

## How to Devise an Exhibition

### Heather Birchall, Whitworth Art Gallery

The idea for this session sprung out of an idea to put together a set of guidelines for academics working on exhibitions. These are not meant as hard and fast rules for organising shows - as circumstances and budgets of course vary enormously between projects – but we hoped that they would give some insight into the roles and expectations of the academic and curator or museum professional.

In my role as a curator I have had the fortunate experience of working with a number of academics who have brought challenging ideas to the table. It's my job to make these ideas a reality, though the curator always has to bear in mind that the exhibition will need to reach out to a wide audience – far beyond the academic community. Even working at a university art gallery we still have a duty to our audiences who don't want to have to read text on the walls that appear as if it may have come out of an academic textbook. Who does the curator try and satisfy? I want to consider one case study which is an exhibition titled 'Blake's Shadow: William Blake and his Artistic Legacy' which was held at the Whitworth Art Gallery from January to April last year and subsequently travelled on to Seoul National University in South Korea. The show had been devised by Dr Colin Trodd from Manchester University's Art History Department, and I worked with him closely for about eight months before the show opened. I would say overall that we had a fruitful working relationship – and it was hugely beneficial for me to share Colin's knowledge and passion for this extraordinary artist. Yet there were inevitably trials and tribulations along the way.

One of the main issues involved the captions which I felt were written in prose which was too complex for our audience. Another issue involved the objects themselves which I felt weren't always relevant to the argument we were trying to make. He would include a work because it was by a particular artist – yet I would always choose a work for its relevance to the exhibition. This was partly because we were primarily limited to using our own collection however, and in the end I was more grateful to Colin for having discovered works which had rarely been out of our store. We did borrow a few paintings, and when Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* from Manchester Art Gallery and Blake's *Newton* from Tate were refused he suggested we have colour reproductions. This is a blasphemous act at the Whitworth, but yet I did in the end agree that we should make some reproductions. We debated about what to do with the catalogue. When I came on board with the project there wasn't time to produce a book to accompany the exhibition. We compromised on a pamphlet and I made sure it had an ISBN. In the end 'Blake's Shadow' looked wonderful – and Colin came to understand my skills and experience in hanging works and designing exhibition spaces. Perhaps it would have helped if we'd have had that knowledge about each other at the beginning of the process. For Colin I could see why he may have got frustrated: I came on board quite late in the day and when it came to dealing with

publicity and interpretation projects I hadn't made sure that he knew who everyone was within the institution.

What I hope this session will do is open up some areas of discussion about the academic and the curator. Being a curator myself I would have been more reassured by the title 'Academics don't bite' but I hope that we can perhaps discuss in the time we have how to go about creating successful collaborations in future.

### **A Princely Vision: The Albert Memorial Visitors Centre Mike Davies, Birkbeck College**

I would like to take a look at the beginning of this process and consider how art historians who already have the germ of an idea for an exhibition might set about presenting a proposal to a curator. I want to take, as an example, a project proposal for an exhibition about the Albert Memorial produced for English Heritage. This had developed directly out of research I had been carrying out into the 1851 Great Exhibition which has since become the topic of my PhD dissertation at Birkbeck.

For many years I had been aware that the Memorial was in a sorry state of repair and had watched from the sidelines as it slowly decayed and grew old gracefully, and the debate about its future rumbled on. However, in 1987 an official report included 'demolition' as one of the options for its future, and three years later, in 1990, work began installing the largest free-standing scaffolding in the world completely covering the Memorial and hiding it from public view. Arguments in favour of restoration mostly centred on the Memorial's aesthetic merits, described as 'an integrated fusion of architecture and the arts.' By contrast, I had found that what caught people's imagination was not so much the merits of the Memorial itself, as its relationship to the 1851 Great Exhibition.

First, almost without exception, people did not realise that the Crystal Palace had originally been built, not at Sydenham in South London, but in Hyde Park. Secondly, the £186,000 profit from the Exhibition had been used to buy the land to the south of the Memorial, which we now know as Albertopolis. And lastly, the Memorial has as its centrepiece the huge gilded statue of Prince Albert gazing south across Albertopolis, and holding in his hand a copy of the catalogue of the Great Exhibition. I was confident that it was this story which would present the best case, by mounting an exhibition, for saving and restoring the Memorial.

The exhibition, however, remained just an idea until 1993 when I finally became convinced that restoration was in danger of being delayed indefinitely as long as there was a problem, not so much with finding the money, but with justifying the expense. At this stage the only effort made to arouse public interest in the

restoration was an information board on the hoarding around the site. It was time for me to do something before it was too late, and make a start on the exhibition. I was confident that the very process of starting work would in itself begin to attract support. I was encouraged in this decision by the frequently-quoted words of W.H.Murray, the Scottish mountaineer (often misattributed to Goethe):

Concerning all acts of initiative ... that moment one commits oneself, then providence moves all. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred

By the middle of 1994 the exhibition proposal had been completed and I was able to present it to English Heritage. It showed the exhibition space divided equally between the life and achievements of Prince Albert and the story of the Albert Memorial, including a changing display of individual pieces from the Memorial before and after restoration. It was to be housed in a small temporary building built at the base of the Memorial. I was lucky because unknown to me English Heritage was due to launch a major appeal for funds for the restoration and wanted to be able to explain its story to potential donors and to the public. This explained their prompt acceptance of my proposal to produce the exhibition, while at the same time agreeing to provide a building to be called the Albert Memorial Visitors Centre. This was on the condition that the exhibition had to be ready to open on Thursday 13 April 1995, in barely twelve weeks time.

