

Exhibition Critiques:

The *British Galleries* at the Victoria and Albert Museum

by Dana Allen-Greil, Colleen Dilenschneider, and Janet Petitpas

Variety, Evocative Labels, and Clever Interactives Make for a Memorable Group Visit to the *British Galleries*

by Dana Allen-Greil

We stepped off the plane at Heathrow bleary-eyed from an overnight flight. I had come to London with two museum colleagues for a series of meetings with staff at the Tate and the British Museum. While both of my colleagues had visited the museum and the city several times before, I had never been to England and was eager to take in as much as I could in the timespan of our short international trip. To their credit, my seasoned colleagues wanted to ensure that I experienced the best that London—and its world-class museums, in particular—had to offer. So, without hesitation, we hopped on the tube towards the Victoria and Albert Museum.

I suggested that we start with the *British Galleries* based on my recollection of a meeting at a history museum many years earlier in which someone referenced the exhibition as a model of visitor-centered interpretation. I remembered that the objects had been completely reinstalled and reinterpreted and that museum educators had been very involved in the decision-making, design, and writing of the exhibition (an uncommon practice in many institutions).

What's important about the particular context of our group visit is that this exhibition critique is written from the perspective of the less-than-ideal visitor. What I mean is: we were not the

visitors you dream of when designing an exhibition. We were incredibly jet-lagged and fatigued. We had a jam-packed agenda that gave us only a few hours to spare in the building. We didn't really feel like reading labels. For some of us, the experience would be brand new while for others it was almost old hat. We represented several generations. We were about to walk from the day-lit bustle of the metropolis into a dimly-lit series of galleries full of really old stuff. In reality, we were the kind of visitors that actually come to your museum every day. And... we had an incredibly enjoyable experience together in this exhibition.

Here's why:

1. Segmentation and variety make the exhibition's large scale manageable.

The *British Galleries* cover a considerable swath of time (1500-1900), house nearly 3,000 objects, and occupy an enormous amount of physical space. To counteract this intimidating size, the chronological framework of the exhibition is broken



Dish, 16th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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This is the result of an expertly designed museum display that intentionally prioritized both participant-driven discovery as well as meaningful group interaction.

up into human-scaled rooms that prevent visitors from feeling overwhelmed. In the various themed spaces, visitors find a mix of objects including furniture, clothing, jewelry, and housewares. The ode to British design includes objects meant for the rich (I call these the “ooh, aah!” pieces) as well as common folks (the “hunh, interesting!” objects). I found the *Galleries* offer a rather nice balance of fancy and ordinary—encouraging us to gape in awe as well as imagine using household items ourselves. The exhibition offers variety in interpretive strategies as well. Text labels, videos, touchable items, and digital interactives offer interesting combinations of things to look at and things to do.

Despite our unique interests and preferences, we found ourselves able to navigate the show easily together without getting lost. We often drifted away from each other, having been attracted to different objects and elements in the *Galleries*. But just as often we found ourselves organically coming back together, compelled to experience aspects of the exhibition as a social group. One of my colleagues was drawn to an exquisite pair of embroidered velvet mittens she had seen and enjoyed in the past; when she found them she waved me over to revel in them as well. I spotted a “What is it?” cabinet full of unusual objects, such as a strangely appealing dish formed with concentric circles. When I opened a panel and read the answer reflected in a mirrored surface, I summoned my group over for more discoveries. (The dish turned out to be a chicken feeder, designed to keep the food or water from scattering about the farmyard). We took turns quizzing each other about what the



Pair of mittens, ca. 1600. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

rest of the objects in the case might have been used for.

This experience I am describing is not a matter of happy circumstance or simply a group of visitors who travel well together. This is the result of an expertly designed museum display that intentionally prioritized participant-driven discovery as well as meaningful group interaction. What’s most impressive is that the designers pulled off their goals in such a way that we felt energized, and not exhausted, by the vast choices on offer throughout the expansive exhibition.

