

Best of British: The British Galleries, Victoria & Albert Museum

An unexpectedly pleasant surprise awaits young visitors, if they can set aside their dusty expectations of museums.

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We weren't expecting to like the brand new galleries at the V&A. We'd never been before but had heard of the museum's reputation for being boring and non-child friendly.

How could 400 years of British design, art and culture appeal to the 'Playstation 2 generation'? We may not have known that much about Regency Classicism but we had fun pressing the buttons.

How wrong could we be? Queen Victoria has been dragged screaming into the 21st Century. There were interactive touch screen quizzes, online guides, films and discovery areas to please everyone.

When we first entered the British Galleries we found them quite dark and dreary. But we quickly realised they were like this for a reason - to match what life must have been like in 1500.

We were impressed to see that many of the exhibits had descriptions in Braille and that there were books explaining many of the contents in large text.



We thought it was a good idea that scattered throughout the galleries were 'touch and feel' areas, so we could find out what a Tudor mattress felt like or how delicate Chinese porcelain really was.

We liked the many 'touch-stations' - which included on-screen quizzes: a bit like 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire' meets 'Antiques Roadshow'. We may not have known that much about Regency Classicism but we had fun pressing the buttons and probably picked up a thing or two in the process.

Our particular favourites on display included the State Bed from Melville House (you've never seen such a big, lavish 4 poster in your life!) and the enormous Mortlake Tapestry (telling the fascinating story of the goddess Venus and her lover Mars).

The highlight for us were the 3 discovery areas - filled with clothes to try on, things to design by computer and others to make with your hands. We really enjoyed designing a coat of arms (and e-mailing it back home), making a 16th Century chair, building Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851 as well as dressing up in armour and an 18th Century hoop and petticoat. We reckon these discovery areas will appeal to young people of any age, even if they're not interested in art or history. As well as having great fun playing, we learned loads.

Keshia tries out some 18th Century leisurewear.

We found the audio commentary next to many of the displays really good, explaining in an appealing way the story behind various paintings and objects. One minor criticism is that there should have been more of these 'phones'. We could easily imagine school groups getting into fights over them!

There were a couple of rooms showing films, which, as well as providing a well needed sit down, also gave us interesting insights into the subject matter. We enjoyed one which talked about the influence other cultures in the British Empire have had back home.

We found the staff in the British Galleries to be incredibly helpful and informative. There were plenty of seats, and it wasn't too hot - a problem you often find in museums.

We were impressed that so much of it was child-friendly. We learned loads about what people wore and what they had in their homes. Perhaps though, it would have been nice to see more on the lives of ordinary people and not just the very rich.

We reckon young people who aren't really interested in history or art will look at the discovery areas and not much else. We reckon the Galleries are ideally suited to secondary school children, although they may appeal to younger children if they've an interest in history.

We're not regular museum goers. In fact, one of us has never been to a British museum before. But we loved the British Galleries at the V&A, and we don't see why other young people our age shouldn't enjoy them too.

About the team

This article was produced by Keshia Harvey, 14, and Chidi Izamoje, 11. It was published in the Museums Journal.

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