

Kelvingrove re-interpreted

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, a much-loved Glasgow landmark, closed in 2003 for a complete refurbishment. Fourteen months after re-opening in 2006, we have welcomed over three and a half million visitors.

The new Kelvingrove is object-based, visitor-focused, storytelling and flexible. It's the creation of a huge team of people, inspired by a huge and varied collection, informed by extensive research and consultation, and kept focused by a clear set of objectives.

Traditional museum categories have been subverted and mixed. Paintings are displayed with geology, animals with arms and armour, St Kildan textiles next to Benin bronzes. The storytelling approach means that we chose groups of objects to tell a particular tale. We haven't tried to tell visitors everything about the objects on the galleries – graphics are limited to 100 words and labels to 30. There's more information available from books, computers and curators in the Study Centre.

Each story display was designed and interpreted for a single audience – children, schools, teenagers, families or non-expert. We also identified specific interpretation for under-fives and for people with sensory impairments.

Before we closed, research showed that, above all, people wanted the new Kelvingrove to be thought-provoking. This helped us to take risks, to cover the darker side of our collections, to have fun. And the flexibility of the displays gives us a safety net if necessary.

A few things to look out for when you visit:

- the impact of Impressionism made clear in the Changing Styles in French Art story, where the run of nine paintings takes you from dark realism to primary colour fauvism at a glance;
- a Famous Grouse whisky bottle reinforcing the message about the icons of Scottish wildlife;
- electronic thought-bubbles over the gloomy picture of a Marriage of Convenience, where you can add your own interpretation;
- endangered animals turning away from the animal parade in the Life Court on their journey towards possible extinction and fossilization;
- audio walls that bring a human dimension to archaeological stories;
- graphics which just use images to make the link between Glasgow Style designs and the natural forms that inspired them.

There have been lots of positive comments from visitors, the media and other professionals – as well as a few negative ones. We don't expect to please everybody, and would have failed in our aims if we did. This quote from a visitor's blog gives a flavour of what people think:

'There's a right buzz about it...as museums go it's no got that serious-as-fuck way about it, folk creeping about on tiptoes, whispering "excuse me" to people and edging past them, none of that. And there's a bit of a bric-a-brac fashion about the way certain things are laid out.'

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