2. The labels were written in succinct yet evocative language.

Part of the reason we were able to experience the exhibition both as individuals and as a group was due to well-crafted, multi-level textual interpretation. Intro panels and object labels were brief and highly readable. Not once did I feel the sensation of guilt I often experience in museums when I lose steam midway through a large block of text. Instead, I found I could easily skim a sentence or two and then breeze past if I wished, homing in on an object that caught my eye. While one could certainly spend hours reading everything, the way

the content is written also makes those with less time feel at ease. The V&A's guidelines for writing gallery text get right to the point: "Visitors have come to look at objects, not to read books on the wall."

While I was familiar with the V&A's ten-point guide (available on their website: <http://tiny.cc/vaguidelines>), I didn't realize until after my visit that it was developed based on audience research conducted in the revamped *British Galleries*. The guidelines are now applied throughout the museum. Here's just a taste of the brilliant tidbits you'll find within:

- **Write for your audience:** "Assume no knowledge of history, nor patronize the reader."
- **Engage with the object:** "(The label) should encourage visitors to look, to understand and to find their own reward, whether aesthetic, intellectual, or personal...in helping people to appreciate the object, be careful not to rob them of the chance to make their own observations."
- **Bring in the human element:** "Link the past to the present, the familiar and the unfamiliar . . . another way of linking objects to our own lives and experiences is to evoke the senses of touch, taste, sound and smell."
- **Write as you would speak:** "Enthusiasm matters. If our text is to be friendly, and if we would like visitors to respond positively to our displays, we have to show our own love for the collections."



Peg tankard, 1655-1657. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

3. The content prompted meaning-making through conversation.

In my opinion, the contributions of the V&A's label-writing principles to the visitor experience cannot be underestimated. Here's an example of bringing in the human element through writing that ties together the familiar and the unfamiliar: The label accompanying an engraved silver tankard explains that the pegs affixed vertically inside are designed to denote the amount of liquid (beer, ale, or cider) to be consumed before passing the vessel along to the next drinker. The phrase "to take someone down a peg" apparently refers to rudely drinking beyond one's measure. The tankard and its accompanying interpretation prompted my group to discuss (with wrinkled noses) the relative hygiene of sharing beer with a pub full of drinkers and to ponder whether the phrase more familiar to our American

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References:

Packer, J., and Ballantyne, R. (2005). Solitary vs. shared: Exploring the social dimension of museum learning. *Curator*, 48(2), 177-192.

Falk, J. and Dierking, L. (2013). The museum experience revisited, p.150-151. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

tongues (“take someone down a notch”) was also derivative of this artifact of 16th century life.

Research on learning in museums (Packer and Ballantyne, 2005) has shown that those who visit museums with others value being able to share the experience and discuss ideas with members of their group. Though I saw thousands of objects during my brief sojourn across the pond, this tankard stands out in my memory because of the dialogue it stimulated. Indeed, conversations can be pivotal in a group’s attempt to find shared meaning in museums (Falk and Dierking, 2013). In writing this critique many months after our visit, and without benefit of notes, I am struck by how critical these kinds of object-inspired conversations were to my own learning and enjoyment of the museum.

4. Hands-on and interactive elements spurred engagement with and among visitors.

A good example of content that encouraged me to look closely and engage with the object was another simple “lift the panel” type interactive. I was asked to determine which of two 18th century dishes was made in China and which in England. Following hints, I was able to spot the difference between the Chinese export and the English dish that was instead decorated in a Chinese style. Without this interpretive device, I would easily have ignored both objects, having never felt particularly inspired or well-informed enough to engage with ceramics in the past.

In another room, the enormous and impossibly fluffy-looking Great Bed of

Ware practically begs to be stroked or jumped on. Thankfully, the V&A offers touchable samples of the mattress and bits of fabric, sparing the original artifact such abuse. In fact, it was while I was feeling a silky layer of cloth that I remarked to my colleagues how much I—someone whose career has centered on digital museum experiences—forget the power that simple touch interactives have to engage visitors. And while the *British Galleries* offer quite a number of computer-based touchscreen interactives, I found none of them to be particularly compelling compared to the other experiences available. (I did note, however, that all of them were in working order, a feat that is not easily accomplished after more than a decade of use.)

