Creating the New Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery of China and South Asia

JANE PORTAL

1 Photograph of the South Asia end of the old Hotung Gallery, with many sculptures in the centre

THE HOTUNG GALLERY will be twenty-five years old on November 10th, 2017. It was opened on November 10th, 1992, thanks to the generosity of Sir Joseph Hotung (1).

When I returned to the British Museum as Keeper of Asia from Boston Museum of Fine Arts in December 2014 and put my mind to plans for the Asia Department and its future display, I was clear that the most useful thing I could try and achieve was the renovation of the Hotung Gallery. In conversation with Sir Joseph, I was delighted to discover that he was of the same mind. He felt, as I did, that the gallery should be renovated to meet the challenges which had presented themselves since the gallery opened, and that we should set it up for the next twenty-five years.

What were some of these challenges? Since 1992, visitor numbers have increased greatly, to the point where we now have almost seven million visitors annually from all over the world, many of them Asian. The Hotung Gallery (Room 33) is invariably their first stop in the museum. Visiting groups will often congregate around the entrance to the Hotung Gallery, causing obstruction and impeding the flow of visitors. In fact, in our visitor surveys, we discovered that the most common behaviour of a visitor is to walk straight up to the Oculus in the centre of the gallery and look down through the hole. Therefore, one of the aims in the renovation is to clear the central entrance area around the Oculus to give more space, and to encourage visitors to make their way right down to either end of the gallery.

Another challenge is the presence of many “listed” original old mahogany display cases, dating back to the building of the King Edward VII Wing in the early 20th century, which was an addition to the main museum building. The cases are arranged in regular bays down the length of the gallery, which is 115 metres long, the longest single gallery in the British Museum and as long as a football pitch (2). These cases are very handsome but not very deep, have thin glass and only one door per case, presenting challenges in terms of access to the objects inside at either side (3). I can remember in years past personally squeezing into the cases to carefully remove objects from the far ends. Other old mahogany desk-type cases in the window recesses presented other challenges in the way they were secured and in the fact that they were too high to meet present-day disability access regulations (4).

Then there was the fact that the lighting and temperature conditions in the gallery were not conducive to the
display of paintings or textiles. However, without such vital products as paintings, silk and cotton, how could one truly tell the story of China and India?

Lighting was another challenge—the old fixtures were showing their age and the light bulbs not lasting as long as convenient. Some of the fixtures were not available any longer. We needed a contemporary lighting solution—something which was very close to Sir Joseph's heart when the first iteration of the gallery was planned in 1992.

There was also the floor, which had served very well but was faded, scuffed and marked from thousands of footsteps, generally showing its age; and the interiors of the display cases with their twenty-five year old fabrics, labels and graphics.

We decided that we should ask a design company to prepare a concept design for our consideration, and Sir Joseph generously agreed to fund this preliminary stage, after which we would decide what scale of renovation to undertake. In the summer of 2015, with the help and advice of Prof. Jessica Rawson, who is now a Trustee of the Sir Joseph Hotung Charitable Settlement and led the establishment of the gallery in 1992 as Keeper at the time, the museum interviewed a number of companies and selected Nissen Richards Studio for this task, working with Studio ZNA as lighting designers.

We were clear that we wanted a new narrative for the displays of China and of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal) and to bring those narratives up to the present, including new acquisitions and new research. The major objective would be to illuminate the history and culture of these large areas of Asia, to express their major achievements in art and technology, and to compare and contrast them with other parts of the world seen in other galleries in the British Museum. To this end, lighting was to be put first, as fundamental to any new display.

On entering the gallery, we felt that two immediate impressions would be essential: the scale and beauty of the gallery should be immediately apparent, expressing thereby the richness of the museum's collections and its interest in and commitment to Asia; and the areas and time periods included in the space should be recognised easily, so that the visitor would know what to expect and where to go.

It soon became apparent that if we wanted to present a chronological narrative and to bring it up to the present and also to include paintings and textiles, we were going to have to leave something out, as there simply was not enough space. In the previous layout, the story of South Asia ended before the arrival of the Mughals and there was no treatment of the colonial period or the 20th century. Similarly, the Chinese narrative largely ended with the 18th century. So we made a reluctant decision to leave out the countries of Southeast Asia and undertook to find another space within the museum to devote to this region, which is of growing importance in the world.

