

# ***'I feel included'***

**An evaluation of *Conservation in focus* in Room 3 at the British Museum**

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**'I feel included' – An evaluation of *Conservation in focus* in Room 3 at the British Museum**

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*Conservation in focus* was a **unique** exhibition that combined traditional objects and text with **live interpretation** of conservators working in the room.

Visitors loved being able to **interact** with Museum staff, and were able to **engage deeply** both with the objects and the conservators themselves.

The exhibition was extremely successful and provoked much **deeper outcomes** than had been expected as visitors felt a sense of **inclusion** from the behind the scenes look at the Museum.

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# 1 *Conservation in focus*

*Conservation in focus* was held in Room 3 of the British Museum from 11 September – 28 October 2008.

The display focused on conservation of objects and showcased this often unseen aspect of the Museum's work. Throughout the period of the exhibition, a team of the Museum's conservators were based in the room, offering visitors the opportunity to meet them as they worked and demonstrated the procedures, the techniques and the tools they were using.

The exhibition featured three different stages, focussing on the following different objects:

- Greek and Roman sculptures
- Pacific barkcloth
- An Iron Age cauldron and a medieval tile panel



## 2 Scene setting

### 2.1 Objectives

*Conservation in focus* offered visitors the chance to interact with the Museum's conservators in order to gain a better understanding of their role, and also the role of conservation within the whole Museum.

The research aimed to test how successfully visitors engaged with the conservators and the objects in the room, and find out the resulting outcomes.

The Museum specified three key messages which they hoped visitors would take away with them:

- Through their specialised skills and knowledge, conservators reveal information about objects and ensure the preservation of cultural heritage for the future
- Conservators don't work in isolation. They collaborate and make decisions with many people across various disciplines
- The work of conservators enables the public to access Museum objects and understand them better

The key messages and the delivery mechanisms are inextricably linked in this exhibition, so in order to test the success of the exhibition it is necessary to firstly evaluate the individual delivery mechanisms, and then the key messages.

### 2.2 Presentation and interpretation scheme

The main focus of the exhibition was the left hand wall, where three conservators were sat behind a Perspex partition working on individual objects. Visitors were encouraged to ask them questions or talk to them about what they were doing.

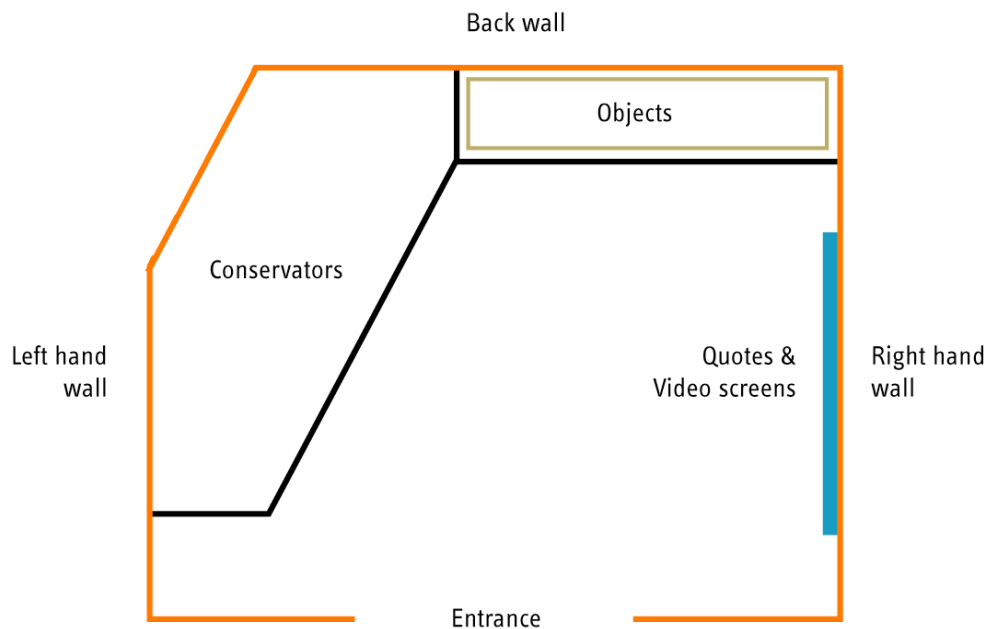
At the front of the Perspex screen were images and some text, as well as a small box containing some of the tools used by the conservators. Some of the images and text panels were removable so conservators could hold them up to help illustrate a point.

At the back of the exhibition was a display case featuring one or more static objects that had been restored. These objects changed during the course of the three display periods. There were also interpretation panels here to explain the work that had been carried out.