Perhaps my favorite hands-on experience of the trip was when my colleague and I were able to try on replicas of 16th century ruffs. We spent quite a bit of time perfecting our postures for a photograph. Sadly my colleague’s photos were later lost; I would have loved to share this memento of our social experience with you. Instead that snapshot is etched in my memory as both a bonding experience and an opportunity to consider what it might have been like to don such elaborate costume had I been born a few centuries earlier.

5. Intensive front-end audience research and prototyping laid an interpretive foundation.

For an exhibition so clearly designed with learning and audience needs in mind, it should come as no surprise that significant resources were put towards research. In fact, the V&A commissioned (or conducted themselves) baseline studies,

formative evaluations, prototyping, and summative evaluations. A trove of reports is available on the V&A website: <http://tiny.cc/varesearch> I hope that the museum community will use these resources to plan and design similarly successful exhibition experiences for visitors in the future.

I Like Large Parties: Intimacy and Personal Relevance through Design in the Vast British Galleries.

by Colleen Dilenschneider

As a part-time expat living in London, I had visited the Victoria and Albert multiple times before I received an invitation from *Exhibitionist* to weigh in on the *British Galleries*...which means that I'd had multiple opportunities to breeze past these dense and seemingly-cluttered rooms on my way to other exhibitions. It's not that I wasn't innately interested in the content or that I hadn't heard rave reviews about these galleries. It's that these rooms—featuring a dense quantity of items of all shapes and sizes, each seemingly regal and precious—seem to be intentionally designed to demand quality time and respect within a large, world-class institution replete with multiple other permanent and rotating exhibitions.

I am a member of the millennial generation—an “always distracted” digital native with near-endless amounts of information available at my fingertips. This, combined with the fact that I work for a predictive technology and market research (“big data”) company that



Visitors may walk through the paneled room from a house at Bromley-By-Bow and be transported to 1606 through sights, sounds, and smells. Photo by Colleen Dilenschneider.

does work to “future-proof” museums, certainly informed my perspective while exploring the *British Galleries*. To cut to the chase: when I visit museums, I am sensitive to the market perception that museums display stale snapshots of the past that may be irrelevant today. Thus, I tune into the concept of “touchability,” i.e. how easily visitors can create meaning and personal relevance to their own lives, experiences, and personal interests within the exhibition.

Data suggest that we increasingly live in a world that values transparency and personalization. One may immediately think that the *British Galleries*, which are vast in terms of breadth and depth of content, may offer little personalization. After several trips to the Victoria and Albert dedicated to the exploration of the *British Galleries*, I think my premature assessment is incorrect. The design of the galleries, in my opinion, strongly affects visitor engagement and meaning-making in a way that allows the enormity of the content to be—and likely remain throughout the market’s evolution over time—both personally and culturally relevant to individual visitors.

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Touching marquetry or ceramics, for example, allowed for further discovery by focusing on individual aspects of the experience of living in a specific time.
Photo by Colleen Dilenschneider.

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In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," Jordan Baker attends one of Gatsby's vast, elaborate engagements and declares, "I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy." I thought about this quotation throughout both of my visits to the *British Galleries*. The *British Galleries* are a large party—and they can be overwhelming without some focus. In the end, however, I found that they also managed to be very intimate.

Connection through Design and Curation

The galleries are arranged in chronological order and explore four themes: 1) *Style*; 2) *Who Led Taste?* 3) *Fashionable Living*; and 4) *What Was New?* These themes immediately made the protected and "untouchable" items laid out before me seem more conceptually accessible than they had ever seemed breezing through these rooms on past visits without regard for the themes. To me there was an innate, everyday understanding of these themes. Today, we have magazines on style, watch celebrities lead taste, have our indicators

of fashionable living (from "hipsters" to tech-clad executives), and experience new technologies nearly every day that change the way that we interact with the world around us. When viewed through the lens of these themes, the densely-packed galleries seemed to open up for me, and they felt much more digestible.

The themes helped to keep the galleries and the many items within them conceptually manageable, and also created intrigue. While the *Who Led Style?* theme kept me closely connected to historical context (Henry V, the court of Elizabeth I, etc.), *Style* and *Fashionable Living* themes provided cultural "touch-points" that connect to today and to many personal memories. For instance, the displays-themed *Fashionable Living* often included items related to birth and death, marriage, or protecting possessions—things that remain innately relevant today and that I was able to connect to my own understanding of the world.

