section on the future, where Mrs S. said she liked the new design for a taxi and was amused by the three storey train. She was especially pleased with the caravan, "open air holiday much the best plan – would like something like that"⁶⁶ but was greatly alarmed by the electric bed. Henderson summed up her impressions of the visit:

"On the whole I was rather surprised by her lack of obvious enthusiasm though she seemed pleased by a good many things. She said she thought that everyone – even poor people – ought to see it, to get ideas for themselves and know what could be done. She looked at things throughout from a very practical personal standpoint, whether these things would be suitable for her home and her family."⁶⁷

However, the point of the exercise was that Mrs S. should give her views from real life experience and, in so doing, give the consumer's perspective that the Council wanted.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, p. 4

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ M-O A Box 5/K Diary by Judith Henderson on "S. Family", "Visit to the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition" 15/11/46, p. 5

The visit was followed up with visits to the S. Family home to see if the exhibition had changed their taste but concluded it had not:

"It was difficult for Mrs S. to relate the exhibition to her own home as it was not for her just a case of certain items in the different rooms being altered... where from the point of view of alteration the exhibition had left her conscious of the effect except to make her wish she could have the whole room as she saw it in the exhibition. Mrs S. seems to have definite tastes of her own and though she may have gleaned some new ideas in device from the exhibition it will not have radically altered her taste as she is already aware of modern design and had made up her mind when she buys something she knows it has got to last and that chance may not occur again and the main thing affecting her choice would be practical common sense. Nevertheless the exhibition did have some effect as both Mr and Mrs S. minds are fertile ground for any new mechanical device."⁶⁸

If the reason for this study was that the "S. Family" represented the Council's new consumer, then it did not reveal much useful information about new consumer trends because the family was on a very low income. But it seems Harrison was delighted with Henderson's "Notes on Diary of S. Family":

"Extremely fascinating stuff... there is a good deal that could be done by OBSERVATION, if time can be fitted in, e.g: Mrs S.s' shopping habits; regularity, times of leaving and returning, shopping routine, system, plan, budget. Children's street play habits. Bed times, lights on and off etc. We could discuss these and many other things when we meet... I think everything you are doing is interesting, but as well as describing the children, important as that is, one wants to use them as much as possible as informants and also to take every opportunity to get into the S. home."⁶⁹

Later, on 29 May 1947 he wrote to Henderson asking her to meet him to discuss "some work we are about to start for Beveridge on voluntary social service outlets etc., about which you probably have a lot of information about Bethnal Green"⁷⁰. Harrison's interest in the social aspects of Henderson's research brings attention to another dimension to this work. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, social research of the East End became a political tool where the work of Booth and the Webb's, in particular, was absorbed into the Labour party's policies. Britain Can Make It brought this audience within the post-war Labour Government's sights in plans to centralise programmes of industrial and social reform: the Utility Scheme and Welfare State. The balance of interests between the market and the welfare of the British public is described by David Crowley as "welfare capitalism"⁷¹: "under the aegis of the scheme

⁶⁸ M-O A Box 5/K, Handwritten note "General impression and comments" by Judith Henderson, 19/12/46

⁶⁹ M-O A Box 5/K Letter from Tom Harrison to Judith Henderson 04/12/46

⁷⁰ M-O A Box 5/K Letter from Tom Harrison to Judith Henderson 29/05/47

⁷¹ Crowley, D. in Attfield (1999) Utility Reassessed: The role of ethics in the practice of design, Manchester University Press, p58

were shaped by social ideals as much as economic pragmatism of wartime rationing, in that 'good design' was presumed to bring beneficial effects to the lives of those who consumed Utility's products."⁷²

The exhibition succeeded in attracting a large new audience of new British industrial design. It also inaugurated new methods of display that led to greater engagement with audiences. But, in general, Mass Observation audiences did not much care for the Council's approach to design education. Visitors spent far less time in the "What Industrial Design Means" section than any other and showed little interest in it. The problem was that the Council's view of the British public's taste was largely untested by consultation or survey. As Chapter 1 of this study shows, only a few select members of the design establishment were influential in influencing the V&A's decision to exclude 'modern' design in 1908. Mass Observation found that where good contemporary design was concerned, the public's taste turned out to be highly similar to the Council's, though it was not the same in the case of Utility.

The designer's imagined homes and furnished room interior displays for different social classes converged with Mass Observation's social categories, so that, in a sense, representation in textual form was seen to converge with design. That both Mass Observation and Britain Can Make It targeted 'the masses' revealed a new era of fascination with social design. In this sense, we may understand that contemporary design represented a material formula for mass society in Britain at the time that defined social housing and public buildings; new schools, hospitals and places of work.