The right hand wall featured a number of quotes from conservators explaining their work, as well as a series of video screens with changing displays of other conservation work that had taken place either at the Museum or around the world.

For ease of understanding the three areas of the exhibition are often referred to in this report as **left hand wall**, **back wall** and **right hand wall**.

*Schematic diagram of Conservation in focus*



If we add this unusual form of interpretation to the extant body of insight into visitor behaviour and response built up during the previous thirteen Room 3 shows and a number of major special exhibitions, it is perhaps unsurprising that we have learnt more from this evaluation than from many of the shows that used more traditional approaches to interpretation.

## 3 Exhibition overview

*Conservation in focus* was a hugely successful exhibition that provoked deep levels of engagement among visitors and offered them a unique, behind the scenes look at the workings of the Museum.

Visitors felt privileged to be able to watch the conservators working and subsequently be able to talk to them. Visitors do not expect to be able to see this sort of work in the Museum, and the exhibition came as an unexpected but pleasant surprise. The *Conservation in focus* exhibition offered visitors similar levels of involvement and engagement to the Hands On experience at the Museum, and provoked equally positive responses.

However, the success of the live interpretation proved to be something of a mixed blessing, as although talking to the conservators offered visitors a greater insight and deeper levels of engagement, the draw of live interpretation sometimes distracted visitors away from the other elements in the room. The static object particularly suffered here which proved to be a problem for the exhibition as two of the key messages relied upon this object and its interpretation.

Visitors left with strong intellectual outcomes regarding the skill of the conservators and the importance of the conservation process, but they also gained significant emotional and spiritual outcomes too. They felt a sense of inclusion with the Museum - having been offered a behind the scenes look at the Museum's work, and also fascination with the work the conservators carry out.

The conservators and the public would like to see more conservation work taking place during a visit, perhaps in a similar fashion to the Hands On work that currently takes place within the Museum.

## 4 What we did

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre was commissioned by the British Museum to evaluate the *Conservation in focus* display as part of an on-going evaluation of the Room 3 displays. This report forms the fourteenth report in the series.

The following primary research took place at the British Museum over 5 shifts between 22 September - 23 October 2008, covering weekdays and weekends.

### ***Anatomy of a 3 minute visit***

Our researcher approached visitors who had already completed their visit in the room, and asked the visitor to talk them through their visit, describing their thought process behind every decision and continuously describing their thoughts and feelings at each element of the display.

They are also asked their reactions to the opportunity to interact with the conservators, and the subsequent outcomes that have been provoked.

This methodology provides a wealth of rich, qualitative data and enables us to get inside visitors' minds.

60 *Anatomy of a visit* interviews were completed

### **Sequential visitor tracking**

We tracked individual visitors during their visits to Room 3, recording their behaviour at different areas of the room, recording where they went first, how many elements they looked at and how their interaction with the conservators affected engagement levels.

This information allows us to identify patterns of visitor behaviour, which is essential to understanding how visitors are responding to the design of the exhibition.

305 visitors were tracked using *sequential visitor tracking*.

## 5 Who visited?



Having conducted significant research in Room 3 we have been able to identify three main types of visitor to the display space. As during the previous Room 3 displays, the pen portraits remain relevant here, although there was probably a higher proportion of visitors with a professional or academic interest in conservation or archaeology in this instance.

### 5.1 Pen portraits of typical Room 3 visitors

Research at the previous eleven Room 3 displays has helped us to understand the type of visitors who come into the room. The following are three brief general descriptions of the most common type of Room 3 visitor.

#### **Serial Room 3 visitor**

This type of visitor is a regular visitor to Room 3 with the exhibition often being the sole reason behind their visit that day. Many of these visitors will just pop into the Museum during a lunch break as they know that they will see something new and interesting in the room.

#### **Visitors with a personal connection**

Room 3 attracts visitors who have come to the British Museum for another reason and entered Room 3 as the subject matter interests them. This is often due to the close relations in terms of subject matter between Room 3 and a coinciding special exhibition. For example, in this instance many visitors

came to the Museum to see *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict* and visited Room 3 as the subjects covered in the two spaces were related and therefore of interest.

### **Incidental visitors**

Room 3, and the Museum as a whole, attracts a large number of incidental visitors, many of whom are making their first visit to the Museum that day. The room's close proximity to the main entrance and Great Court and its often intriguing décor attract many incidental visitors into the display.