The items within the galleries were arranged in a way that helped to create meaning by cultivating a connection between the viewer and the displayed objects. I knew immediately that I was both right and wrong in my past and limited impressions of the galleries: they certainly demand quality time and attention, but they are not an overwhelming hodge-podge of items placed on a walk-through timeline. Within the galleries, it seemed that meaning-making led the journey through time, rather than simply time leading the exhibition journey.



An 1878 cabinet highlights the classic story of the Greek goddess Juno. Though this item may stand alone as a historic item, those interested in the story of Juno more specifically may listen to the story of the Judgment of Paris on a small phone located next to the cabinet. Photo by Colleen Dilenschneider.

Transformative experiences/a walk through history

As I made my way through British history starting in 1500, I found that pondering the connection between the themes and observing the items around me in each time period allowed me to immerse myself within that era; and the density and placement of objects underscored this experience. One of the first and more direct experiential surroundings occurred when I walked into the paneled room from a house at Bromley-By-Bow. The wood creaked as I walked across the historic flooring, and I was transported to 1606 with the sights, sounds, and perhaps even smells of the time.

There were similar opportunities to immerse oneself in the sensory and cultural experiences of the highlighted time periods throughout the galleries. I listened to the music played on Queen Elizabeth's Virginals, stepped foot into several historic rooms, and even tried on a gauntlet. While the opportunity to

enter historic rooms held an immersive and transportive quality for me, many the experiences of sensory "touch" beyond sight were singular experiences taking place one after another. The mix of immersion (i.e. walking into a historic scene) and isolated explorations (i.e. touching marquetry or ceramics) allowed for engagement as well as further discovery by focusing on individual aspects of the experience of living in that time and location.

By the time that I reached the fashionable bed of Mr. and Mrs. Garrick on the second floor of the exhibition, I was prepared for the quiet and more secluded and immersive space, surrounded by many of the couple's personal items. The introduction of specific individuals beyond the "usual suspects" of royalty also created a level of intimate connection for me. These time periods weren't just represented by objects, but by individual people as well.

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Selfie: In my work, I aid museums in shedding perceptions of stagnancy and cue into opportunities for personal or contemporary relevance. On my way up to the British Galleries on Museum Selfie day (22 January), I spotted someone at the Victoria and Albert Museum who may be taking up a similar opportunity. Photo by Colleen Dilenschneider.

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Choose your own adventure

Compared to other exhibitions I have experienced, the *British Galleries* are very large in size and scope. Though they span four hundred years of British culture from 1500 to 1900, I managed to have a very personalized experience within the galleries. Perhaps it is by design that having so much content forces a visitor to prioritize time based upon interest. To be certain, the design of the galleries allows visitors to walk a discernable path through history, but it also allows visitors to “go deep” on certain topics of interest within side rooms and displays that are of particular interest.

The *British Galleries* do not attempt to incorporate any revolutionary interactive technologies within the galleries (and do not seem to have added significant updates since opening the exhibition). However, the basic, computer-based opportunities that are offered allow visitors to research areas of personal interest. These kiosks allow visitors to learn more about specific objects and test their knowledge of Renaissance, Jacobean, and other styles with an interactive quiz. I even took a quick break from being on my feet by

designing my own coat of arms in one of the discovery rooms. In sum, simple technologies are used to personalize the experience without distracting from topics at hand.

Because the themes into which the *British Galleries* are divided are easily understandable and may be applied to our everyday lives, I immediately felt as though the exhibition could reasonably extend past 1900 and into present-day. It was almost as if I were walking through chapters of a book that is still being written.

Research at IMPACTS, the company for which I work, reveals that impressions and hopeful takeaways displayed at the start of an exhibition generally have higher retention rates than takeaways displayed at the end of an exhibition experience. Perhaps this is why, while I took in a great deal of historical information, my biggest, personal takeaway was the role that today plays in writing history. Needless to say, I won’t breeze by these galleries again. In fact, even after spending several hours in them, I still have more to explore. That... and I like large parties.