Although Mass Observation found that it was too early to ascertain whether consumption tastes had changed, the exhibition's legacy prevailed in new exhibitory methods, which were adopted by other museums. For example, Misha Black designed for the Science Museum in 1948; and James Gardner went on to produce the Geological Museum's "Story of the Earth" exhibition of 1971, which was considered to have redefined science museum design and was critically acclaimed and imitated worldwide⁷³. The Design Research Unit went on to gain further prestigious commissions, from engineering and product design to interior design and corporate branding⁷⁴. In short, Britain Can Make It introduced a generation of British designers who influenced an entire range of some of the nations and the world's best known public and corporate identities.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ See "Giles Velarde interviews James Gardner" in Sparke, P. 1946 p. 9

⁷⁴ These included the Electricity Board Showrooms in 1954 by Black, Gibson and H. Diamond; the BOAC engineering hall at London Airport (now Heathrow) from 1951 to 1955 and the P&O Orient line's new liner Oriana by Black and Bayes in 1959. Other companies included Ilford, Courage brewery, Dunlop, London Transport and British Railways, including the D2000 engine by Black and Beresford Evans

But Britain Can Make It's immediate successor was already planned to be the Festival of Britain. In the meantime those who advocated design reform were convinced, "It is without exception the finest Exhibition that has ever been put on in this country or ever been put on by British interests in any foreign country...With this we finally get rid of the Victorian hang-over in design."⁷⁵ Most manufacturers, with the notable exception of manufacturers of Menswear and General Electric Lighting (GEL), agreed the exhibition was an outstanding success and wrote letters of congratulations to the Council. Nevertheless the exhibition had also experienced its share of acrimony from rejecting sixty percent of manufacture's products, which soured relations somewhat.

Most importantly, in terms of this study, Britain Can Make It showed that the display of contemporary design in the V&A had proved popular and accessible to a new British audience. The overwhelming majority of skilled working-class visitors challenged the received orthodoxy that the Museum's location prohibited their attendance, suggesting that representation of design, in a way that people felt was relevant to their lives in an accessible and engaging format, were more important factors. The exhibition's success signaled a receptive climate for the Museum to reconsider its policy towards contemporary design and return of its 'modern' collections from Bethnal Green, since this particular audience no longer represented the industrial producer it once did at the time of the New Art Display, so much that it did the Council's new consumer.

⁷⁵ This last comment by John Gloag to C. S. Leslie should be interpreted in light of the V&A's overall representation of design at this time, where Victorian design was 'daringly' presented as the most 'modern' among its collections. Gloag, J. to Leslie, 24/09/46

3.4. A Second Rearrangement but Still No Unity

By the end of his Directorship in 1944, Maclagan was aware of plans for a major post-war exhibition, and anticipated this would subsequently influence the Museum's rearrangement that he had been planning since 1937:

"It is even within the bounds of possibility that such a Temporary Exhibition might pave the way to a permanent breaking down of the hampering conditions which have been so serious a difficulty to us in the past and which have often excited such unfavourable comment from foreign visitors... I have so far as possible confined these notes to a consideration of the problems which will have to be faced when the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum are brought back after the war..."¹

Due to failing health, Maclagan knew he would not be presiding over these changes. Nevertheless he resolved to develop his plans for his successor: "it must be greatly to his advantage if the questions involved have been considered so far as this is possible, by the Advisory Council before he is called upon to take over his responsibilities as Director."² It seems Maclagan's desire to keep contemporary design at bay had survived the Council of Art and Industry's investigation mentioned in Chapter 2. It is likely this was because the War had interrupted proceedings. Having previously enjoyed success with his display of English design in the Octagon Court in 1936, Maclagan conceived an organisation of Primary Galleries devoted to British, or more specifically, English art from the Tudors up to 1825 in Rooms 51-8 and 118-26. On his retirement in April 1945, the task fell to Ashton. Maclagan anticipated it would take 12 months, but the nation's economic problems and labour shortages meant that rearrangement did not begin until 1947 and was not in place until the end of Labour's premiership in 1951.

Maclagan had predicted that Ashton would need to establish his plans within a relatively short period before the Museum's collections were returned from storage. As events transpired, he mainly followed Maclagan's scheme by dividing exhibits into primary thematic galleries organised by style, period and nationality; and secondary study galleries traditionally arranged by material³. As we shall see in the next section of this study, Ashton saw favourable circumstances to change the Museum's policy in respect of contemporary design. At least, it seemed possible an accommodation might be reached whereby the Council could exhibit contemporary exhibitions in the Museum. But eventually circumstances dictated that the Report of 1908's policy regarding

¹ AAD/1977/4 'Director's Memorandum on proposed Museum re-arrangement' May 1944

² Ibid

³ Burton A, 1999, p. 196

'modern' work was maintained where the collections stopped at 1820. However, where he was able to, Ashton set about conveying a sense of the modern aesthetically with well spaced out modern "white cube"⁴ displays so that exhibits, rooms and lighting imparted a modern unified effect for the aesthetic enjoyment of objets d' art.

