

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

In Museums and Galleries month, teenagers say they feel left out by the current crop of exhibitions.

The last museum or gallery either of us had seen was the Tate in London, on a school trip. That made a lasting impression, but unfortunately we can't say the same of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

The first thing you notice when you visit the museum is how enormous its Victorian entrance is.

The second is how empty it seems. On the day we visited there were no crowds or queues, and no other teenagers. It soon also became clear that we would not be able to cover the Museums and Galleries Month event, Waiting for the All Clear.

This was a week-long series of workshops about family life in Birmingham during World War II, but it was only open to primary school children. This was disappointing but we decided to look at the rest of the collection.

The museum's pride and joy is its Pre-Raphaelite paintings. These may be an attraction for visitors interested in art, but at first sight there doesn't seem to have been any attempt to draw in novices or younger visitors. Someone has gone to the trouble of writing informative labels about each painting, but they are not at all eye-catching.

The computers are much more entertaining. Touch-sensitive screens make it easy to find information about artists and their work, and are engrossing to use. In fact, they're so much fun the museum's security guards can't keep their hands off them. The museum needs more of this kind of new technology to attract young people.

That's not to say the museum ignores the youth vote. There is an activities room for younger children, Light on Science, packed with clever ideas for demonstrating scientific principles in fun ways. There is also an area where junior-school children had chosen all the exhibits.

Alongside unusual items like 19th-century police handcuffs and a fearsome broadsword, are the children's explanations of what they had chosen, and why. An audio guide to the display is available, but this was not working on our visit. That aside the idea of the exhibition is attractive, and it would be encouraging to see more ideas like this, perhaps involving a wider range of age groups.

But there is not a lot here to tempt in anyone over ten years old who would not call themselves a museum's 'regular'. The atmosphere is pretty uninviting; we were told the low lighting level was required to protect the paintings and artefacts from damage, but this seems to be the case in all the rooms, regardless of the exhibits, giving the museum a gloomy feel. Sign-posting could be better as well - at one point we got lost.

We were also put out to find ourselves being shadowed by security guards who seemed to imagine we must be up to no good. Overall, the museum would benefit from more ideas, especially interactive exhibits throughout. We are sorry to say we won't be rushing back for another look, or telling all our friends about it.

About the team

This review was produced by editors Thomas Carney and Thomas Willshire, both 15. It was published in the Museums Journal.

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