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Europe 1600-1815, Victoria and Albert Museum Galleries

Blog entry

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Europe 1600-1815, Victoria and Albert Museum Galleries

Location: Rooms 1-7, Victoria and Albert Museum, Kensington, London

Event Date: N/A: Permanent Gallery

Review Date: 21 July 2016

Event URL: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/europe>

Reviewed by: Paul Stock, International History Department, London School of Economics and Political Science

Review

Europe 1600-1815 is an outstanding addition to the permanent galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Across seven rooms, the refurbished and reorganised galleries document the ‘great cultural changes’ of the period, making three key arguments: that France succeeded the Italian states as the cultural lodestar of the period; that Europe was an increasingly globalised society, infused with goods and materials from across the world; and that ‘luxury, privacy and comfort’, while initially signs of privilege, gradually became widespread among the lower social orders. The exhibition consists of four key sections, each with its own large room or rooms: ‘Europe and the World, 1600-1720’; ‘The Rise of France, 1660-1720’; ‘City and Commerce, 1720-1780’; and ‘Luxury, Liberty and Power, 1760-1815’. At first glance, one might detect a rather traditional historiography underpinning this organization. After all, ‘commerce’, ‘luxury’, and ‘liberty’ were among the watchwords of the Whig historians, as were ideas about the rising middle classes, and the migration of cultural power northwards from the Mediterranean to France (and Britain). In fact, the displays demonstrate a willingness to expand and complicate these familiar trajectories.

Take, for example, the first room on ‘Europe and the World, 1600-1720’. The gallery avoids over-simplifications about the importance of the classics and secularised modernity to show how art and design was ‘shaped by trade, colonization, and religious conflict’. The dazzling array of objects on display—paintings, prints, devotional artefacts, furniture, tapestries, statues, weaponry, jewellery, and so on—explore a broad range of human experience in the period: from domestic life and cultural attitudes towards death; to global trade and its relationship with religious belief. There are two particularly important achievements which are sustained throughout the exhibition. Firstly, the global and local are shown to be deeply interconnected. The display cabinets show how items produced across the continent—for

example, Bohemia, Malta, Russia and Sweden—deploy local techniques and artistic traditions, but also participate both in the globalised circulation of materials, and the international exchange of ideas expressed in wider aesthetic movements: the baroque, *chinoiserie*, and neoclassicism. Secondly, the exhibition integrates intellectual and material life. It shows, for instance, how Catholic doctrinal beliefs were disseminated in devotional and domestic objects; and how weaponry or armour could reflect ideas about masculine fashion and social status. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a museum devoted to art and design, the exhibition is especially strong on the technical challenges of producing fine objects. The captions detail the highly specialized craftsmanship required to make the goods on display, reminding us that these are physical objects and not simply vehicles for ideas or artistic concepts. There is an excellent cabinet titled ‘From Design to Garment’ which details the production-stages of making eighteenth-century clothes. Another strong section relates these interests to conservation practices: it shows the four-metre decorative table fountain constructed by the Saxon porcelain factory at Meissen for the prime minister of Saxony in the 1740s. Significant parts of the object were missing or damaged, meaning that replacement parts were constructed using digital modelling, 3D printing, and plaster moulds. These techniques produced ceramic pieces which are virtually indistinguishable from the surviving remnants, and it no doubt would have been tempting to present the ‘complete’ fountain as if it were a miraculously preserved original. Instead, a short video explains how the new pieces were produced. This has the simultaneous effect of highlighting the technical sophistication of early modern ceramics, and foregrounding the curatorial labours which allow objects to be better displayed and more fully understood.

Overall, the galleries exhibit a laudable thematic coherence. Each of the rooms is further subdivided into sections which organize the material on view. For example, ‘City and Commerce, 1720-1780’ is subdivided into: accessories, silk, grand dining, luxury shopping, city workshops, rococo, Catholicism, and fantasies (which refers largely to orientalist ideas about exoticism). Display captions assign each object to one of these categories, meaning that the viewer can not only read about the item itself, but also understands how it fits into broader themes of the period and relates to the other objects surrounding it. The main sections also contain whole interiors: a panelled room from La Tournerie (a château in north-west France); a private room from the Parisian townhouse of Antoine Megret de Sérilly (the paymaster-general of the French army); and a ‘mirrored room’ described as ‘northern Italian’. This allows visitors to appreciate larger-scale aesthetic effects which are inevitably lost

amidst museum display cases. Similarly, smaller rooms connecting the main four focus on the sociability of the period: collecting, the *salon*, and the masquerade. The idea, clearly, is to insert inanimate objects back into their social contexts, and to help viewers understand how these items were deployed in cultural practice: displaying one's wealth and taste, or discussing and exhibiting new and fashionable ideas. It must be said, however, that *Europe 1600-1815* concentrates almost exclusively on high culture and luxury products. To some extent, this is a consequence of seeking to acquire the best examples of fine design; in other words, it cannot be avoided, given the exhibition's, and indeed the museum's, holdings and wider mission. But amidst all the royal patronage and aristocratic commissions, I did find myself wondering to what extent these aesthetic priorities filter down into more everyday contexts, especially given the increase in mass-produced consumer goods towards the end of the period. Unfortunately, the exhibition provides limited answers to this question: even the sections on domestic consumption tend to focus on very high-end goods: gilded harpsichords, and luxury tea and coffee sets for example.