Disappointingly the new approaches to display Britain Can Make It inaugurated, that proved so influential in the development of other museum displays in the future, were not used by the V&A. Neither were Gardener, Black nor any other designer who worked on the exhibition, employed by the Museum again. Instead, Ashton relied on his own resources, asserting, "I do think far too much emphasis has been placed on the integrity and skill of the designer. I would challenge any designer to put up as good a show as any intelligent museum man."⁵ Ashton thought that decorative art works should be viewed in the same way that fine art was in galleries so he based his scheme on what he knew of modern practice in art galleries. Hence, the Museum's concept of 'modern' began to change again as instead of focusing on collections; 'modern' design was used by Ashton as an aesthetic device to display historic objects as works of art which he intended would distinguish his new English Primary Galleries,

"In these galleries – more than at any other time in the history of the Museum – there was a demonstration of the belief that English art, particularly the art of the eighteenth century, could and should stand comparison with Italian art, and that it was a legitimate part of a national cultural history. Objects from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were not included unless they had been designed by Robert Adam."⁶

Ashton carried out his plans with little expertise to guide him. Rather than consulting professional designers, he preferred to rely on his own judgement. The basement perimeter galleries Britain Can Make It had earlier occupied, and helped rebuild, now housed Continental Art from 1525 to 1825. Due to the intense activity in collecting British art during the interwar years, the British collections had become more extensive than those from the Continent and occupied the upper floors (today this houses the British Galleries). The display started at 1500, with the Tudors and Stuarts until it reached 1759 at the main entrance, and then doubled back until it reached 1820.

Britain Can Make Its popularity introduced a new audience to the Museum that had been shown to be interested in contemporary design products displayed in a contemporary style. Although Ashton was unable to sustain this, and his gallery

⁴ Burton A, 1999, pp. 198-199

⁵ Ashton, L. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 97 1948-9, p. 864

⁶ Smith in Baker & Richardson 1997, p. 281

display was not as successful as Gardner's in reaching a new public, he did attempt to engage audiences with a new restaurant and later opening hours for music and theatrical performances. In so doing, Ashton was hailed as "among the first to envisage the rapidly increasing demands of a new public"⁷. His most ambitious plans concerned the Circulation department, which he envisaged would be replaced with a larger department dedicated to a much larger public role:

"The former Circulation department will, I hope, be expanded to include the internal educational facilities of the Museum as well as the external ones, and all such functions as guide lecturing, provision of photographs etc. will be here more practicably housed than hitherto; that Department will in fact become the voice of the Museum inside as well as outside the building. The collections of the old Circulation department will shortly undergo a complete stock-taking, and with additions of new material, will be able to provide for the provinces and I hope for certain centres in the Colonies and the Dominions, long terms loans of material appropriate to local needs as well as an annual programme of travelling exhibitions."⁸

Of course 'old Circulation' still looked after the Museum's 'modern' collections that, by this time, had grown considerably under the care of Peter Floud and his team although they still mainly focussed on Victorian and Edwardian design⁹. Floud was appointed Keeper of the department in 1947 and built a team that broke through traditional barriers by including several women staff and promoting scholarship in 'modern' design. It was clear from Ashton's proposal that if the new department was to take on a more active public education programme its collections would also. Circulation's 'modern' collection and its staff expertise, combined with a supportive Director in Ashton, and sympathetic Government, indicated favourable conditions for a larger programme of contemporary design. So what prevented it?

Circulation's close relationship with audiences meant it acted as the Museum's barometer of their changing requirements, which made it more susceptible to restructuring as social change occurred. After the widening of secondary education with the Education Act of 1944, it became apparent that after the War Circulation would face its biggest challenge:

"Since 1880 the Department had lent not only to art schools but also to museums and galleries; from 1919 it extended the loan service to secondary schools. After the Second World War, demand from schools looked likely to mushroom, for as a

⁷ Trenchard Cox. 'The Museum in a Changing World', V&A Bulletin' Vol. I. no. 1, 1965, p. i. CF. the allusion to Ashton's 'revolution in technique of display', *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 97, 1955, p. 335

⁸ AAD/1977/4 Ashton, L. Plans on Circulation, 14/03/1946

⁹ During Smith's Directorship Circulation had made the case for admitting Victorian work before it became difficult to find suitable examples. See Smith, C. S. 1997, p. 282.

consequence of the Education Act of 1944, the number of potential borrowers was suddenly increased by several thousand."¹⁰

Returning to Velarde's interview with Gardner, it is notable that on being asked what he thought could be done about design education Velarde reported that, "He (Gardner) thinks that the British attitude to life is still embedded in the 19th century, and that the only way to change thinking is to change the teaching in schools. "Art schools?" I asked (interviewer). "No," he replied, "schools at basic level."¹¹ We know from Chapter 1 that Circulation offered a school loans service, but in 1901 this entailed a relatively limited provision of temporary loans to key regional art and teacher training colleges as well as public museums, art galleries and libraries. Under the Act the meaning of 'school' changed from a state elementary to tripartite system consisting of primary, secondary grammar and tertiary provision for every child which implied a much larger national operation.

Initially, Circulation planned to respond with a schools service over a ten year period, but this failed to materialise along with Ashton's more ambitious plans for the Department's national outreach role. It seems the necessary funding just wasn't available when work for rearrangement began. However, it is necessary to consider this against other major projects as it seems considerable sums of money were made available for Ashton's Primary English Galleries and, even more so, for acquiring three historic houses: Apsley House, Ham House, and Osterley Park House, as part of an arrangement with the National Trust between 1948 and 1949. The administrative and running costs of these houses alone were a considerable commitment. This leads us to consider that the decision not to proceed with a new gallery of contemporary design or extended schools service did not so much reflect a lack of funding as it did a lack of political strategy on longer term design education.

