

KELVINGROVE: A MUSEUM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Sue Latimer recounts the journey of Kelvingrove from a worthy, but tired, museum, to one of the most exciting and popular in the country.

Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum reopened in July 2006 after three years of extensive building repairs and a total redisplay of its wide-ranging collections. And after more than 15 years of discussion and planning. Sixteen months later, more than four million visitors have experienced the new storytelling, visitor-centred and object-focused displays.

Kelvingrove has always had a special place in Glaswegian life and, even before it closed, visitor figures were around one million a year. But by 2000, the building and its contents were looking tired and, though the objects and art still inspired visitors, it was practically a museum of display and interpretation styles of the last 50 years. The Kelvingrove New Century Project set out to create a museum fit for the 21st century.

OBJECTS, STORIES AND PEOPLE

The need to redisplay Kelvingrove had been recognised in the early 1990s, and the lengthy search for funding allowed Glasgow Museums staff to develop and refine the ideas that underpinned the project.

In the new Kelvingrove the collections are at the core of the displays. The interpretation and displays are designed to inspire visitors to look more closely and think about how and why these objects and art exist. We subverted traditional collection boundaries – mixing rocks and art, guns and animals. There were themes that we, and our visitors, would have liked to see, but we don't have the collections, so there was no point.

The storytelling approach allowed us to choose groups of objects to tell a particular tale or focus on just one issue. We know that telling stories is a powerful and effective way to communicate. The focus on one story – of the many that each object could tell – was also a useful discipline in creating concise and meaningful interpretation.

And, most importantly, people were at the centre of everything we did. We held extensive consultation on the overall themes and the individual story displays with everyone from non-visitors to museum professionals. Advisory panels guided us on access, community engagement and learning. The Junior Board's unsparing opinions on interactives, text and retail products helped to create a museum experience that works for families and children. And we made sure that the interpretation is about people – the people who created the art, used the objects and have an impact on the natural history.

BELOW:
Kelvingrove tackles difficult issues such as the sectarian divide between some Protestant and Roman Catholic Glaswegians.

'PEOPLE WERE AT THE CENTRE OF EVERYTHING WE DID'





Every story is targeted primarily at a single lay audience – families, children, teenagers, schools or non-experts. We also focused some elements on under-fives and visitors with sensory impairments. The chosen audience impacted on every aspect of the story – the heights of the plinths and interactives, the writing of the text and the design of the graphics.

CREATIVE DESIGN

The years of development created a very clear philosophy and vision for Kelvingrove, detailed interpretation plans for every story and comprehensive display standards specifying our accessibility requirements. This clarity helped to build a solid framework for our designers' inspiration and creativity to flourish within.

We wanted designers who would challenge our brief and bring their creative thinking to this huge project. Event Communications were appointed as designers for the entire redisplay in autumn 2003. Event worked wonders with – as they regularly reminded us – a budget substantially less than usual for a project of this scale.

'CLARITY HELPED TO BUILD A SOLID FRAMEWORK FOR OUR DESIGNERS' INSPIRATION AND CREATIVITY TO FLOURISH'

They created big effects in the galleries, especially the two courts dominated by the Spitfire and 'The Heads'. But they brought the same imagination and attention to every object and every case layout. Scottish jewellery is mounted on a thistle-shaped stand. Endangered animals are turning away from the animal parade in the Life Court on their way towards the dinosaur and other fossils, while the wolf and bear appear ready to rejoin Scotland's wildlife – if and when they're allowed to.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

One effect of the limited budget (noted by the Interpret Britain judges) was our reliance on the written word. We therefore made every word count. In fact, we did a lot of word counting – sticking to strict limits of 100 words for graphic panels, 30 for labels and 20 for image captions.

ABOVE:

The rutting deer draw visitors into the heart of the Scotland's Wildlife gallery and a story about grouse, bluebells, salmon and other iconic wildlife.

The judges praised the 'clear, concise and engaging' text, which resulted from a text-writing process designed to develop the skills of staff throughout Glasgow Museums. Everyone – story curators, research managers, editors and the Education & Access team – did two days, training with James Carter. A small team then worked hard to create inspiring content for the graphics, using simple language, not simple ideas.

We've tried out different styles of writing. One story curator used verse to engage a child audience with *Animal Speak*, another was inspired by graphic novels in interpreting Ancient Egyptian gods for teenagers. *The Fish's Tale* mixes a child's storybook approach with bullet-point myths and facts for a family audience. And sometimes we avoided words altogether, using only images to interpret how Glasgow Style designers were inspired by the natural world.

BELOW:
The painting of *A Marriage of Convenience* inspires visitors of all ages to imagine the thoughts of the young wife and her much older husband.

DISCOVERY AND INTERACTION

IT, audio and interactive interpretation was carefully located for maximum impact with a limited budget – clustered in galleries such as Every Picture Tells a Story to create a lively atmosphere, or conveying essential messages in a story, like the film comparing human and other animal defences in Animal Armoury.

The three discovery centres are full of interactive learning – and carefully positioned in corner galleries to draw visitors through the displays. In the History Discovery Centre visitors can handle objects with our Learning Assistants. The Environment Discovery Centre encourages investigation of animals and plants. And we hope that visitors will look at art with more understanding after a visit to the Art Discovery Centre.

'AN ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE'

So what do visitors think? The visitor who wrote the comment above went on to note that: 'The provision for kids was particularly impressive, as was the accessibility of the material for the adult layperson'. This is the breadth of appeal that we aimed for.

Not everyone loves the approach. In particular, some visitors – and critics – have taken a strong dislike to the art interpretation. We're doing further research into this, but we also know that plenty of visitors have remarked that Kelvingrove has made them look at art properly for the first time. We haven't yet carried out detailed evaluation of the interpretation, but initial visitor research shows that 98% of visitors think Kelvingrove is very good or good. 91% think the amount of information is just right and 89% feel we've found the right balance between complexity and simplification. And 65% say we've achieved our aim of making the displays more thought-provoking.



'TELLING STORIES IS A POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE WAY TO COMMUNICATE'

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

- Solid planning and a clear vision are essential – both to guide and inspire designers and other contractors, but also to help decision-making as the project develops.
- Good interpretation should challenge visitors to think and discover, but the process of creating it should also involve challenges. If it's too easy, it probably isn't going to work as well as it could.
- The project team have to have clear individual responsibilities and provide firm decision-making – in any creative process, designing by committee is dangerous.

- Investing time and energy in developing good text is vital. It's easy to overlook the written word in favour of more 'sexy' interpretation, but it's our most used interpretative tool, available to every display whatever the budget (and it doesn't break down).

The Kelvingrove redisplay has aimed high – to use the latest research into our collections, establish a new museum philosophy, place visitor studies and learning at the heart of the displays, and apply best practice in interpretation. Our visitors seem to approve and we're proud that fellow interpreters think so too.

Sue Latimer is Senior Education & Access Curator at Glasgow Museums and was responsible for the graphics, discovery centres and manual interactives at Kelvingrove.