

VICTORIA AND ALBERT: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

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*Lecture held in partnership with New Walk Museum
Delivered on 12th November 2018*

Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society was part of that wonderfully cosmopolitan movement of independent learned societies, founded in the early 19th century, as meeting places dedicated to the study of the arts and sciences. Founded in 1835 – some 17 years before the birth of the Victoria and Albert Museum – Leicester Lit. and Phil. embraced all forms of knowledge in the wide pursuit of learning and advancement, stimulated by civic pride, intellectual curiosity and commercial expertise.

These same pillars of education and civic enterprise were similarly at the heart of the V&A's early role in the world. One of our primary founding forces was the Mechanics' Institute movement of the 1830s and the system of design schools that emerged in the mid-19th century. The 'learned society' was the civic precursor to the Mechanics' Institute, very often supporting key roles in the establishment of technical training for working men, spearheading campaigns for enhanced public facilities such as libraries and schools, as well as the foundation of many early museums.

In these unions of commerce, education and civic pride, the Lit. and Phil. Society and the V&A both find their beginnings. But, what about the V&A today?

The V&A is today the world's leading museum of art, design and performance: a world-class collection of over 2.3 million objects and 17 national collections; a centre of excellence for innovative curatorship, conservation and research; a place for brilliant exhibitions, displays and events; thought-provoking permanent galleries; and a natural home for art and design education.

The V&A came into being on the back of multiple forces. The 1836 Select Committee on Arts and their Connection with Manufactures was adamant that, 'The principles of design should form a portion of any permanent system of national education'. The young, ambitious civil servant Henry Cole was even more blunt: 'Straight lines are a national want', he wrote. And, 'unless you begin with the child and teach him the ABC of drawing, you have little chance of

establishing any permanent system of art-instruction in this country'.

Fear over the poor quality of British design relative to its European competitors led to the rethinking of art education from first principles. Rather than just fine art, Britain needed an education system which supported industrial and decorative design. So the government schools of design were established in 'the most important seats of manufacturing industry... with the commercial object of improving the patterns of manufactures'. The best examples of design were accumulated to inspire and instruct the student-designer.

Cole had visited national displays - such as the 1844 Paris Exhibition of Industrial Art - and persuaded Prince Albert that an international exhibition in London would inspire British designers. The result - the 1851 Great Exhibition - was the first truly international exhibition of design and manufacture drawing together the 'wealth of nations' from 32 countries. An estimated six million visitors came to view more than 100,000 products on display in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace - with each nation competing to demonstrate its prowess in design and manufacture.

From the 1851 Exhibition emerged, first of all, the idea of 'Albertopolis': 'an establishment, in which, by the application of Science and Art to Industrial pursuits, the Industry of all nations may be raised in the scale of human employment'. Profits from the event were used to purchase land south of Hyde Park, in what the developers now termed South

Kensington. It was on this land that Prince Albert and Henry Cole's ambitions to develop a campus of museums, colleges and educational institutions that promoted the arts and sciences was realised. The South Kensington Museum became the new home of the design school movement – training teachers, reforming curricula, and lending its collection across the country. Now, the museum could educate the designer and manufacturer – boosting the standard of design – and the public – as consumer to justify it.

Right from the start, we had a different ethos, focused on access and improvement. The museum was 'like a book, always open and never shut', Cole would say. We had a restaurant and café - a commission for the then-relatively unknown designer William Morris - to bring in new visitors; and we had gas lighting and evening openings to ensure after-hours access for working people. Between 1857 and 1883, more than 6.5 million of the total 15 million visits were made during the evenings, when the working-class population could attend.

Cole – who was always keen on the numbers – would have been delighted at last year's record-breaking visit figures. Nearly 4.5 million people visited our sites for the first time in our history.

As a future-focused museum, the V&A uses the tools of the past for contemporary relevance: from our brilliant programme of exhibitions – this year's *Frida Kahlo and Videogames*, to next year's *Cars and Mary Quant*; free and accessible cultural activity; evening openings with our pioneering Friday Lates; digital expansion with our collections increasingly accessible online; and contemporary interventions such as the week-long design celebration, London Design Festival.