¹⁰ Burton, A. 1999, p. 207

¹¹ Ibid

3. 5. A Phoney Victory

The term "phoney war" was used to describe the first few months of World War II when Britain evacuated, prepared and then waited for signs of invasion that didn't come. I have appropriated it here to convey the invasion of contemporary design Maclagan anticipated would follow Britain Can Make It, but that never materialised. With rearrangement underway in 1949, the Museum and Council explored the potential of the Museum's North Court as an appropriate gallery for modern industrial design. They planned that the gallery would open in conjunction with the Festival of Britain in 1951, and consulted the Festival's organiser Gerald Barry on a site visit that was recorded by Gordon Russell, then Chairman of the Council:

"Visited the V&A Museum with Gerald Barry (of Festival of Britain) and met Leigh Ashton and Peter Floud. Inspected North Court. It is, I should say about 120' x 120' within walls about 30' high. Glass roof. These are from very heavy cast-iron stanchions and Ashton suggests that a floor put in between these leaving centre open for light below would make a very fine gallery. The essential thing is that the job should use very little steel and should be reasonably cheap."¹

Russell proposed that a qualified person should meet with Peter Floud, on site and to assess the possibilities, "We might get a fine gallery of contemporary industrial design in 1951. If necessary, fee someone, but speed is important and it must be confidential."² Floud duly met with the consultant engineer Mr Felix Samuely 'in confidence' to survey the North Court on 25 February 1949. Subsequently, a report was produced and was favourably received by the Council which proceeded to ask for an estimate. This came back on 24 March 1949 "in the neighbourhood of £5000"³.

Russell then wrote to Barry 31 March 1949 with Samuely's Report asking "What do you think the next step might be?"⁴ This was attached to a "Draft Statement" proposing the gallery which stated, "It is now strongly urged that the fulfilment of this be considered as a priority for the Festival of Britain in 1951,"⁵ as formerly proposed,

"If this is agreed, it is suggested that the North Court of the Victoria and Albert Museum be considered as a suitable site for the following reasons:
(a) It fulfils the original conception of the Victoria and Albert Museum and has the support of Sir Leigh Ashton; (b) It could be achieved at estimate; (c) Other educational bodies, such as the Royal College of Art, are interested in seeing this scheme developed."⁶

¹ DCA File 118 series number 26 1945, 1946 and 1947 'Regarding the position of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Council of Industrial Design.' note by Gordon Russell 21/02/49

² Ibid

³ DCA File 118 Estimate 24/03/49

⁴ DCA File 118 Letter from Gordon Russell to Gerald Barry 31/03/49

⁵ DCA File 118 'Draft Statement Victoria and Albert Museum project' 06/04/49

⁶ DCA File 118

The draft was sent to Ashton, Robin Darwin of the RCA and others who supported the project for them to produce letters to this effect. On 8 April Leigh Ashton wrote under the heading "Victoria and Albert Museum 1951"⁷, "Gerald Barry is now prepared to back this project to the full and take it to Sir Stafford Cripps and Herbert Morrison. He is asking for a paper stating the project from the point of view of the Council of Industrial Design, with supporting letters from yourself, Robin Darwin and others."⁸

A second statement was drawn up this time under the heading: "Victoria and Albert Museum Project" dated 13 April 1949, which outlined the reasons for the project and the Council's aims stressing its educational value: "The value to students of an exhibition of goods of first-rate design from all over the world can hardly be exaggerated. For the past ten years they have had to rely almost entirely on photographs: a poor substitute indeed."⁹ The statement made a convincing case for the proposed gallery:

"1851 was an international exhibition and some flavour of this ought to survive 100 years later. The Council of Industrial Design therefore proposes to hold, under the auspices of the Festival of Britain, an International Conference of Industrial Designers – the first of its kind – in 1951 and, as an integral part of this, to ask the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum to put on a small but highly selective exhibition of industrial design, international in scope. This the Director is most willing to do, and has suggested a way of making the necessary space available...this scheme which would go far to fulfilling the purpose for which the V&A was founded more than 100 years ago and the cost of which is extremely modest considering that it meets a national need will commend itself to the Ministry of Education."¹⁰

Russell wrote to Robert Jordan of the Architectural Association on 13 April 1949, also under the heading, "Victoria and Albert Museum, 1951"¹¹ and marked "confidential"¹²: "Barry is keen on this and wishes to take it to Cripps and Morrison. He asks for a paper from the CoID, and I would like to back this with a supporting letter from you, as Principal of the most important architectural training school."¹³

On the same day he wrote to Gerald Barry, "As it directly affects the Ministry of Education, I am inclined to think an opportunity should be taken of canvassing John Maud and Bray before seeing Cripps. It would be unfortunate if opposition built up

