Some impressive examples of design art are going on display at two London venues, finds Ossian Ward.

This page has been devoted to the phenomenon of 'design art' before, but never has such a convincing display been mounted in London. 'Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design' is a bit of a mouthful, but the proof is in the pudding as in the eating and it's a heady concoction for sure.

A wooden entry leads you from the V&A into 'Forest Guide', the first of three camper-than-Christmas environments, followed by 'Enchanted Castle' and 'Heaven and Hell'. The leafy, mirrored and moody backdrops are distracting, but not to the detriment of the displays already confused, oft grotesque hybrids of, say, a wedding dress fused with a chair, or a bath mashed with a boat; not to mention the dead-cat stool and the pig-s-skull tostap (with water-fat oyster, in case you're interested).

Beyond 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' theme-parkery, there's a true engagement with the complex nature of those objects and how their ugly or ostentatious aesthetics seem to frustrate the very purpose of furniture or domestic usefulness. The definition of 'design art' is everywhere: when function is not of sole importance, the artistry takes over, cleverly intertwining workaday familiarity with visual ideas that challenge such normality. So, the 'Fig Leaf' armchair by Dutch designer Tord Boontje is both a place to lounge clothes, on its beanbag branches, and a thing of immense beauty, with 60 enamelled copper leaves. But what makes it art and not just louche design is the comment Boontje prompts on the very act of covering our original nudity. It's deeper than its looks.

Another characteristic of 'design art' is vast expense, with most items produced in editions of only three or five. Studio Job (more Belgian and Dutch designers) exquisitely sends up the exclusivity in its 'Robber Baron' series echoing the tastes of Russian black marketers or Chicagoan mobsters. Their gold cabinet has its contents exposed by a bank-heist hole, while the 'Robber Baron' table hails a cloud of industrialist pollution. These jokes on power and glamour would reflect ironically on their owners' wealth were it not for the converse irony that the V&A probably can't afford each pricey piece for its own collection.

The selection by Gareth Williams is not uniformly satisfying, but the brilliant catalogue explains the poll of the Omegna Workshops 1913-19 explains how art critic Roger Fry (Omega's leading light) introduced avant-garde French painting to London, but not quite why he tried his hand at putting cubist on rugs and shawls. His decorative experiments didn't even last as long as the show's title suggests, closing in 1916, perhaps due to a lack of seriousness in dressing tables and lampshades, but more likely due to the cost and exertion of producing uniquely customised, handmade objects. Yes, it was early 'design art' (although every piece was meant to be collaborative, stamped with Omega's anonymous mark, but Fry deemed its failure and shut up shop, blaming the closed-mindedness of English taste, rather than the lengthening First World War.

Fry was right to believe that interior design could convey the expressiveness of the human mind - why can't a tea pot make you stop and think in the same way a painting might? And when the best design art is on show today at the V&A, Fry was also right to say that it's anything but made in England. 'Telling Tales' is at the V&A until Oct 18, 'Beyond Bloomsbury' is at the Courtauld Gallery until Sept 20.