Impact of Design on 2001 Refurbishment of British Galleries by Janet Petitpas

In 2001, the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London opened renovations to their British Galleries, which cover over 32,000 square feet of exhibition space and comprise 10% of the Museum’s overall exhibition floor. Over a decade later, do the galleries still feel fresh or are they now dated? How does the design of the



Visitors listening to audio at tapestry. Photo by Janet Petitpas.

galleries affect the visitor experience?

I have frequented the V&A dozens of times during my years in London but have tended to view special exhibitions or have gone to see specific, famous objects in the *British Galleries* on short visits. I have never visited with the goal of seeing all of the *British Galleries*, so this was a novel experience.

Upon entering, I was greeted with an introductory label that included the four themes of the galleries: *Style, Who Led Taste?, What Was New?, and Fashionable Living*. I find it frustrating when learning messages are kept secret, so I appreciated this appearing as an introduction. Visitor research shows that guests frequently miss the main message of an exhibition even when it is stated straight out, and I appreciated that this was part of the introduction. Many of the larger labels throughout the galleries also reiterated which theme they were related to, which I found helpful.

The displays themselves were sumptuous, beautiful and contextual, which enhanced the pleasure of viewing the individual objects. Interactives (by this I mean interpretive elements that are not collection objects) were present in many



Wood paneling behind paintings and furniture provides a room-like context. Photo by Janet Petitpas.

sections and were a mix of computer kiosks, handsets with audio information, and touch tables with samples of finishes and materials that could be handled. These were a mix of digital and low-tech items, such as the touch tables which featured pull-out labels in Braille, as well. Several discovery areas and two spacious research areas with computer kiosks, comfortable chairs, and books were also part of the galleries. The inclusion of these components showed that careful thought was given to the differing abilities, ages, and interests of potential visitors. Great care was also given to provide opportunities for visitors to follow their own interests within the exhibition themes.

The interactives were well designed and provided a more in-depth explanation about the meaning, use, and making of an object. The first audio that I encountered referred to a man's garment from the 1700s. The audio was recorded from a theater costume specialist, who talked about how one could not bend in the middle when wearing this type of garment, and how the costume department could always tell when an actor had moved more freely than possible in the 1700s as the garment would be ripped. This audio added an interesting



The Bed of Ware with touch table. Photo by Janet Petitpas.

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layer of meaning that one could not get by just looking at the object. In another area, an audio component was placed next to a tapestry and told the story of Venus, Vulcan, and Mars. The explanation highlighted many of the vignettes that could be seen on the tapestry, enhancing my ability to understand the object and connect more deeply with it.

Touch areas included ceramics, veneers, and wood carving techniques that provided the opportunity to use an additional sense to understand and connect with the objects. For example, one of the most famous objects, the Bed of Ware, was accompanied by a touch area with samples of the bedding material.

The discovery areas featured object wall units that asked visitors to think about the purpose of a specific object, then open a cabinet to read about what that object was actually used for. Also included were costumes and kits that visitors could use to dress a Tudor or Victorian flat doll or make a rubbing. Some activities in the discovery areas related to specific objects nearby, like knotting and weaving around the tapestries or hoop skirts to try on near clothing of that type. The computer kiosks either invited visitors to look deeper at an object or addressed a certain element about style or one of the exhibition's themes. While all of the audio components let me know how long they

would be not all of the computer kiosks or video did. This was somewhat frustrating as I would become interested in something only to have to move on because the video was turning out to be quite long, and I had a lot of ground to cover.

Two film rooms were included—one on each of the two floors of the exhibition. I did not see all of the films, but really enjoyed watching a series of films made during the Victorian era which showed regular people wearing some of the clothes like those on display and living their everyday lives in a time represented elsewhere in the exhibition. Other films looked at the Crystal Palace exhibition opened by Victoria and Albert or featured historians talking about décor at some historic homes represented in the exhibition. Seeing the moving images brought the static objects to life and placed them in a historic context.

