

What I've learnt about making successful object centred exhibitions

Introduction

Real objects are an immensely valuable resource for our visitors and are the unique selling point of many museums. To achieve the goal of making our collections truly accessible – intellectually, physically and culturally – we have many challenges to address. An important step in meeting these challenges will be to learn from the evaluation of previous object-rich exhibitions. Here are some key lessons I have learnt from recent experience of developing object-rich displays

1. The particular strengths of objects over other forms of exhibition media are: The resolution and density of information that they contain e.g. detail, smell, sound; The appreciation of scale they provide; Their authenticity; That they can engender a sense of personal connection between the visitor and people from the past; Their inherent value e.g. they are uniqueness and/or have a high monetary value
2. If done correctly object-rich displays are immensely appealing to visitors – children as well as adults.
3. Icons vs relics – visitors are attracted to objects for a variety of reasons – aesthetic qualities; nostalgia (a very powerful attractor); the chance to touch, interact, even operate. Rarely are visitors attracted to an object because they recognise its inherent significance. In other words for visitors most objects are relics not icons. These objects do not speak for themselves but need interpretation just as a relic needs a reliquary to illustrate its significance.
4. Your icon or mine – what visitors consider to be iconic is probably not what you as a museum professional would consider to be an icon. And vice versa.
5. Mundane objects are mundane – visitors are not interested in simply looking at something they can see anywhere in their everyday world simply because you have stuck a label next to it. To interpret contemporary everyday objects requires careful and skilful display. You need to show something about that object that visitors have not seen before. Cutting the object in half can work wonders for some objects but not for all. Modern day Information Technology is especially challenging to make interesting for visitors.
6. High density displays equal high stress – visitors do not like having to search for matching labels. Ideally each object needs to be individually labelled. Visitors want information immediately to hand as they look at each object rather than off to one side in a large, numbered text panel.
7. Shared experience – most people visit museums with others – friends, family or their school cohort. They want to talk and share the

experience. Whatever we do we must design displays that facilitate rather than inhibit that interaction.

8. Physical distance is a barrier to visitors engaging with objects. Visitors love close access to objects even if there is a glass barrier between them. Placing objects at a distance is an alienating experience for visitors. That object at the back of the top shelf is rarely the highlight of someone's visit.
9. Narrative and structure is key – Encyclopaedic displays rarely capture or retain visitors' attention. Instead visitors consistently seek some guiding narrative or theme to an exhibition. Their failure to identify one is a major barrier to their learning and enjoyment. Visitors particularly value seeing objects in context; understanding how they were used, when and in what situations. The popularity and success of re-constructed scenes, dioramas and immersive displays is testament to this.
10. Strange juxtapositions, clever puns and jokes are rarely worth the effort – at best visitors ignore them at worst they find them pretension and frustrate. In my experience such techniques are valueless in interpreting objects and are not thought-provoking for visitors.
11. Different people ask different questions of objects - while some are interested in how a machine worked, others want to find out about the lives of the people who used it or the historical movements that it was a part of. Other visitors may appreciate an object from a design or artistic point of view. The point is that there is no one correct way of interpreting objects and this requires multiple perspectives.
12. The object label needs to re-direct visitors' attention back to the object. Successful object-interpretation is where the visitor is constantly switching their attention between the object and the label. The ultimate goal of any interpretation is to make visitors look longer and think more deeply about the object.
13. Design does matter to visitors - light levels, sight-lines, colour schemes, the presence of natural daylight are nearly always commented upon by visitors – positively or negatively. Indeed the lighting of individual objects is often crucial to engaging visitors' attention.
14. If all else fails use the 'velvet cushion' approach to displaying the object – display it in isolation, against a richly coloured background and under strong lighting