## 6 Attractor

From researching previous Room 3 displays we have established an attractor model that focuses on four main triggers:

- Room 3 repeat visitor
- Information
- View of object
- View into room

*Conservation in focus* differs from other recent displays in that it moves away from the 'Object in focus' ethos, and instead concentrates on the work of its conservation team. As a result, visitors could not see a specific object that subsequently attracted them into the room – instead they were more attracted by the proposition offered to them by the exhibition's title, which was clearly visible on the back wall of the room.

However, some visitors saw the conservators through the door, rather than the objects, and thought this was a unique opportunity to have a behind the scenes look at the Museum's work.

### ***Conservation in focus attractor model***

| Trigger   | Attractor                  | Driver       |     |
|---|----------------------------|--------------|-----|
| Room 3 Repeat Visitor   | Stimulate Variety          | Int          | Emo |
| Information<br>(publicity,<br>recommendation,<br>projection screen) | Connection to conservation | Emotional    |     |
|   | Connection to object       | Emotional    |     |
|   | Interest in conservation   | Intellectual |     |
|   | Recognition                | Intellectual |     |
|   | Intrigue                   | Intellectual |     |
| View of conservators  | Unique opportunity         | Int          | Emo |
| View into Room  | Convenience appeal         | Soc          | Int |
|   | Modelling                  | Soc          | Int |

## 6.1 Repeat Room 3 visitor

Some visitors know that a visit to Room 3 will provide them with an enjoyable intellectual or emotional experience, and therefore visit without necessarily knowing (or caring) what the content will be.

*I have been in this room a couple of times before and they have had interesting exhibits in it*

*Every time I come to the Museum this room is for something new and different and interesting*

## 6.2 Information

Visitors saw a range of information before visiting the exhibition, including posters on the railings outside the building and on the Museum's website.

However, arguably the biggest attractor was the large exhibition title at the back of the room which could be seen from the corridor and drew many visitors into the space.

### Connection to conservation

There was a significant proportion of visitors who had a professional or academic interest in conservation or archaeology, and came into the room often with specific questions to ask. The range of the connections to conservation covered students, teachers and conservators themselves.

*I work for a conservation company – mainly on old buildings though*

*I work for National Trust as a conservation assistant so I just wanted to see what they were up to in the conservation room*

*I study archaeology so I had a look at the conservation techniques*

*I actually did some conservation studies in college – I was a classical civilisation major*

*I teach Art History*

### Connection to object

The conservators in the room noticed that some visitors had a personal connection with the object – specifically the barkcloth which attracted interest among tourists from New Zealand, Hawaii and Samoa.

*We were particularly interested because my sister lives in Hawaii and we've seen this Polynesian barkcloth before – people actually wearing it!*

### **Interest in conservation**

Many visitors to the room were attracted in by an interest in conservation or archaeology. The rise in the number of TV programmes such as Time Team, and the British Museum documentary has undoubtedly raised awareness of conservation and archaeology, and visitors have some prior knowledge which they wanted to relate to the exhibition itself.

*I just saw a notice saying conservation ... just interested to know how it's done*

*It's more in the media now ... TV programmes – more publicly aware of it now*

*I'm interested in conservation. I think it's a marvellous concept. It's a fascinating part of the Museum's work I think*

*I think the thing that most brought it home to me was the television programme that was on about the British Museum. It was then that I realised how much went on behind the scenes and this is sort of a live example of that really*

### **Intrigue**

The title sparked intrigue among some visitors, especially as it is a subject which they usually would not expect to see openly displayed in the Museum. they therefore considered this an opportunity to get a privileged, behind the scenes look at the Museum's work.

*The text on the back of the wall brought me into here ... all I could see was the text on the wall behind. I saw that it said conservation, and I thought that sounds interesting enough, I'll have a little look*

*I was just on my way out and saw Conservation in focus which sounded interesting*

### **Recognition**

Some visitors wanted to find out more about how conservation has affected the objects with which they are familiar in the rest of the Museum.

*I don't particularly have an interest as such, other than the fact I experience all these artworks and I don't really know why they remain in the state that they are, so it's interesting to get a glimpse into that*

### 6.3 View of conservators

Previous Room 3 displays have centred around an 'Object in focus' which was often positioned in the very centre of the room and subsequently attracted visitors into the space.

This was not the case for this display, and although not positioned centrally in the room, seeing the conservators working in the room was sufficiently intriguing to attract visitors.

Many visitors considered this to be a unique opportunity to see conservators working in the open, as can be seen in the Section 8 of this report.

### 6.4 View into room

Room 3's position by the entrance to the Museum attracts many visitors who have just entered the building, or have just finished their visit.

#### Modelling

Visitors are attracted into a room if they see other visitors in there – and some visitors saw people talking to the conservators and were intrigued to find out what they were talking about.