The interactive components generally felt up-to-date and did provide the opportunity to connect with objects in a deeper way or understand more of the context surrounding the making or use of the object. My only issue was that they felt somewhat canned—as if the developers had a chart indicating how often they would put in an interactive by using a limited menu of interactive types: computer kiosk, listening station, tactile area, or perhaps a more in-depth type of interactive in a discovery room. The format for the interactives seemed to need to fit within a prescribed menu of options rather than creating a novel approach that might best address the topic at hand. I am aware of how robust interactives need to be in a museum with such a large visitorship, so I acknowledge that these



The Crystal Palace interactive. Photo by Janet Petitpas.

may be the only options left that work in heavily-trafficked and minimally-staffed areas.

One interactive that did surprise and delight me was a building area in the Discovery Zone near an area that discussed the Crystal Palace fair in London. The Discovery Zone contained Lucite building blocks that visitors, particularly children, could use to build a Crystal Palace. The lighting was dramatic, and the blocks really sparkled; even I could not resist the urge to build away. I would have liked to see more interactives that were so intuitively linked to the concepts they addressed.

An aspect of the galleries that I deeply appreciated was the beauty with which the objects were displayed, the beauty of the objects themselves, and the care given to showing the objects in an appropriate setting rather than just in a case or grouped by type. For example, furniture was shown against paneling that would have been found at the time the object was created or used, and household items, clothing, and furniture were frequently grouped together historically. Dispersed in all of this were extremely famous objects, such as the aforementioned bed of Ware, King James' wedding costume, and some



A Fabric sample book needed more information on label. Photo by Janet Petitpas.

areas containing almost entire rooms moved from historic houses.

The care given to the display was highlighted rather acutely when I ended up on the third floor instead of the fourth floor to continue viewing the exhibition (which is on two floors of the Museum). I went up one set of stairs and ended up in a 20th century exhibition. After a few minutes I realized that these objects were far too modern to be part of the same exhibition—I thought I was moving backwards chronologically—but in that time felt the startling contrast between the style of the galleries I was in versus those of the *British Galleries*. The 20th century gallery contained interesting objects, but they were displayed in older-fashioned cases with older style labels, flatter lighting, and no interactive components. When I found a staircase to take me to the fourth floor I was struck by the drama of the lighting and richness of the displays. The 20th century gallery showed all objects against a white background. In contrast the *British Galleries* used many blocks of color and broke the floor plan up into separate rooms and smaller galleries, creating a lovely pace in which to take in such a large exhibition. Lighting was very well used to guide the eye to specific objects; where lighting had to be

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Charles and Diana mug with other royal memorabilia. Photo by Janet Petitpas.

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These design elements really helped keep me interested and focused on specific items without getting overwhelmed.

low, sometimes flashlights were tethered nearby for a better look. These design elements really helped keep me interested and focused on specific items without getting overwhelmed.

Sprinkled throughout were entire rooms from historic houses or structures that were beautiful and took the experience of immersion to a further level. These areas succeeded in transporting me to a different time and encouraged me to take a deep breath and imagine myself there. I was alone in several of them, which enhanced the time warp aspect of being in these rooms. This was quite haunting.

I am generally not an avid label reader and can be fairly impatient, which I combat by scanning and finding one or two objects that I really want to interact with. I think that the V&A has reached a nice balance with the labels written for the *British Galleries*. These labels were not exhaustive and generally answered the questions I had while looking at the objects. However, there were a couple of objects that I personally thought were fascinating and wanted to know more about. Although the objects were numbered in a case the number corresponded to a label about a group of objects rather than the one that interested me. One such object was a book containing samples of textiles with

notes written on the side. The book was lovely, and I was very interested in who had created it and why: was it a textile merchant? A designer? The corresponding label did not answer any of the many questions that popped into my mind. This happened to me a couple of times during my visit.

The overall tone of the exhibitions felt very serious. The objects were so beautiful, but I almost heard a little voice in my head whispering, “don’t touch anything!” as I walked through. There were some moments of levity, which lightened the tone and were refreshing. They included a Prince Charles and Lady Diana commemorative wedding mug displayed with historic royal memorabilia. The presence of the mug was especially fun because it was one of the few objects that made me think, “do I have one of those kicking around?” and represented something that might be found in any home.

In the end, I thoroughly enjoyed my visits to the *British Galleries* and look forward to going back and bringing friends and family. The galleries were very carefully thought out and beautifully designed. The color choices, lighting, layering of information and deep beauty of the objects made the visit a pleasure. ✨