Display Cases: refurbished 19th century cases and new.

The original steel frame display cases were supplied in 1928 by the renowned Dresden based company August Kühlenschlifer und Söhne. Praised in their heyday for being air and pest tight, the cases had to undergo a major refurbishment to comply with the safety and collection preservation requirements of today. This included VSG glass, new pedestal with compartment for silica gel, replacement of rear panels, integration of the external top-mounted LED lighting system. Additional new cases were commissioned to complement historic cases.

The challenges:

1. High density of artefacts on display, artefacts arranged in tiers, and with overlapping layers of depth of mounting; 2. the height of display cases 324cm, varying depth 76-90 cm; 3. design intent based on invisible mounts, secured predominantly using wall-mounted rods, except one gallery mounted with a Reutlinger suspension system; 4. compression of the overall exhibition schedule (Fig 5-13).

Changing approach to mountmaking

Mountmaking is part of preventive conservation. There was a need to overcome a problem of seeing mount design and production as separate and additional processes to those concerned with conserving/restore and interpreting artefacts. The initial collection survey was carried out in 2014 with the aim to evaluate the artefacts’ condition, light sensitivity, environmental and conservation needs. This survey fell short linking individual artefact’s condition with mount design and with curatorial narratives. This predominately but not exclusively concerned important artefacts, accessories and garments from the galleries ‘Into a New World-North America’ and ‘South Seas: Encounters with Paradise Lost’. The two-dimensional and vertical design rendering and the proposed mounting were unsuitable from both, the preservation and the interpretation points of view. This problem became apparent at a late project stage and the team had to go back to the design board. At such a late stage changes (to already approved solutions and budgets) had to be justified, and designs redrawn and approved. For the garments representing the Native American peoples and for the Maori cloaks, where their preservation condition allowed, the team implemented a significant conceptual change to mounting the garments on custom-made body forms, presenting them ‘as if worn’.

Project Management approach: from individual tasks to a team workflow.

Four lead conservators took responsibility for the 14 galleries to ensure the conservation workflow and deadlines were efficient and integrated into the overall exhibition schedule. One lead conservator represented the conservation team acting as a main liaison with architects, vendors and management. The project had four overlapping phases: 1 collection survey, 2 conservation treatments, 3 mount assessment and mount making, 4 display cases and installation. The mount design/mount making phase was organised by grouping objects by gallery/display case, taking into account the exhibition context, the object’s condition, and the anticipated design intent. Mounts were produced in collaboration with Vienna Arthandling.

In conclusion

1. This project demonstrates that mounting is an integral part of preventive conservation.
2. Changing displays required rethinking the legacy of 2-dimensional and abstract representations of historic garments, and a collaborative and agile approach to exhibition development.

References

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