⁷ DCA File 118 Letter from Ashton to Gordon Russell 08/04/49

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ DCA File 118 Letter from Gordon Russell to Robert Jordan 13/04/49

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

inside the Ministry of Education because they felt by-passed"¹⁴. Barry soon after replied to Russell on 22 April 1949 thanking him for the draft statement: "I think it would be best if, in the first instance, I had a word with John Maud on the telephone. In case it should be useful, I am drafting something which could go to Cripps either as a letter or a memorandum, to accompany or precede a visit."¹⁵

On 25 April 1949 Robert Jordan wrote to Russell thanking him for the draft and including his letter of support of the proposal. In the letter he outlines the British design scene as uncompetitive in the last 50 years: "The Scandinavian and some other countries have had a temporary advantage of us in the last half century and I am convinced that this is largely due to the fact that their architects have never lost touch with interior and industrial design, as ours have done."¹⁶ He goes on to make an argument with quite profound implications for the historical role of the V&A: "There has never been a standard of reference, a place where one could go to see the best that was being done in many fields, and the present proposal will do more than anything I can think of to put this right." Jordan then acknowledges the importance of the proposed gallery to education in architecture in tandem with design:

"we have recognised that, in our increasingly complex world, we have to produce one more specialist for the architects team – the "interior designer" – one who can advise the architect on what is being done in the industrial field and can assemble for him the adjuncts of building – furniture, textiles, ceramics, technical equipment, et cetera. With this in mind we have just set up a joint A.A. - R.C.A. Committee, who are to launch an "interior design course" for training such specialists. This course, to start in 1950, will have an architectural basis but will also have at its disposal the resources of the R.C.A. I need hardly point out that an exhibition of contemporary industrial design, in Kensington, would not only be of value to such a course, but would almost be for it one kind of working library."¹⁷

Another letter of support came from Robin Darwin who was the Rector of the R.C.A. and supportive of contemporary industrial design. He replied to Russell on 27 April 1949, which again stressed the importance of the proposed gallery of contemporary design for students:

"I should like on behalf of the Royal College to support this proposal very strongly. As you know, our students rely very greatly on the facilities provided by the V. and A., and the experience they gain thereby forms an essential element in the teaching provided in each of our Schools."¹⁸

¹⁴ DCA File 118 Letter from Gordon Russell to Gerald Barry 13/04/49

¹⁵ DCA File 118 Letter from Gerald Barry to Gordon Russell 22/04/49

¹⁶ DCA File 118 Letter from Robert Jordan to Gordon Russell 25/04/49

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ DCA File 118 Letter from Robin Darwin to Gordon Russell 27/04/49

He presented the Museum's lack of a collection of contemporary design as a serious issue for the current education of industrial designers in Britain: "The absence of any collection of modern design comparable to the historical collections has long been felt, and it has now become more serious than ever, with the College's resolute attempt to re-orientate its activities towards service of industry."¹⁹ Darwin suggested that "Changing exhibitions of modern design, international in scope, would be a great stimulus and educationally of the utmost value. As things are, students have to rely far too much on photographs in specialised magazines, which often give an entirely false impression"²⁰. He mentioned how such exhibitions would be beneficial to schools of Engineering, Furniture design, Ceramics, Textiles, Silversmithing and Jewellery as well as the department of Industrial Glass, links, he stressed, that were relevant to the history of the Museum:

"It is not without interest to recall that the origin of the V. and A. Museum was a room full of decorative ornaments from which students in the "School of Design", which was opened in Somerset House in 1837, could make studies. It is pleasant to think that that association has continued for 112 years, and I would particularly welcome the proposed extension of the facilities which the Museum can offer."²¹

Finally, a letter from the Council, from Harland Thomas to Leonard Crainford of the Festival of Britain dated 23 June 1949 stated that a resolution should be sent "supporting the project and stressing its permanent value."²² It was suggested that the finished proposal should first be sent to the Ministry of Education prior to sending it to the Board of Trade and finally to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The rapid exchange of correspondences in the spring of 1949 conveys a momentum of rare agreement among the different stake holders involved and their great enthusiasm for the project. They waited for a response from the Ministry of Education until 20 October 1949 when a note was passed to Russell which must have caused great disappointment:

"I spoke with Sir John Maud's assistant about the V. & A. project and he told me two things: (a) Sir John is very booked up at the moment owing to the reassembly of Parliament; (b) he thinks while Sir John was in Paris the matter was dealt with between the M.o.E. and Ministry of Works and the results were not at all encouraging in fact he rather thinks, from memory, that it was decided to drop the matter."²³

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² DCA File 118 Letter from Harland Thomas to Leonard Crainford 23/06/49

²³ DCA File 118 Letter to Gordon Russell 20/10/49

The Ministry sent a more formal letter confirming this news on 22 October 1949, stating the proposal could not go ahead due to timing restrictions but that it was hoped that the proposal could be realised in the near future. In correspondences marked "confidential" Barry asked Russell "Must we take this as final"²⁴ to which Russell replied "No, we will not take this as final. I have unleashed other hounds, but the going won't be good. I will keep you posted."²⁵ Subsequently Russell spoke with the civil servant Maxwell Hislop on 5 November who "promised to make enquiries inside MoE and let GR know what he thought would be a useful approach."²⁶ On 24 November Hislop reported "I am afraid that the enquiries I have made about the suggested Exhibition of Industrial Design at the Victoria and Albert Museum have not led to anything positive."²⁷