*We just saw people waiting at the desk, so we just wanted to have a look at it*

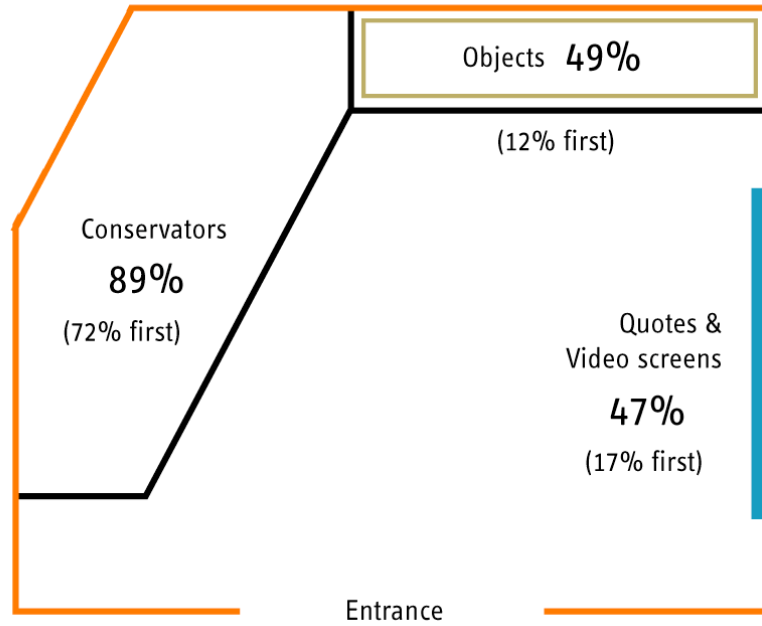
#### Convenience appeal

Room 3 is a very convenient room to visit if a visitor is short on time, and the timed tickets for *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict* meant that this was often the case.

*I've got a timed ticket for Hadrian and I've got some time*

## 7 How visitors behaved in the room

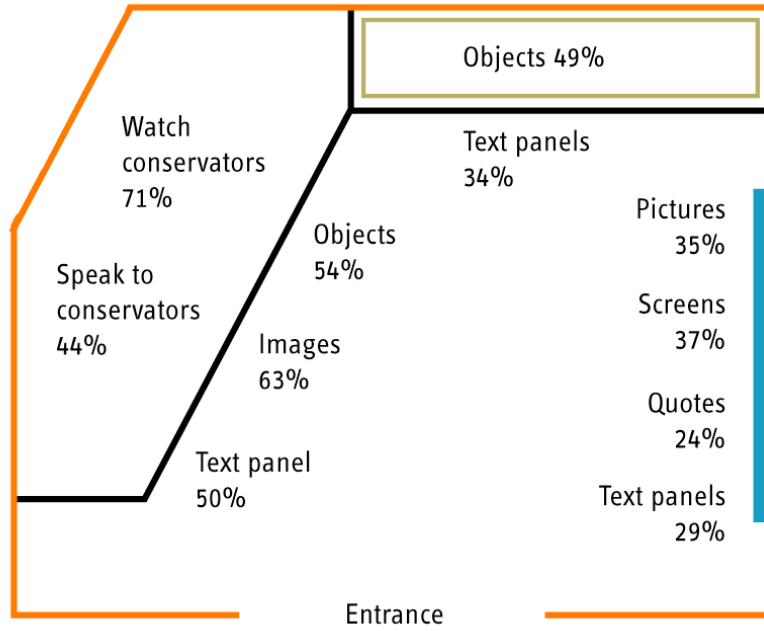
### Usage of 3 main sections of Conservation in focus



The large numbers in the model above represent the proportion of visitors to Room 3 who visited each section of the display. The smaller figures below represent the percentage of visitors who went to this section first during their visit.

The next model breaks down usage even further, showing usage of the individual elements of the display.

**Usage of individual elements in the room**



This shows how usage of the individual elements decreased in a clockwise direction around the room, based on which was the more appealing proposition.

## 8 Delivery mechanisms

By looking at each of the individual delivery mechanisms separately, we can test whether they performed well as assumed in the interpretation matrix.

### 8.1 Rail / barrier

The information on the rail or barrier by the conservators gave an introduction to the exhibition and the conservation work in the Museum.

**50%** of all visitors to Room 3 **read this information**, with a further **63%** **looking at the images** and **54%** **looking at the objects** in the glass case.

This is a relatively high usage for all three elements, as the conservators often used the information or images as an interpretation aid.