But in our rapidly changing world, there's great uncertainty about what the future will hold. With the Brexit vote, we've encountered a new national landscape, one which often feels fearful for the future, in which institutions concerned with the past have an important role to play.

Large parts of the country feel left behind by globalisation and shifting export markets, with a displacement of traditional skills and a lack of opportunity. As local authority museums and cultural organisations bear the brunt of austerity, and philanthropy outside London comes harder to come

by, we have a responsibility as a national museum to be truly national.

So in our reflections on the past, we're returning to our founding mission: reinvigorating the civic function of the museum, as an inherently educational institution, with popular appeal and widespread regional connections. We're working to deepen our connections through national partnerships and skill-sharing. I'm proud that our loans programme lends more to UK partners than any other museum. This year, 2,000 V&A loans travelled to 241 UK venues.

What is more, on 15 September - after more than a decade of hard work - V&A Dundee opened. This cultural milestone for both Dundee and the V&A stands at the centre of the £1 billion transformation of the city's waterfront - an international centre for design that presents the story of Scotland's outstanding design achievements from within a truly global context. We've been delighted and gratified by the response from both the media and local communities. Some 250,000 people have now visited.

But as the national museum of art, design and performance - born of the 19th century design school movement - the V&A has a social and cultural imperative to creative education that still leads our purpose. We want the V&A to be a national incubator for creativity and 21st century design skills.

When the government downgrades creative subjects from its national assessment criteria, we are faced with a troubling state of affairs. Since the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measure in 2010, arts GCSE uptake has fallen by 35%. Progressively, only the brightest and wealthiest are given the opportunity for artistic experimentation and creative careers. With GCSE entries for arts subjects at their lowest level in a decade, there's a real danger of us destroying something we are very good at.

So, we initiated a programme called DesignLab Nation to support the teaching of the relaunched Design & Technology GCSE. This programme links up with regional museums, secondary schools and local industry in communities with a strong manufacturing heritage facing the challenge of globalisation. Launching in Blackburn and Coventry, the programme has now expanded to Sheffield,

Sunderland and Stoke-on-Trent. This year, the programme will see over 60 V&A loans to these five locations, enhancing partner collections, and providing inspiration for school projects.

The V&A Museum of Childhood also has a particular and powerful calling within this mission and we recently revealed ambitious plans to reinvent the museum for the 21st century. We want to turn it from a Museum of Childhood into a museum to inspire children, reflecting the ways in which young people explore, play and learn. The museum has the capacity to transform the life chances of some of Britain's most disadvantaged children through the wonder of art and design.

And in our work to reach the widest possible audience, V&A East - a new Stratford Waterfront museum, and a Collection and Research Centre in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park - is set to revolutionise how the V&A's world-leading collection can be accessed, explored and experienced. Opening in 2023, these two interconnected sites will provide a 360-degree view of the V&A, sharing our collection in ways that have not been possible before.

The importance of museums in today's troubled national and global landscape seems more compelling than ever. We are advocates and promoters of truth and scholarship in an era of fake news; we are reflections of society – with a civic role to play in discussing and shaping the culture we live in; and we herald the positive benefits of cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange in an era of accelerating chauvinism and parochialism.

But we should never forget the sheer joy and wonder of creativity. Whether this manifests through the V&A's Raphael Cartoons - commissioned by Pope Leo X as designs for the tapestries that would hang in Rome's Sistine Chapel; the 17th century flower pyramid of stacking flower holders - modelled on Chinese pagodas - that catered for a great craze for tulips in Holland; or the Chellini Madonna - a 15th century roundel by Donatello - mercifully salvaged from use as an ashtray and its significance recognised from notes penned by the Florentine physician Chellini. We can all admire the wonder of these things.

'Beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life'. These words were spoken by William Morris, who maintained a close relationship with the V&A during his lifetime. Morris's mission on beauty is as important today as it was in his lifetime. And like Morris, we at the V&A 'do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few'.

If we can continue to marry the educational mettle of Henry Cole with the aesthetic and progressive ideals of William Morris, we should be true to our founding purpose. In the words of Iris Murdoch, 'anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism' is an act of great virtue.