

Conservation in Focus at the British Museum

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THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM



Watch Museum conservators work
on objects from the collection

CONSERVATION IN FOCUS

11 September – 26 October 2008
Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG
Tottenham Court Road, Holborn, Russell Square
Admission free, www.britishmuseum.org

The Asahi Shimbun Displays
The Asahi Shimbun
Japan's Leading National Newspaper

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Department of Conservation & Scientific Research

Background

Examples of Conservation Programmes at other institutions:

- Hampton Court Palace
Ask the Conservator programme
- Culture Sport Glasgow (Museums)
- National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen
- The British Library
- Lunder Conservation Centre, Washington



Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Display Panel

Concept

- Aimed to showcase conservators and demonstrate their expertise
- Live and interactive temporary studio staffed throughout Museum opening hours and weekends
- Held in an 'experimental' space in the Museum assessed by market research



Key Messages

Conservators:

- Reveal information about objects
- Ensure the preservation of cultural heritage for the future
- Collaborate with many colleagues across various disciplines
- Enable access to, and better understanding of, objects



Planning

Logistical challenges

- Poor acoustics
- No environmental control
- Higher risk of theft
- No specific marketing budget or education programme
- Kitchen space behind gallery



Planning

Project team and roles

- Developed by Exhibitions Team:
 - Project manager
 - 2D & 3D designer
 - Interpretation
 - Marketing
 - Curators
- Conservation section representatives



Planning

Staffing the exhibition

- Two-weeks per section:
 - Stone Wall Paintings and Mosaics
 - Organic Artefacts
 - Ceramics, Glass and Metals
- Open 10 - 5, including weekends
- Pictorial Art conservators on-call
- Worked in teams of 3
- Half days vs full days



Planning

Object selection

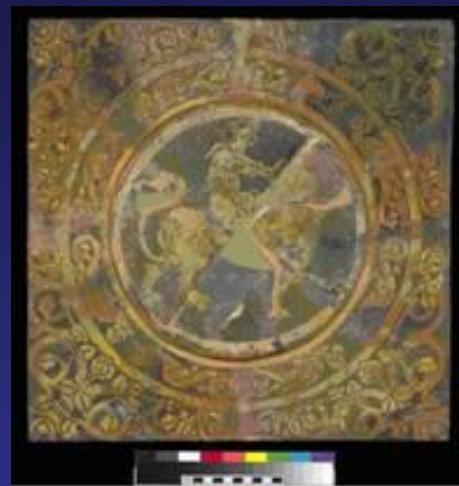
- Size
- Treatments that could be easily interrupted
- Health and safety
- Curatorial support
- Relates to other activities in the Museum (exhibitions, projects, loan)



Classical sculpture



Pacific barkcloth garment



Medieval tile



Excavation of Iron-Age cauldron

The Exhibition



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The Exhibition

The live studio



The Exhibition

The live studio



The Exhibition

the 'After' display case



The Exhibition

The 2D wall: life size images and LCD screens



Example of one of the LCD screen story



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8

Outcomes and Experiences

Internal outcomes

- > 35,000 visitors saw the exhibition
- Raised CSR department's profile within Museum
- Enhanced CSR department's web presence:
 - LCD screen stories
 - Iron-Age cauldron conservation project funding



Outcomes and Experiences

Conservators' experiences

- Enjoyed the experience
- Renewed their enthusiasm for their work
- Would do it again in the future
- Time consuming



Outcomes and Experiences

Top questions:

- What is it?
- How old is it?
- Is it a real object?
- What are you doing/using?
- How long will it take you?
- How did you become a conservator?



Outcomes and Experiences

Visitors' experiences

Of >35,000 visitors:

- 89% visited the live studio
- 47% watched the digital screen stories
- 49% of visitors looked at the 'after' display case



Outcomes and Experiences

Concerns:

- Concern by conservators about level of complexity that could be shown

Visitors understood:

- The amount of skill and work involved in conservation
- The importance of conservation for the future
- That conservation enables access and understanding



Outcomes and Experiences

Visitors did not pick up on:

- That conservators work in multidisciplinary teams

but

- Visitors felt a sense of inclusion and privilege



Communications Group

- Showcase live conservation work in the galleries
- Science Saturday
- Gallery talks and BM Friends Events
- Have science and conservation stories told through various media
- Work with Museum's Schools and Young Audiences team



World Conservation and Exhibition Centre

- Public Tours
 - Monthly tours for public and school groups
- Conservation Live web portal
 - Blogs
 - Videos
 - Live events
- Requires training for staff
- Volunteers





Cross Section