The information provided on the rail offered visitors the most traditional form of interpretation, and some visitors were happy to just use this to help inform their visit.

*I was more interested in reading the text panels*

Less confident visitors tended to use the interpretation panels on the barrier as an entry point to approach the barrier, and then subsequently have a conversation with the conservators.

### 8.2 Demonstrator / Interactor

For the purposes of this report **Demonstrator** and **Interactor** have been combined, as often all three conservators in the space were interacting with the public.

The use of conservators in the room provided a unique interpretive technique that allowed visitors to form their own questions and engage with people rather than text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this live interpretation was an extremely successful technique.

#### **Were the demonstrators and interactors attractive features?**

The offer of live interpretation was an extremely attractive proposition to visitors, many of who only entered the room as a result of seeing the conservators working through the main entrance.

*I saw the girl working*

*The people that were in there already doing the conserving*

*It looked really interesting because there were lots of different people in there, they were all using like dentist tools*

**44%** of visitors to the room actually **spoke to the conservators**, with a further **71%** of all visitors either **watching the work** they were doing or **listening** in while the conservator spoke to someone else.

#### **How did visitors interact with the conservators?**

58% of visitors who spoke to the conservators actively approached them and initiated the conversation, while 42% became engaged in conversation after the conservator spoke to them.

Some visitors were concerned that they would be interrupting the conservators' work, but were pleased to have the conversation once the conservator spoke to them.

*I was reading and she came over and told me a bit more about it ... I didn't want to interrupt her!*

*She came to me actually and she told me a great deal about it*

*She could see I was interested and came across to speak to me*

*She came back and just said 'Are you alright?' and just started a conversation about it from there*

Some visitors listened to other people's conversation, and subsequently got involved when they had a question.

*I sort of half-listened to a conversation while I was finding out, then got involved there*

*I was just standing there and he was talking to somebody else. Then I asked him a question and we just chatted about what he's doing and so on*

Others were happy to just listen to the conservators speak to other people, and find out more that way.

*I wasn't speaking to her, that lady was speaking but I was listening*

*I was listening to someone else talking*

*I didn't talk directly but I heard the conversation*

### **What did visitors ask about?**

The conservators reported being asked four or five questions repeatedly, as well as a wider range of more specific questions. The five most common questions were variations on these:

- What is the object?
- How old is it?
- What are you doing?
- How long will it take?
- What training do you need / how do you get into conservation?

Visitors said they liked having the chance to speak to the conservators, and given the opportunity tried to find out as much as they could.

*We heard one of them talking to a gentleman who admitted that he knew nothing, and he spent a long time talking to one of them and asking questions and she was explaining things and he seemed to really appreciate that and get an awful lot from it*

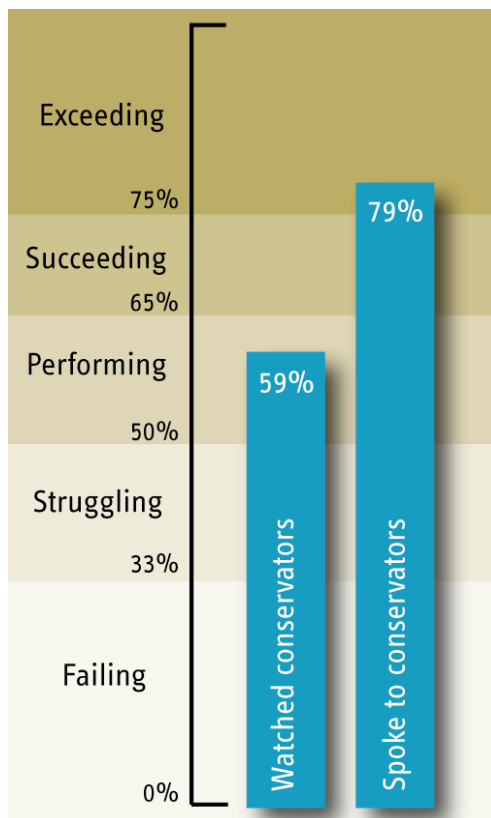
*I asked them as much as I possibly could and I found it very useful*

*We didn't need to ask her many questions. They told us everything!*

### **Did interacting with the conservators increase engagement?**

The chart below compares engagement levels for those visitors who watched the conservators working, compared to those who spoke to the actual conservators themselves.

**% of visitors engaged at left hand wall**



This shows that there was a deeper level of engagement amongst visitors who spoke to the conservators than those who just watched the work taking place. However, both watching or speaking to the conservators were extremely successful interpretive techniques.