The exhibition was produced at great speed much along the lines of my proposal, and it did open on time. It was visited by over 220,000 visitors, and won an NPI National Heritage Award, before closing once restoration of the Memorial had been completed in 1998.

In this case the people who we might describe as 'curators' were the historians and project managers at English Heritage who had a their own views on what should be included in the exhibition. They were less interested in telling the story of Prince Albert and the Memorial than providing information about English Heritage's restoration work. This proved to be a source of some friction, but in at least one instance it did lead to an inspired choice - a beautifully re-gilded angel, positioned high up on a column which became the iconic image of the exhibition, its arms raised in a gesture of either pleading, presumably for funds, or rejoicing at the saving of the Memorial. This is a good example of compromise, luck, and serendipity - all essential ingredients in producing any exhibition.

Art historians are in the ideal position to generate exciting ideas for exhibitions which will make a genuine contribution to their disciplines. Taking the first step and approaching a curator with a proposal requires simply, in the words of W.H.Murray, one of those 'acts of initiative ... [because] that moment one commits oneself, then [hopefully] providence moves all.' Thank you.

## **Christiana Payne, Oxford Brooks University**

I'm a university academic who has worked on a number of temporary loan exhibitions of nineteenth-century British paintings and drawings. This is one of the catalogues: *Rustic Simplicity: Scenes of Cottage Life in Nineteenth-century British Art* (1998). If I wanted to sum it up, I'd say my work has been about showing well-known paintings in new contexts (especially social contexts), and drawing attention to less well-known paintings.

There are many advantages in becoming a guest curator. It's easier to persuade a publisher to publish a catalogue, rather than a book, and you don't have to worry about ordering, and paying for, lots of illustrations, because the museum should do this for you. The publication of research in this form is becoming more desirable, with the AHRC's Knowledge Transfer scheme and the new emphasis in the REF on impact assessment. These are practical advantages. Also, you have the opportunity to bring works together that you've studied separately, and to bring works out of storage or private collections. And you can reach a wider audience than your fellow-academics. I think these two last considerations are the most important. I wouldn't advise anybody to work on an exhibition unless they found it really exciting to put together objects, and to write for the general public.

There are also disadvantages. It's a lot of work. There's the potential for frustration and conflict with the museum curators. Patience is needed, as it can take a long time for projects to be confirmed. There's no money in it to speak of (at least not if you take into account the actual hours you spend). And you can feel exploited. But if you really get a thrill from bringing the works together, and want to communicate with non-academics, then in my view it's the most rewarding thing an art historian can do.

I was really lucky with my first experience of exhibitions – this was a show based on my PhD thesis, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890*. It started as a very modest proposal. The Djanogly Art Gallery agreed to put it on, but couldn't promise that the catalogue would be any more than a typed handlist. However, once they had agreed to do it I wrote to the Director of the Yale Center for British Art, and was delighted to get a positive response. From this I learned that it's a good idea to get one venue interested and then use that as a springboard to approach others. Getting Yale interested was crucial as it meant that the exhibition became much larger, and the catalogue was published by Yale University Press.

Five years later I curated another exhibition at the Djanogly Art Gallery: *Rustic Simplicity*. This went on to a second venue at Penzance, and this led me on to collaborating with Penlee House on other projects.

In 2007 I was guest curator, with Juliet McMaster, of a new display at Tate Britain, “James Clarke Hook and Painters of the Sea” – this literally brought pictures out of store and onto the walls of one big room at the Tate, and was up for a year, going on subsequently to Penzance as a loan exhibition. There was no catalogue, but we had a study day. I published a book, *Where the Sea meets the Land: Artists on the Coast in Nineteenth-century Britain*, in 2007, and the Tate display helped sales of the book (most of the pictures in the display were also discussed in the book).

My next exhibition will be portraits and figure studies by John Brett, to be shown at the Barber Institute in Birmingham, the Fine Art Society, and the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge in 2010. This will include a lot of works from private collections which haven't been exhibited before. This time I hope to have a catalogue and a book, but I won't say any more because it would be tempting fate! I like working with relatively small institutions and especially with university museums, who appreciate the academic, as well as the popular, context for a show.

When I started out I had never seen an exhibition proposal, and I think it would be really useful to make model proposals available. A proposal needs to make the case for the exhibition, like a proposal for a book or a grant application – why does this show need to be put on, who will it appeal to, why is this museum more suitable than any other, what opportunities are there for educational activities, additional venues, and so on. It would be good to know what curators are looking for in a proposal. One curator said to me this week that, when academics propose exhibitions, they just think of “me me me” – they don't consider what is in it for the institution. Why **should** a museum want to put on your exhibition?

We might discuss contracts and fees – I suspect that practices vary widely, and a general code of practice would be extremely useful. Academics with university posts may be happy to curate exhibitions for nothing, or for a nominal fee – but where does that leave independent art historians? And how should the work be divided up? I have always assumed that the budget, and the loan letters, are part of the museum's contribution, but lately I have heard of academics being asked to do both things.

Temporary exhibitions and displays have great potential for bringing academics and curators together, and hopefully our discussion will help to ensure that this is a mutually beneficial relationship, rather than a frustrating and conflict-ridden one.