

Appendix 2b: Achieving the Department's Aims Ian Carradice

Introduction

This short appraisal is based on two brief visits to the HSBC Money Gallery within a single day during public opening hours (13.00-13.15 and 16.15-16.45). I also read some background material on the gallery (Introductory Guide, Money Resource Pack, etc.), and obtained some notes from John Orna-Ornstein on the original objectives of the gallery. This report will focus at first on the Gallery's stated objectives (sections 1-3), but will also note some general appraisal issues (4).

1. Objective 1: *'The display will be appropriate to the size, shape and architecture of the Gallery and take account of its position on a major route.'*

1.1. Location. The Gallery has an advantageous position, near the top of the main staircase of the Museum on the major route to the upstairs Greek and Roman galleries. It is inevitable that many visitors will pass through and presumably it is hoped that most will stop and enjoy the display. On my visits there were always between 15 and 20 (lunch-time) or 10 to 20 (late afternoon) persons looking at the display cases, and, additionally, another 5 to 10 walking through without pausing (possibly because they were on a return journey, having already looked at the display earlier).

1.2. Size, shape, architecture. Since coins are generally small, museum displays of money tend to be squeezed into small, often dimly lit, side rooms in galleries. By contrast, this gallery is quite large, spacious, light, with a high ceiling, and forms part of a major through-route. The large, well-lit glass cases are well spaced, allowing visitors plenty of room either to stop or walk straight past. The backing boards have bright colours in different shades of turquoise and green which match the painted gallery walls and ceiling. The overall effect is of a display that 'fits' very well the space being used.

2. Objectives 2-5: Content of the display: quality and range of collections; chronological scheme; thematic presentations.

2.1. The display presents the history of money, key features being the time charts at both entrances to the Gallery, and the date ranges clearly indicated in the headings of the display cases along both walls. The large quantity and wide variety of items exhibited illustrates the high quality of the collections that back-up the display.

2.2. The chronological scheme is clear, as noted above, and the selection of visually attractive items can't fail to give an impression of the historical development of money to anyone prepared to stop and look.

2.3. The thematic presentations – forms of money and how they were made along the south wall, how money has been used on the north wall – are clear, at least to a person already possessing some understanding of the subject. The

cleverness of the layout, with historical progression in parallel through the two halves of the gallery (north and south) could only be fully appreciated by a visitor systematically navigating the entire Gallery (which most visitors will not) or by a group accompanied by a well-briefed leader (e.g. a school group). On the other hand, the self-contained nature of each case allows the casual visitor to 'dip-in' effectively.

3. Objective 6: *'The display will address the interests of all types of visitors, so that it will communicate with children, casual visitors, academics, etc.'*

3.1. The display cases include information at various levels, from short bold headings declaring broad concepts to lengthy labels noting more complex numismatic issues (like die-linking). The latter will clearly inform even the expert, but will inevitably be ignored by many visitors. I observed one visitor (male, middle-aged) studying one section of case 8, 'Metal and Money Supplies AD 600-1450', for a full 15 minutes; otherwise most visitors seemed to spend no more than 30 seconds at any one point in the Gallery.

3.2. The display includes many objects that have obviously been selected to attract the attention of visitors who might have been deterred by a more traditional numismatic display of coins arranged in rows. I gained the impression that the island cases (some of which contain particularly eye-catching exhibits, e.g. coin hoards, the old cash till and the reducing machine) attracted proportionately more visitors than the side cases. However, the latter were also well stocked with interesting and/or attractive 'non-coin-like' items, e.g. ancient pots, a Benin bronze, printing plates, indigenous forms of money, a 1786 lottery ticket, a 'Toy Story' plastic piggy bank, etc. I believe these items do succeed in increasing the attractiveness of the cases to visitors; but one issue to consider is whether these items do any more than just catch the eye – do they also lead the visitor to discover the other interesting material or numismatic concepts? In other words, the issues of 'attracting attention' or 'holding attention' could merit further exploration through a visitor survey (though there may be practical difficulties in obtaining this type of information).

3.3. I did not have the time to assess the labels for readability (there are straight forward tests for this). Nor did I examine in detail the arrangement of objects (lines or angles of vision, etc.); but my overall impression was that most items would be visible to most visitors, though some of the coins must have been well above eye-level for small children.

3.4. I have no doubts that the display would satisfy the more academic visitor, both in the volume of interesting material included and the quality of information and interpretation provided.

4. Other notes/issues/conclusions

4.1. In my opinion the Gallery is laid out in a way that should be attractive to visitors.

4.2. The broad concepts, e.g. history of money and use of money, should be easily comprehended by most visitors, but some issues will not be accessible to all (but they probably never could be).

4.3. The contents of the display cases are well chosen and should attract attention; they should also hold attention.

4.4. The format of presentation (chronological and thematic) is appropriate for the subject matter.

4.5. The quality of the objects and the wide range of material exhibited are appropriate for visitor perceptions of The British Museum as one of the world's great museums.

4.6. The interpretive information is accurate and scholarly, as would be expected.

4.7. The durable nature of most of the objects should ensure that conservation problems are minimal, but I saw some silver coins that appeared to be gaining a 'milky' surface appearance that may indicate a conservation problem (light, pollution, etc.).

4.8. The arrangement of the Gallery seems well able to handle visitor flow, both for exhibit viewers and 'passers through'.

4.9. There is an absence of 'high-tech' interpretive devices, but such 'gimmicks' would probably not have enhanced this Gallery.