Visitors commented that they were reach deeper levels of engagement, and improve their own knowledge and understanding quicker as a result of speaking to the conservators rather than reading a text panel.

*I just find it more interesting talking to somebody*

*It is much easier if you can ask the questions you want to ask, even if she has heard them 20 times before ... rather than searching through a label and not finding quite what you want*

**Why did some people not speak to the conservators?**

As previously stated, 44% of exhibition visitors actually spoke to the conservators. While some visitors listened to other people's conversations

with the conservators, there were some visitors who chose not to engage with them.

Some were happy just to watch, and did not feel the need to ask any questions.

*I didn't have any specific questions ... I just watched them*

*I felt I could've approached them if I'd like to. I had no need to*

However, for some the volume of visitors already speaking to the conservators proved a deterrent.

*I didn't [go to the workshop] because there were quite a lot of people in the way*

Others felt that they did not have enough knowledge to ask a sensible question and were afraid of asking something which would have been considered inane.

*I'd feel slightly pressured to know a good question to ask*

*If I had approached any of them it would have been inane questions I'm sure. I'm not qualified to ask them the right stuff and they probably get a bellyful of it from tourists*

Another concern that appeared on several occasions was that visitors felt they should not interrupt the conservators while they were working – thereby missing the whole point of the exhibition.

*I felt badly about interrupting them*

*I didn't want to distract the conservation progress*

### 8.3 Static object

The static object's proximity to the conservators meant that this more traditional form of museum interpretation was competing for attention with the live interpretation. As a result, the static object was always likely to struggle to reach the same heights as the conservator workshop area.

**48%** of visitors to Room 3 **looked at the static object**, while **34%** read the **accompanying object label**. Only **25%** of visitors who looked at the static object display **reached engagement** – significantly lower than at the left hand wall workshop area.

This means that while the objects were sufficiently appealing to attract nearly half of visitors to the back wall of the display, the interpretation available was not as appealing or engaging as the live interpretation at the workshop area.

#### **Visitors used the static object to gain context for the live conservation work**

Visitors felt the static object at the back of the exhibition helped give context to the live interpretation of the conservators, with some applying the knowledge they had gained by talking to the conservators to increase their understanding of the static objects.

*We went over and saw the completed restoration of the cauldron, and then went back and looked at what they were working on and actually conserving*

*You have to have something to put it in context. Once you read the back wall you know what she's working on over here is one of those*

#### **8.4 Quote / Image Wall**

The quote / image wall aimed to provide information to get across all three messages, but it was not the main source of information for any of them.

**35%** of visitors to the exhibition **looked at the pictures** on the wall, with a further **37%** **viewing the slideshows** on the screens. The **text panels** and **quotes** were less popular, attracting **29%** and **24%** of visitors respectively.

27% of visitors to the right hand wall of the exhibition were engaged, again showing how the rest of the exhibition was a victim of the live interpretation's success.

However, the right hand wall offered another interpretation technique for visitors who did not want to speak to the conservators, and helped provide context for all visitors.

*I particularly liked the area with the ongoing pictures of the other conservation projects that were going on*

## 9 Key Messages & Outcomes

The Museum outlined three key messages for visitors to take away from the exhibition, which are situated on the left hand column of the interpretive matrix.

### 9.1 Message 1

***Through their specialised skills and knowledge, conservators reveal information about objects and ensure the preservation of cultural heritage for the future***

The success of this key message of the exhibition relied heavily upon the live interpretation elements of the demonstrator and interactor, as well as contributions from the static object and quote / image wall.

As stated in the previous section, the left hand wall / workshop area of the exhibition was an overwhelming success in terms of attraction, visitor engagement and subsequent outcomes.

Amongst other outcomes visitors undoubtedly recognised the skills of the conservators, and the importance of conservation for future generations.

#### **Visitors recognised the amount and skill and work involved in conservation**

Visitors were unaware of the painstaking work that was involved with conservation, and as a result felt differently about the conservators themselves, and the amount of skill they had to do this as a job.

They also commented on the passion of the conservators, and enjoyed interacting with people who loved their work and could share their enthusiasm for conservation.

*I like to see people doing what they love*

*You come into museums and look at things. You know they've been restored but you don't actually know what effort's gone into restoring it so I think it's good to make people aware how hard people work behind the scenes*

*They are obviously very dedicated folk to be doing this day in and day out*

*The painstaking work that goes into a few old pots!*

*The best thing is meeting people who obviously love their work and are able to give me their enthusiasm*

*When we go into the Museum we forget the labour that's been put behind discovering items, and discovering how they work*

### **The Museum is more than just an exhibitor**

Some visitors went on to recognise the Museum's role as more than just a place to exhibit objects, and described it as a workshop.

