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COINS ARE SMALL AND BORING: THE IMPORTANCE OF AN EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR A NUMISMATIC COLLECTION

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The British Museum

Any museum has two main roles: to look after and expand its collection, and to make that collection accessible to all of its publics. More and more emphasis is being placed on the second role of working with our visitors. Anybody who has had a letter from the British Museum in recent months will realise that we are no longer "The British Museum" alone. We have now been reborn as "The British Museum, illuminating world cultures." The point the museum hopes to make with this new tag line is that it is not enough simply to exist and hold our objects. Our role is, to quote directly from one of the British Museum's recent planning documents, to "inspire and enlighten all the publics we serve" (*Plan 2000/01 to 2004/05*, April 2000, p.12). This is all very well. Indeed it is an admirable aim. But how do we do it in practice? How do we inspire and enlighten our visitors about our collections of coins and banknotes?

The normal answer is, by putting the objects on display, either in permanent galleries or temporary exhibitions. The British Museum's HSBC Money Gallery is an example of this (fig.1). However, there is a problem here. Coins are not ideally suited to display. They were never designed to be admired from a distance of two or three feet through laminated glass. Rather, they were always intended to be handled. The truth of the matter is that many people find displays of coins inaccessible and boring, and at the British Museum we know this from bitter experience. One third of visitors to the HSBC Money Gallery walk straight through the gallery without stopping. And perhaps this is not surprising. Look at the competition: Greek sculpture, Egyptian mummies, Celtic treasure hoards, bog bodies, Greek temples and so on. This difficulty is illustrated by two statements overheard in British Museum exhibitions in recent months. A young boy, asked by his mother if he wanted to stop and look at the money gallery said "no, coins are small and boring." And a middle aged lady, stopping for only a few seconds in a recent temporary exhibition, said "when you've seen one coin, you've seen them all." They both had a point. Coins are small, the details can be hard to make out and the inscriptions can be unintelligible to experts let alone casual observers. And, from a distance of a few feet, they do all look the same. Coins are, for the average visitor, hard to access and hard to get excited about. In addition, they are particularly difficult for certain types of visitors to enjoy. Ten per cent of museum visitors have a visual impairment, for example, and would

particularly struggle with coins because of their size. Children, or adults in wheelchairs, are likely to have difficulty seeing details on coins higher than 1.5 metres.

Now, I am painting a very negative picture. Many visitors, of course, do find coin displays stimulating, and there are ways of making numismatic displays more interesting and more accessible. Probably the most important of these is to integrate coins with other related objects. But the point I am making is that, as curators of numismatic collections, if we're to do our job of 'inspiring and enlightening' our visitors we need to work a bit harder than curators of many other collections.

In working with coins and banknotes, then, we have a difficult task. But we also have two wonderful advantages that cannot be applied to most other museum artefacts. The first of these is that coins have been used for 2,600 years and in most parts of the world. Our objects can relate to all sorts of periods and civilizations, from China in the 1st millennium BC to medieval England. They are also still in use today. That means that coins are at least familiar and that, in one sense, visitors do have a point of access to the objects. The second advantage is one to which I've already alluded. Coins can be handled and indeed were *made* to be handled. Many of the disadvantages coins have when you put them on display are actually advantages when it comes to handling the objects. They *are* small. They have a wealth of detail and two sides, so they repay careful examination. And, in addition, they are durable.

That is where an education programme comes in. It is precisely for this type of object that an effective education programme is important, if not essential. Education, and particularly personal mediation, can help bring these "small, boring" objects to life.

So, what might an education programme include? Lectures and gallery talks are the traditional mainstays of much museum education work. My experience, though, is that gallery talks in particular are not effective when talking about coins. The objects are simply too small to be seen by the audience. Publications are an important facet of an effective programme, whether they are popular books for adults or children, guides or gallery trails for children. And IT, or computer, opportunities cannot be missed (the British Museum now has more visitors to its website than visit the Museum in person). All of these, however, are missing the biggest advantages of coins: that they are easy to relate to, because we all use coins today, and that they were quite literally made to be handled.

I am going to go on to advocate and give examples of education programmes involving object handling that I think are the most important way of allowing visitors to appreciate our objects. But I started by saying that museums have two duties - to care for their collections as well as to make them accessible. Reconciling the two has always been difficult. If you had come to the British Museum 50 years ago you wouldn't have seen any coins at all on display. We only displayed electrotype copies of the objects because we were so concerned about their care. Very sensibly we took a step on from that position and realised that it was important that visitors were allowed to interact with objects themselves. So what about taking another step forward and allowing direct interaction with the object? There is no reason why coins from a museum's collection cannot be handled in a controlled and secure environment. We use almost every part of the collection in this way, with specialists, with the general public and even with school children. Not all coins are suitable for handling of course. Rare coins, fragile coins and modern coins with a polished surface are best left behind glass or in a cabinet. There are also limits as to where coins can be handled. It is one thing to allow object handling in a secure room. It is another thing entirely to allow it in an open gallery or even off the museum site. My rule is that no object from the accessioned collection, however common or low-value, can be used in a non-secure environment.

That is where a teaching collection comes in. Another advantage of coins is that, in comparison to many other antiquities, they are cheap. It is possible to build handling collections for a relatively small sum of money through donations and through prudent acquisition for the purpose. With a thousand pounds you can acquire a very useful collection of money from around the world, including Chinese knife coins, Roman denarii, medieval silver coins, Katanga crosses and Liberian kilingi (fig.2). There is a wonderful story to be told with these monetary objects.