Nissen Richards worked closely and intensely with curators and external advisors over the summer of 2015 and presented their concept design in October 2015 to the Trustees of the Sir Joseph Hotung Charitable Settlement,
who most generously agreed to fund a complete renovation, signing the contract at the very end of 2013, one of the last acts of Neil MacGregor, the outgoing Director (5, 6, 7).

We then had just under two years to work with colleagues from inside and outside the museum to deliver the new gallery for its twenty-fifth anniversary—no easy task. Jonathan Lubikowski, our Capital Projects Department colleague, was appointed as Project Manager under Russell Torrance, and I was Chief Curator for the project with Richard Burton leading on the South Asia side and Jessica Harrison-Hall on the China side. Prof. Jessica Rawson provided invaluable experience and advice, especially on the Early China presentation, acting as mentor to her erstwhile graduate student, Dr Yi Chen, now Curator for Early China at the British Museum. Other academics whose input was appreciated include Dr Naman Ahuja, Prof. Sunil Khilnani, Prof. Margot Finn, Prof. Robert Bickers, Prof. Henrietta Harrison, Dr Lars Laamann, Prof. Craig Clunas and Dr Frances Wood. Other curatorial input was provided by Dr Imma Ramos, Dr Sushma Jansari, Dr Daniela De Simone, Wenjuan Xin and Mary Ginsberg. We were sad to lose Dr Clarissa von Spec in the middle of the project period when she was appointed to Cleveland Art Museum, now replaced by Dr Yu-ping Luk as Basil Gray Curator of Chinese Paintings. Carol Michaelson took curatorial responsibility for the refurbishment of the Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery of Chinese Jades, displaying Sir Joseph’s collection, which is contiguous to the main gallery.

The gallery was closed to the public in June 2016, and all the 2000 objects—many of them large stone sculptures—removed to temporary storage, with the help of an army of collections managers and our Heavy Object Handling team, or “the Heavies”. Outside contractors, supervised by the Project Manager, then started work (8, 9, 10). Many details of the original air circulation and heating systems were investigated, electric cables laid, permissions sought from Historic England and the Borough of Camden for various interventions, such as removing some of the inadequate desk-cases. A start was made on retrofitting old mahogany cases with thicker glass and more doors, spray painting newer brown metal cases white, and planning screens for the windows and materials for the new floor.

Of course, such a project is a group effort and many other colleagues from the British Museum were involved, such as conservators, collections managers, the Interpretation team and the digital team, Communications and Events. Conservation assessments were carried out once the new case layouts and object lists were completed (11), over 900 new mounts had to be made and a detailed reinstall schedule devised.

As far as the narrative and object selection are concerned, this was, as you can imagine, a massive and complex task. The decision was made to employ a chronological approach, with the architecture of the space dictating the bay structure. Each bay constitutes a sort of room devoted to a particular time period, but within that there are some
7 Concept design for Jades Gallery entrance. Image Nissen Richards Studio

9 Really Useful Boxes used to pack and move objects

8 Covering the wall painting during the deinstallation process

10 The Heavy Object Handlers in action

11 Conservation of an inlaid lacquer tray
themes. At the South Asian end there are some regional presentations by necessity, for example Sri Lanka. Illustrated are some examples of the case layout designs to show the general plan (12, 13).

One important area for public engagement with the gallery is that of the Interpretation team, led by Stuart Frost. We decided to employ a largely chronological narrative at each side of the gallery, with each Bay having a simple title visible high up from a distance and an introductory information panel at the entrance to the Bay; we also decided to use the concept of Gateway Objects to simplify the way in which the public could understand the narrative. This meant that every case in the gallery would have one Gateway Object, which would introduce the subject or story of that case (14). The central entrance area has deliberately been kept fairly empty to enable circulation and a pause for reflection and assessment. On first entering the gallery, visitors can read introductory information panels on the pillars and a waist high curved panel with an initial introduction to China and South Asia and timeline following either side of the curve of the Oculus (15).