*Conservation is more of an active discipline. It's not just something that's meant to keep things in spaces. It's actually doing something alongside curating and archaeology*

*A museum isn't just a display cabinet, it's a workshop and skill*

### **The importance of conservation for the future**

Visitors also picked up on the importance of conservation for the future generations, both in terms of the Museum's role, but also people individually.

*There are lots of locked rooms all over the various levels in the building and you just wonder what's going on behind there. I think it's important to know that these things aren't just sitting in the back gathering dust*

*To make people aware that they've got to preserve things basically. Treat them properly otherwise we'll lose all our history*

### **Why was this key message successfully communicated?**

The success of the communication of this key message is inextricably linked to the success of the live interpretation element of the display. The interpretive matrix shows that the means to communicate this message was through the demonstrator and interactor, and their success in terms of attraction and engagement subsequently led to a successful outcome.

## **9.2 Message 2**

***Conservators don't work in isolation. They collaborate and make decisions with many people across various disciplines***

Visitors did not pick up on Message 2, or did not consider it a major outcome when asked what they felt they had learnt from the exhibition. No visitors spontaneously mentioned the collaborative work between conservators in the Museum, suggesting that this key message was lacking from some visitors' learning outcomes.

### Why was this key message not successfully communicated?

The relative failure in communication of the second key message is once again linked to the success of the first. The Museum relied upon visitors using the static objects to give them the information necessary to reach this key message. In reality, visitors were more attracted by the live interpretation than the static objects, and as a result awareness of this key message suffered.

## 9.3 Message 3

### ***The work of conservators enables the public to access museum objects and understand them better***

Visitors undoubtedly picked up on the fact that conservators enable the public to access museum objects and understand them better, though this was largely achieved by visitors speaking to the conservators rather than looking at the static object.

Visitors recognised the role of the conservators as a 'middle step' between excavation and display, and caught onto the fact that these objects would not be fit for display without the conservators' work.

*This is like a middle step from it being buried or hidden, taken out and then being prepared for display, which I think is important for people to understand*

*It's more involved than you think just finding something and sticking it on a plinth*

*You find out more about that object than if you were in one of the galleries. Because of this you actually know a lot more about what it is, why it is, how it was made and what they're trying to find out*

*When it's straight out of the ground it's not in a state that most people would be able to understand, and most people would be able to appreciate ... so I think it's an important step*

*When you look at a piece of sculpture ... you don't necessarily get the richness of somebody working on it ... it's a privilege to be able to interrupt somebody working*

Some visitors also related what they had learnt in Room 3 to specific objects elsewhere in the Museum.

*I've just been to the Hadrian exhibition and there were statues that have been falsely put together with the head and so on ... it's the wrong head!*

### **Why was this key message successfully communicated?**

Visitors were able to latch onto this key message due to the interpretive mix in the exhibition. They could find out about this message through looking at the static objects of quote / image wall, but more importantly also through the conservators. Watching conservators work on actual Museum objects helped visitors understand the important role they play.

## **9.4 Other outcomes**

The three key messages outlined above are all very intellectual, and are focussed on the transfer of knowledge and understanding of the conservation process.

### **A privileged look behind the scenes of the Museum**

*We are not allowed to see this kind of work ... so it's great. It's like seeing a doctor during surgery*

Visitors felt a sense of inclusion from seeing the conservators work in the room, and like in previous Room 3 displays, felt privileged to see some behind the scenes work. Visitors do not expect to see this kind of work taking place in the open, and so it comes as a huge unexpected but positive surprise when they are not only able to watch the work, but also talk to the conservators.

In some ways, visitors compared this interactive process to the Hands On experience in the Museum, where again they are able to partake in activities that they do not expect to be able to do in a museum.

*I didn't realise they had these sort of things going on*

*Normally you can't talk to them, look at the equipment, see what they're doing*

*I feel included*

*It's kind of a hidden activity that they do in their basement somewhere where the have ... millions of wonderful things that we never see, so I think it's a wonderful idea*

*You can get to have a little insight into the back door stuff. It isn't something that you'd get in any normal museum*

### **Fascination with the conservators and their work**

Visitors were extremely interested in the work of the conservators, to the level of fascination at times. The novelty of being able to speak to conservators, combined with their level of knowledge offered visitors a fascinating insight into the conservation process.