Let me give you some examples of how we have applied this principle across our teaching programme at the British Museum. The main focus of our object handling work at the moment is in the galleries. We have developed small handling collections on a variety of themes - currently "what is money?", "money of the ancient Greeks", "money of the Romans" and "art medals" - and these are used largely in the HSBC Money Gallery (fig.3). The object handling is staffed by trained volunteers, an approach which allows us to offer object handling five days a week, every week of the year. The volunteers are trained, not only in the subjects of the handling sessions, but also about how to teach with objects. The focus of the work is on "enquiry based" learning, encouraging visitors to explore the objects themselves and ask questions, rather than delivering a lecture. The response to this programme has been enormously positive and a

variety of audiences including families, adults, collectors and some of our many visitors who do not speak English have benefited enormously from the opportunity to handle artefacts. One important advantage of this sort of work in the galleries is the number of people it reaches. This year, we will provide direct handling opportunities to about 30,000 visitors. Next year, we plan to expand, both to cover new subjects and to work in other museum galleries. This is where we come back to the fact that money is relevant to most societies that are represented in a museum, so that we can work in the Greek galleries, the Roman galleries, the African galleries, and so on. Over five years, I anticipate providing the opportunity to ½ a million visitors to handle ancient and other coins. We also use object handling for high profile events with the general public. We have an annual Money Week with a variety of events. Some of these are art based, some use re-enactors, some use music, but most also involve actually handling objects.

The British Museum attracts about 250,000 school children a year. They are an audience that often find traditional displays inaccessible, so we make them a priority audience for object handling. Virtually every week we have groups of school children in our study room for handling sessions on the ancient Greeks or the Romans. We also cover slightly less mainstream subjects such as trade between 19th century Britain and Africa. Some of the same sessions run off-site in schools. A new initiative with schools is to send objects out without any staff. We are in the process of developing a series of what we call "money boxes." These contain a small number of genuine coins, some replica coins and replicas of other objects, and a variety of accompanying resources helping teachers to use those materials. The boxes will be loaned to schools for a six week period. Those we are currently developing are on the subject of the Tudors, a subject that is taught at nearly every primary school in the United Kingdom. The 50 boxes will serve an audience of approximately 200,000 school children over their five-year lifetime.

Another important audience for object handling is adults with particular access requirements. Working with such an audience is very resource intensive but is enormously worthwhile and rewarding. One group we have worked with particularly frequently are adults recovering from mental illness. These are people who find museums very intimidating. For four years we have run a museum studies course for such people. We look at all sorts of aspects of museum work, and all sorts of objects, but the focus of the work is our collection - again because it provides an access point to most parts of history and places in the world. The main aim of the course, however, is not to teach about coins or banknotes, but to bring

the students to a point where they can use the British Museum and other museums independently, both for learning and for leisure.

Other groups of visitors we have worked with are those who are visually impaired and those who have learning difficulties. The former get nothing from traditional museum displays, and gain enormously from being allowed to touch and feel and even smell monetary objects. Adults with learning difficulties find the written information that makes up a part of virtually every museum display difficult to use. So to touch objects with the help of an informed intermediary is very useful. We are also beginning hospital and community centre outreach with the teaching collection, again using carefully trained volunteers.

A final project that is worth mentioning brings in the theme of regional museums, one of the themes of this conference. The largest group of the general public who are excluded from our museum displays are those who, for reasons of distance from London, do not find it easy to visit the British Museum. So we are making efforts to send our collections to other parts of the country. About one-third of the contents of the Manchester Museum's new money gallery, for example, will be long-term loans from the British Museum. We are also trying to extend our philosophy on handling objects to our regional partners and lending or giving handling objects to other museums.

Over the coming years, hundreds of thousands of individuals will be allowed to handle objects either from our main collections or from our teaching collection through projects like the ones I have just described.

Museums have to compete with a huge range of other attractions, including television, cinema, computers, shopping and so on. Every time a visitor comes to one of our museums we have successfully competed against all of those other attractions. But all too often we fail to compete effectively. The answer of many museums has been to become as much like those other attractions as possible, incorporating as many computers and recreated scenes as they can, and thereby placing visitors in the sort of fantasy world they are used to entering on television. These may be valid strategies, but they leave us in danger of forgetting our main advantage, that we provide contact with the real thing, with artefacts that tell the story of men and women over thousands of years. It is vital, it seems to me, that we maximise that advantage - that we make our museums interesting, lively places where visitors have a full and rounded experience of objects from the past.

I would like to finish with an image of a boy in one of our handling sessions (fig.4). He is enjoying an experience that he cannot get from a

computer or from a shopping mall, an experience he will probably remember for years to come. One might argue that by allowing to visitors to touch objects we endanger the treasures we are supposed to be preserving. I would argue the opposite, that by not allowing visitors to touch objects in a controlled way we are endangering the very future of our numismatic museums.

The British Museum Plan 2000/01 to 2004/05, Trustees of the British Museum, 2000.



Figure 1. The HSBC Money Gallery at the British Museum, London



Figure 2. Objects from the teaching collections of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum.

Figure 3. A school group are invited to handle objects in the HSBC Money Gallery.



Figure 4. A workshop on trade between Victorian Britain and Africa.