For the time being the matter was left on hold. The Museum's new thematic and materials based arrangement opened to acclaim in 1951 and was hailed as a new age in museum display for which Ashton took the credit even though it had actually been on the Museum's agenda since the last rearrangement of 1909 and Maclagan had laid its basic scheme in the late 1930's and early 40's before handing over the reins to Ashton. It was said to have solved the problems of the 1909 scheme, leading to a better defined, less decorative and more modern approach to displaying art works. However, Burton argues it also caused a new era of uncertainty in the Museum:

"It institutionalises in the V&A a tension between Cole's idea of a museum – as being concerned with design and with the methods of craft and industrial production (represented in the material –based study galleries) – and something else, which is represented in the sequence of chronological galleries. This 'something else' might be history as expressed in material culture, the history of political events and social conditions as these have been registered in the paraphernalia that people use in their lives. This sort of history, however, is not to be found in the V&A, 'We are not a social history museum' is a mantra repeated piously by many V&A staff."²⁸

This 'something else', he further argues, was the presentation of objects of use as artistic masterpieces, "reposing in all their purity and calm, speaking for themselves and inducing a reverent mood of aesthetic contemplation."²⁹ Ashton had introduced 'modern' methods of display that had the effect of dislocating them from their social history where they may be regarded as art. This cosmetic application of the 'modern' as an aesthetic meant it was applied as a form of decoration for it effectively served the same function. 'Modern' provided an anti-functionalist backdrop that distorted the

²⁴ DCA File 118 Letter from Gerald Barry to Gordon Russell 03/11/49

²⁵ DCA File 118 Letter from Gordon Russell to Gerald Barry 04/11/49

²⁶ DCA File 118 Note by Gordon Russell 5/11/49

²⁷ DCA File 118 Letter from Maxwell Hislop to Gordon Russell 24/11/49

²⁸ Burton, A. 1999, p. 199

²⁹ Ibid

meaning of historic objects of utility so they could be regarded as art. The aesthetic elevated the Primary Galleries to compete with the world's most renowned art Museums. But this ran entirely contrary to what the V&A had originally been intended for. As Burton concludes, "if history is here at all, it is art history."³⁰ By comparison Circulation found "the special requirements of Art Schools have naturally led to an emphasis on contemporary work, with the result that the Circulation department's contemporary collections are now much more extensive than those of the main museum."³¹

The Museum carried out its pre-war plans for rearrangement in a way that ran contrary both to its heritage in the nineteenth century during Cole's Directorship and to the modern democratic changes opening before it in post war Britain. The English Primary Galleries constructed the nation's design history as aristocratic white English up to the reign of Queen Victoria. The narrow selectivity of this 'history' of design imposed a representation that was propagandist rather than rigorous or representative. During the inter-war years the Museum had increasingly addressed wealthy collectors and connoisseurs with this new lore, while the contemporary design sector showed an absence of creative direction. Britain Can Make It temporarily succeeded in injecting creativity back into the V&A by uniting it once again with contemporary design and its audiences. For a brief time contemporary design was resurrected in the Museum and very nearly led to a new gallery for this new audience which included students, designers, manufacturers and academics as well as the general public. The connection such working class families had with contemporary design at this time was proven by the numbers who visited and their general approval of it.

In considering the legacy of this episode of the Museum's history it was disappointing that the Museum did not feature in the Festival of Britain but, instead, the following year it celebrated the centenary of its opening at Marlborough House in 1852 with the exhibition: *Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts*. This marked a softening the Museum's approach to what it regarded as 'modern' design but, as Burton argues,

"it is perhaps an index of how thoroughly antiquarian the V&A had now become that when Circulation, the 'modern' department, developed a consuming passion, it was for Victoriana and Edwardian art. Certainly, this was regarded by the rest of the V&A as recent enough to be beneath notice, but it was hardly contemporary."³²

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ V&A, 1950, p. 3

³² Burton, A. 1999, pp. 207-08

In the same year on 17 November 1952 a letter to Gordon Russell from an Ernest Woodgale of Warner and Sons Ltd invited him to a meeting to discuss a proposal by Gerald Barry,

"I saw Gerald Barry to-day and he talked to me about his idea of establishing a museum of currently designed objects... He has an idea that as a start the collection might be made at the Victoria & Albert Museum, in which event it would be necessary to bring in Leigh Ashton at an early date."³³

Nothing more was recorded on this subject, and we may surmise the matter was once again put on hold. Several years later a correspondence from Russell to the architect and Conservative politician Sir Alfred Bossom on 12 November 1957 shows the matter was still being pursued:

"The fact that the terms of reference of the V&A would not permit of the inclusion of engineering products such as typewriters, gas and electric cookers, sewing machines, bicycles, etc, would, in any case, gravely reduce the value of such a collection from a historical point of view. But we have not approached this matter from the historical point of view, important as that is. I feel that from a purely commercial aspect the museum would be of immense value in refuting much loose talk as to Britain's backwardness."³⁴

With these the final words recorded on the matter, we are left with the sense of the legacy of 1908 which established an ethos in the Museum against the inclusion of commercial products, which leaves us with the overriding sense of how increasingly obstructive to progress this had come to be seen by Russell, Ashton, Day and others of most influence to design reform in Britain.