In some respects, the galleries initially seem very traditional in their presentation: there are lots of objects in glass cases accompanied by detailed captions. But this is not a criticism. Indeed, one of the exhibition's real strengths is the way information detail is cascaded through different types of caption. Each room has an overview board which gives a summary of the key ideas and themes; and groups of objects have sub-captions which explain the principles on which certain objects are grouped together. Lastly, every individual item has a brief paragraph discussing its manufacture and uses. So visitors who are hazy on what the French Revolution was will find an answer; while those with more extensive knowledge can learn how Revolutionary iconography found its way onto dining sets and bed valances. In other words, both casual viewers and well-informed scrutineers will be satisfied by the amount of information on offer – a balance which other exhibitions often find hard to achieve. Neither should the glass-cases-and-captions approach imply that the presentational aesthetic is in any way dull: in fact, the obviously spectacular nature of the larger-scale tapestries, metalwork, and sculptures makes for a lively visual environment. Importantly too, there are innovations for younger visitors, which is important if children are not to see museums as forbidding or boring locations. There is a game of snakes and ladders, for example, themed around collecting and cabinets of curiosity. More excitingly, motion sensor technology allows visitors to participate in a Venetian masked ball by gesturing, bowing and dancing in front of a display screen prompted by a scripted narrative. Perhaps fortunately,

this popular feature is in a side room, meaning that the more sober-minded visitor will not be distracted by poor quality eighteenth-century capering. Broadly though, it is pleasing to see these child-oriented activities integrated into the main galleries without intruding on them: this exhibition does not make the mistake of assuming that a family friendly exhibition requires the tone to be uniformly simplified for a younger audience. Lastly, *Europe 1600-1815* includes an innovation I have not seen previously: a free online audio guide accessible via the free wifi. This is an excellent and generous addition, not least because an audio guide could provide an easy revenue source which the museum has presumably decided to forgo in favour of greater accessibility. It also has the secondary benefit of allowing virtual visits to the exhibition remotely through the extensive website.

As I concluded my visit, however, I began to reflect on what the galleries mean when they talk about 'Europe'. The principal focus is on France and the Italian states, with significant material too from the Netherlands, Spain, and the German states. But while there is some effort to include items from an even greater number of European locations – including Russia, Greece, and modern-day Romania – there is also a notable absentee: Britain. At times, Britain remains strangely below the surface. William III of England is mentioned, but principally in terms of his Dutch palace Het Loo, which imitated Louis XIV's Versailles. A rococo waistcoat is on display, ambiguously described as originating in 'France or England', though there is no discussion of the overlapping fashionable culture which this implies. And later we are told that there was a craze for English-style dress throughout continental Europe in 1770s and 1780s, which for men consisted of a 'simple, close fitting cut and fine woollen cloth in sombre colours'. In terms of museum policy, Britain's relative absence from this gallery is no mystery: as the accompanying volume explains (details below) it is 'largely absent because in the museum, directly above the Europe Galleries, visitors will find the British Galleries (1500-1900) with extensive and evocative displays that complement those for Europe'. For the same reason, items from the Ottoman Empire are located in the Islamic Middle East Gallery. Obviously, it would be unreasonable and impractical to critique *Europe 1600-1815* on these grounds, as to integrate British (and Ottoman) objects more fully would require a major reorganisation of the entire museum. But I did wonder whether a wider tendency to separate the histories of Britain and Europe – in museums, public history and, especially, school syllabi – has contributed to the increasingly popular notion that Britain is thoroughly distinct from Europe, and that the culture and politics of the one can be understood with only fleeting reference to the other. In fact, the deep involvement of Britain

in continental Europe – politically, militarily, culturally, intellectually – is a key factor in the trajectory of both the continent and the home nations: an obvious point, perhaps, but one which needs to be made more confidently and unapologetically. At a time when Britain is embarking on a new process to extricate itself from what, for some at least, is an alien and unfamiliar European Union, it is worth reminding ourselves of the depth of those shared histories, and, indeed, their inseparability. In that spirit, it is best to see the Europe and Britain galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum, one above the other, not as discrete units, but as overlaid explorations of shared themes.

Europe 1600-1815 is part of the permanent galleries at the Victorian and Albert Museum in London.

The Gallery's opening is accompanied by the publication *The Arts of Living: Europe 1600-1815*, ed. Elizabeth Miller and Hilary Young (London: V&A Publishing, 2016)