Greeting the visitor behind the Oculus is the impressive set of Ming dynasty (1368–1644) tiles, decorated with auspicious dragons and lotus flowers, donated by Sir Joseph (16). This is flanked by two cloisonné incense burners with auspicious crane legs (17). On either side are more auspicious figures—the fat bellied Chinese Ming Budai to the right and the equally rotund Indian Ganesh to the left (18, 19). Two gallery gateway objects were chosen to embody the vital difference between Chinese and South Asian culture. On the South Asia side the visitor first sees the magnificent bronze Siva Nataraja sculpture (20) and on the China side a large Qianlong period (1736–1795) bronze tripod vessel, part of a five piece altar set (21). A minimal number of objects have been placed on the central axis on both sides of the gallery, in order to encourage visitors to venture down the gallery to either end. At the far South Asia end, the magnificent sculptures from the Great Stupa at Amaravati are displayed with new interpretation, including a digital reconstruction of the stupa site to explain where different sculptures and panels would have been located (22). At the far Chinese end reduced lighting has enabled the display of a group of Chinese hanging scrolls, handscrolls and album leaves. A digital reproduction of the famous Admonitions Scroll can be scrolled through and there is also a screen showing a digital deconstruction of a vertical landscape painting (23). Visitors can also proceed into the refurbished Jades Gallery from this end; accessible from both ends, the Jades Gallery tells the story of 7000 years of jade production through Sir Joseph’s collection, and also includes some interesting new acquisitions by the museum of contemporary jade carving (24).

One question which exercised curators and the Interpretation team was that of Asian languages—whether to in-
16  Group of twenty glazed ceramic tiles made of stoneware with fahua-type decoration. Shanxi province, Ming dynasty, China. Width 244 cm, height 39 cm, depth 12.7 cm. Donated by Sir Joseph Hotung, 2006.0503.1.1-20 © The Trustees of the British Museum

17  Pair of large ceremonial covered cloisonné vessels with three cranes acting as legs. Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795), China. Height 101.5 cm, diameter 55 cm. Donated by Sir H.S.E. Vanderpant, 1931.0414.1-2 © The Trustees of the British Museum

18  Stoneware figure of Budai Hesheng decorated in polychrome enamels and with biscuit-fired areas, by Liu Zhen (according to inscription), dated 1486. Ming dynasty, Chenghua period, China. Height 119.2 cm, width 65 cm, depth 41 cm. Donated by John Sparks, Ltd, 1937.0113.1 © The Trustees of the British Museum
clude any and, if so, which ones. It was eventually decided that including bilingual label text would simply take up too much space. Instead, all the Gateway Objects have been included on the museum’s new multimedia handheld guide, available in eleven different languages including British Sign Language, with curators introducing some of the most important works. Also, in each Bay there is a relevant quotation from poetry or literature presented in its original language as well as an English translation. In this way, we endeavoured to give a sense of the diverse scripts represented in this gallery.

We also include a handling desk where the public can, under the supervision of trained volunteers, handle and learn about a selection of objects typical of Asia, such as jade, bronze, ceramic shards, etc. There will also be a full public programme of performances, gallery talks and events in the renovated gallery.

Exciting new contemporary works have been acquired, such as Miritali Mukherjee’s Night Bloom ceramic sculpture (purchased with the aid of the Art Fund) and Caroline Cheng’s porcelain, Butterfly Robe, composed of thousands of tiny butterflies made in Jingdezhen and sewn on to a burlap garment (25, 26). The Department of Asia is committed to carrying on the acquisition of contemporary works in order to tell the story of the present, as well as the past, of these important areas of Asia, which comprise two thirds of the world’s population.
The new display for the Amaravati sculptures will include a digital reconstruction of the stupa site.

New Chinese paintings displays will be located at the far east end of the gallery.

The entrance to the Selwyn and Elsie Alleyne Gallery of Chinese Jades, viewed from the Hotung Gallery.


Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the assistance of Tavian Hunter in preparing this article.