³³ DCA File 118 Letter from Ernest Woodgale 17/11/1952

³⁴ DCA File 118 Letter from Gordon Russell to Sir Alfred Bossom 12/11/57

Chapter 4: Conclusion

At the heart of this study is the V&A's assimilation to new industrial and social conditions Britain experienced in the first half of the twentieth century. Evidence from the case studies suggests there were distinct shifts in the Museum's structures of material arrangement and communication with audiences where contemporary design was a main catalyst. But, at the same time, they show that the Museum's developing conceptual awareness of contemporary design was increasingly non-synchronic with wider developments both nationally and internationally. For example, its literal interpretation of the term 'modern' in relation to recent manufacture identified it with products on view at the World Expositions, rather than making connections on an ideological or stylistic level. The New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition departed from this approach in different ways and were largely responsible for bringing contemporary industry to the attention of the Museum. By materially explicating their positions on how new design should be related to industry, the protagonists, which I have introduced in this thesis, used similar rhetoric to those of the Museum's in the nineteenth century and to ends that should have chimed with its ethos of design reform. But instead of leading to new programmes of contemporary design, the Museum's rearrangements were designed not to engage with industry and commerce but, rather, to set it apart in ways that re-enforced its artistic and social boundaries.

The issues raised in this study are complex and encompass a number of aspects contained within a design historical perspective that are museologically, sociologically and politically related and, indeed, interrelated. One significant change can be seen if we compare the way 'modern' design was deployed in the Museum in the nineteenth century compared with the way that it was in the twentieth. The New Art Display refocused attention on the Museum's nineteenth century role as an institution of design reform at the beginning of the twentieth century after its 'modern' collections had already been largely relocated to Bethnal Green specifically for audiences that were, in Kriegel's words, Cole's "ideal artisan visitors"¹. The display, therefore, also legitimised these visitors as a primary audience for the Museum.

These underlying tensions regarding the Museum's identity, its collections and audiences converged on the question of how the Museum should be rearranged in the new century. The Report of 1908 attempted to resolve this matter by directing the Museum's policy towards an art historical presentation for a "more highly educated" audience. At the same time, 'modern' design was defined within a commercial context,

¹ Kriegel, L. 2007, p. 178

which was the rationale for its removal from South Kensington to Bethnal Green. The Report of 1908 is possibly the most compelling evidence of the way in which contemporary design was used to construct different social identities among the Museum's audiences. But this was also common practice in high street retail and other forms of public display that featured interior design, as *Britain Can Make It* showed. The exhibition similarly aimed at a "new audience" which was introduced *en masse* to the Museum via the Council of Industrial Design. Here again, the industrial working class, such as the Samuels family of Bethnal Green, were identified as a primary audience for contemporary design. However, this time, they were addressed not so much as industrial workers, which was the case at the beginning of the twentieth century, as they were the Council's ideal consumer of the future.

The New Art Display and *Britain Can Make It* Exhibition presaged wider reforms in cultural politics as Britain transformed from being an industrial manufacturing economy to an increasingly consumer orientated one². They were received very differently in the Museum: the former with hostile criticism and the latter with almost universal praise. This difference may have resulted from the national contexts within which their vision of the new was framed -- the New Art Display showed the future of design through an exclusively imported culture of industry, whereas the vision that *Britain Can Make It* presented was exclusively home grown. These relate to fundamental debates about the search for a contemporary British design culture where further explorations of the case studies in terms of their effects on wider society are of interest. While those broader debates lie outside the scope of this thesis, the case studies I have explored do show how international contemporary design was perceived as distinct from British design. This separation was reflected in the Museum's first gallery of twentieth century design: *British Art & Design 1900-1960*, which opened in 1983, and remained the case until almost a decade later when the Museum opened a new *Twentieth Century Art and Design Gallery* in 1992 that integrated British and international contemporary design, and remains the Museum's principal gallery of the period.

² See Gurney, P. 'The Battle of the Consumer in Postwar Britain. 2005 - *The Journal of Modern History*, 2005 - University of Chicago Press, pp. 956-987; Cross, G. S. 1993, *Time and Money, the Making of Consumer Culture*, Routledge



Figure 38 View of the Twentieth Century Gallery

During the inter-war years and after WWII, the Museum's repertoire of 'modern' design still included objects from the Victorian and Edwardian periods, and had become a specialism of the Circulation department³. When Roy Strong became Director in 1974 he closed Circulation, resulting in the transfer of contemporary objects to the Museum's main materials-based departments⁴. Strong further allocated each department with a purchase grant for acquiring objects made after 1920, bringing the Museum into line with a more mainstream range of modern design⁵. As a consequence of these reforms the New Art collection and other examples of what had been formerly regarded as 'modern' design were also gradually re-introduced back into the Museum in the 1980's.