*It's interesting – I think I'll go back and tell my children*

*The work in action, that's the fascinating part of it for me. The techniques they use, I mean it's such delicate work they do. It's very interesting*

*I've never really had the opportunity to watch the experts in action.  
Fascinating!*

*There were some kids in earlier and they were like 'wow!'*

*This is brilliant!*

*It makes you want to tell people about it ... say 'oh, you must go to the British Museum, they've got this wonderful conservation area'*

## 10 The conservators

### **An opportunity to speak to the public**

Visitors described talking to the conservators as a privilege, and the sentiment was mutual from the conservators. They enjoyed the opportunity to interact with members of the public as they do not usually have the chance to do this in their job.

They also reported interest from other Museum staff who were keen to come and talk to them about what they were doing – thereby highlighting the unique nature of the display and its success in attracting interest.

### **Renewed their love and enthusiasm for conservation**

Speaking to the public allowed the conservators to express their enthusiasm for conservation – much of which undoubtedly rubbed off on visitors. Also, by asking how the conservators had first got into their line of work, they inadvertently encouraged the conservators to renew their interest in the subject.

The exhibition undoubtedly provoked strong outcomes among visitors, but also among the conservators who enjoyed receiving such positive feedback on their work from the Museum public.

### **The Perspex barrier was too high**

The conservators felt that the Perspex screen in front of where they were working was too much of a barrier, and in many ways hindered the engagement process. In order to talk to visitors they were forced to stop what they were doing and stand up to be heard over the screen.

This obviously caused difficulties with children and people in wheelchairs as they were unable to see the conservators working. The conservators thought that a lower partition would have been more effective in encouraging visitor engagement.

The conservators also suggested giving a bigger prompt for visitors to talk to them – perhaps by writing 'Please ask us a question' either in big letters on the Perspex barrier or on the wall behind them.

### **Foreign languages proved an obstacle**

Conservators were slightly more hesitant to approach visitors if they were unsure that English was their first language. One conservator suggested they could have worn pin badges to indicate which languages they spoke in order to encourage conversation with all visitors.

### **Conservators were concerned people got the wrong impression of their work**

The logistics of the room and exhibition meant that a vast amount of what the conservators would usually do was impossible in Room 3. As a result visitors only saw a very small proportion of the conservation work that goes on in the Museum.

The conservators were concerned that people would underestimate the skills that are required for conservation work. In reality, visitors were thrilled to be talking to experts in their field, and were struck by the skills and enthusiasm of the conservators.

### **Conservators were helpful, friendly and approachable**

Visitor reactions to the conservators was almost universally positive, saying that their approachable nature had put them at ease and increased the opportunity for engagement.

*They were delightful, I asked them where they came from and I asked them how they got into conservation and where they trained and so on*

*They were all very positive and very interesting*

*They're very approachable*

*They were very helpful*

# 11 Recommendations

## 11.1 Continue to offer insight into conservation

In this and previous Room 3 displays visitors have reacted very positively to the theme of conservation. At the previous displays this involved an interpretation panel outlining some of the conservation work carried out on a specific object in focus, whereas this display focussed entirely on conservation.

Both approaches proved very popular, and visitors and conservators alike want to see the issue of conservation addressed elsewhere in the Museum. This could be through another similar exhibition to this one, or through the setting up of a conservation desk in certain galleries where visitors can talk to staff, in a similar approach to the Hands On desks.

## 11.2 Specific exhibition recommendations

Visitors and conservators suggested several ways that the display could be changed to increase engagement.

### Lower the barrier

The conservators working in the room felt that the Perspex barrier acted as a deterrent for some visitors, and excluded others from engaging. This was particularly an issue for children or visitors in a wheelchair, as they were unable to see the conservation work taking place. Also, in order to speak to visitors over the barrier, the conservators had to stop working and stand up and talk.

The conservators felt that there was no need for the barrier to be this high, and it could have been lowered without posing any significant security issues.

### Encourage visitors to ask more questions

Some visitors chose not to ask questions because they did not want to interrupt the conservation work, while others felt that any potential question they might ask would be too simple or inane. Obviously, these visitors therefore missed out on a key feature of the exhibition, and did not engage as deeply as they could have done.

Visitors like to be actively given clear directions as to what they can and can't do in an exhibition space, and so stating on the Perspex barrier or on the wall behind the conservators that they should ask questions could have further deepened visitor engagement.

### **Show wider range of conservation work**

The logistics of the exhibition space meant that the conservators were limited in the amount and nature of conservation work they could do in the room. Some were therefore slightly concerned that visitors would underestimate the skills required to carry out conservation work, and would think of them as 'cleaners' rather than 'conservators'.

In future exhibitions, if the space allows it, the Museum could highlight the full range of work carried out by the conservators – showing the range of skills and equipment required for conservation work.



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