A significant legacy of the Museum's distancing from contemporary design in the twentieth century was the propagation of new organisations of design reform, from independents like the Design Industries Association to new Government institutions such as the Council of Industrial Design. These adopted similar intentions and methods of design communication with audiences. Some, like the Council, evolved into subsequent institutions⁶. This was the case when the V&A hosted the Conran Foundation's Boilerhouse project during the 1980's. Terence Conran and the project's

³ See Burton, A. 1999, p. 205 & 207

⁴ See Strong, R. 1978, 'The Victoria and Albert Museum, 1978.' *Burlington Magazine* 120 (1978) p. 276

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The CoID would later become the Design Centre in 1956 and finally the Design Council in 1972.

Director Stephen Bayley planned, with Strong's support, to form a programme of exhibitions and displays of everyday designed objects. These included shopping bags, electrical goods and fashion, that were displayed the specially reconverted basement of what remained of the Museum's old 'Boilers' building. The programme ran until 1989 when it moved into a refurbished warehouse near Tower Bridge and became the Design Museum. Its publicity states: "The Design Museum has created a substantial new audience for the subject, with a programme of popular exhibitions on design disciplines ranging from car design to fashion. It attracts more than 200,000 people a year..."⁷ Arguably, the V&A's support for such external institutions only served to distance it further from contemporary industrial design, precluding new collections and audiences that it might otherwise have gained.

Because it is in the first decade of the new millennium that I have asked these questions, my interest extends to more recent debates in the Museum. In 2001 the V&A's Director Alan Borg, was questioned in the House of Commons by the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Media, Culture and Sport Robin Young, concerning the Museum's relevance to contemporary audiences: "I enjoy wandering round looking at church vestments and chalices and stained glass, but is this swinging modern Britain? Is this the way to get millions of people to visit shows in the middle of London?"⁸ A month later a headline appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper: "V&A given six-month deadline to reinvent itself"⁹. This was issued by the Culture Minister Chris Smith who was concerned that the Museum needed to find a solution to its plummeting audience figures¹⁰. The article further reported,

"A source close to Mr. Smith said he understood that the museum... had "unique difficulties" because of the sheer spectrum of its exhibits and its duty to encourage scholarship. But he said the institution, which was founded in the aftermath of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and pioneered the drive to bring art and design to working people, had to be able to repeat the trick for modern visitors. "The fact is (the source remarked) that most people are unsure what the V&A is supposed to be for, and what they are likely to see there, and that puts them off." "¹¹

From the vantage point of the twenty first century, such questions suggest that the measures taken to distinguish the Museum in the twentieth, created a confused identity. I have argued that this was largely due to the inability of the rearrangements of 1909 and 1947-51, to assimilate the Museum to contemporary industrial culture.

⁷ www.designmuseum.org

⁸ Mr Robin Young to Dr Alan Borg, House of Commons Select Committee on Public Accounts, Minutes of Evidence, Examination of Witnesses, (Questions 1-19) 19/03/2001, HMSO

⁹ Gibbons, F. *The Guardian* 03/04/2001

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

Instead, an incoherent approach prevailed that framed the 'modern' as a practice rather than as an ideological style of transformation and, furthermore, was viewed as *Other* to the Museum's primary operations. This has resonance with Judy Attfield's brilliantly elucidated analysis of modernism:

"The distinction between Modernism as the style of an ideology and design as a material practice of modernity, shows up different material interpretations of the future; the latter turning out to be untidy, disordered and undisciplined in its forms, expressive of the complex problems of adapting to modernity."¹²

What other "interpretations of the future" did the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition point towards in the Museum? The question no longer so much concerns whether to represent contemporary everyday design objects as the V&A now collects and displays these but, rather, its ability, in the present and future, to anticipate and respond to contemporary material culture in a coherent way. The new designs for digital technologies and electronic communication devices, as well as innovative materials and forms in fashion; sportswear; and furniture, cross over into the domain of science to evoke the Museum's old Department of Science and Art.

For today's audiences, the cultural pervasiveness of contemporary design provides a rallying point for audiences of diverse social backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures, with relevance for social inclusion and cultural diversity. It may also be used as a portal through which the Museum's rich design historical collections may be more readily explored. For example, the significance of the Jacquard weaving loom may be grasped if shown in relation to computer assisted design (CAD); similarly, traditional intaglio methods of etching used in print and jewellery making may enhance learning about digital imagery. The authority the Museum exercises as a national institution empowers it to determine which objects of cultural production to include or exclude, with implications for their related audiences. In this sense, the New Art Display and Britain Can Make It Exhibition can be seen to have posed new radically alternative cultures of design reform that, by their attachments to the Museum, paradoxically, exposed a fundamental contradiction at its core.

¹² Attfield, J. (1999) p. 235

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