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British Museum
Access to excellence**

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The HSBC Money Gallery at the British Museum

Access to excellence

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In April 1995, the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, achieved for the first time the funding and space to make a permanent display of its collections which opened as the HSBC Money Gallery in January 1997. The purpose of this paper is to outline the sequence of events leading to its opening and to highlight the conceptual and practical issues addressed in its planning and design.

Previous Permanent Displays

From as early as 1880 until the Second World War the Department had displays of electrotypes of coins and medals in desk cases illustrating, within a numismatic framework, the range of material in its collections. An outline of the display was published in a series of guidebooks. The style of display can best be understood by quoting the 1922 guide, edited by George Hill:

« The Greek coins are exhibited in electrotype, in the first eight standing cases placed in the middle of the room. They are arranged in such a manner as to form a synoptical view, at once historical and geographical, of the gold, silver and bronze coinage of the Greek world, from the invention of coining money in the seventh century B.C., down to the latter half of the third century A. C.» (Hill 1922, p. 13)

This typically traditional display (fig.1) followed the programme used in the study of numismatics at the time, and by using electrotypes intentionally kept the actual coins away from the public and available to curators and scholars in the Department's reserve collections. Furthermore it is very clear from the introduction to the 1880 guide that not only was the exhibition constructed to create a distance between the visitor and the actual coins, but it was also the intention that the actual audience being addressed should not be what we would now call a *«general public»*, but *«the student... the historian... the student of palaeography... the metrologist... the medallist... [and] the art worker»* (Head 1880, p. III-V).

A Long-Term Temporary Solution

This display was removed for safety during the war and the space where it had been on show was damaged by a fire bomb. After the war the space was reconstructed and re-allocated to another department within the Museum, so the Department was without an exhibition space until 1978, when it was able to mount a temporary display illustrating the history of British coins and medals, entitled 2000 years of Coins and Medals in Britain. It was an updated traditional overview of numismatic history from the Iron

Age until the present day told through a selection from our collection, including electrotypes of rarer material, laid out in wall-mounted desk-like cases. An indication of the nature of the display can be gained from John Kent's 2000 Years of British Coins and Medals, published as a guide book to the exhibition. This was seen as a new departure in display, and according to Kent:

« The modern concept of an exhibition differs widely from that of our predecessors. Coins and medals are now seen as part of a historical process with interrelated, political, artistic, social and economic aspects. These relationships are explored in the text and in the accompanying illustrations, which aim to give the visitor to the gallery visual points of reference between the coinage and the other arts. The widest possible limits of time have been chosen, in order to stress historical continuity. A much wider and better informed public than was formerly the case now desires instructive and thought-provoking material. The Department has tried to meet this challenge...» (Kent 1978, p. 5)

By choosing to focus on British coins and medals, the display could be presented in a linear form, telling a single sequential story, so that visitors could be led to follow the story period by period, case by case around the circumference of a circular space finishing with a circular case in the centre. The coins and electrotypes were lying on a shallow slope within desk cases, accompanied on a panel above by introductory and descriptive text and by images presenting the context of the coins. Although this display represented a departure from traditional coin displays in that it had more text and included graphic material, it remained like the earlier displays firmly rooted in a numismatic context. By using electrotypes for rarer items it reinforced the contemporary curatorial view that rare material should be available to curators and scholars in the reserves rather than to the general public.

Originally intended to last for about a year, delayed plans for refurbishment of the area of the Museum where it was located allowed it to run for several years. When it closed in 1985 the Department was again without a display area.

Some coins and medals did, however, stay on display, because during the 1970s the Department began a policy of offering material for display to other departments in the Museum, so that small coin and medal displays began to be integrated into other galleries, where they added to the culture-related displays, i.e. Indian coins with Indian sculpture, Greek coins with Greek vases, etc. This policy has continued down to the present day and has placed over 4,000 coins and medals on permanent display in twenty galleries around the Museum.

The Way Ahead

In 1986 the meeting of the International Numismatic Congress in London and the 150th anniversary of the Royal Numismatic Society prompted the

Department to take the opportunity of a temporary remedy to its lack of a permanent gallery by putting on another temporary display. This was far more ambitious than the 2000 Years exhibition and had a different approach, but had a defined term of six months. The new exhibition was designed for the general public as an introduction to the place of money in world history. Entitled *Money from Cowrie Shells to Credit Cards*, it presented an overview of the development and role of money from the third millennium BC down to the late 20th century. It was a large display in three sections (fig.2). All visitors entered through a series of wall cases which explained what money was in terms of familiar and unfamiliar monetary objects and showed how the main forms of money in use today by the visitors to the exhibition had come into being and evolved. The central section was a themed presentation of aspects of the role of money in the state and in society designed for the visitor to wander around at random (fig.3). Visitors then left through another series of wall cases which showed the processes by which the different forms of money had gradually been detached from the value of the metals they originally contained or represented until the present day when money could circulate in the form of electronic computer code, invisible and untouchable.

The exhibition was accompanied by a book (Cribb 1986) which shared both its name and structure, but was illustrated by only a selection of the displayed material. A children's book *The Money Fun Book* (Cribb 1986a) was also published to coincide with the exhibition. Part of the cost of the exhibition and the books was provided by a sponsor, the Nationwide Building Society.

The 1986 exhibition was a short-lived achievement, but showed the Department how important it was to place its collections in a recognisable context in order to engage the interest of the public. The success of the exhibition persuaded the Museum's Director that it was important for the Department to have a permanent gallery. He offered to transfer a gallery from another department to the Department of Coins and Medals on condition that the money be found to fit it out for the new permanent display and that the display had a similar public focus to that of the 1986 exhibition.

The Vision

In 1994 the search for money was intensified and the concept of the gallery was refined. The space, dimensions and functionality of the gallery which had been allocated were reviewed in order to create a shape for the concept of the display. The key vision was to present the collection as money in a global context. The first question was how to use this to fill the gallery. The gallery is rectangular, with the side walls at least three times as long as the end walls. A large doorway is located in the centre of both end walls. It was very clear from the location of the gallery within the

Museum that visitors would have to be allowed to enter both doors and move through the space in both directions as they passed through the gallery on their way around the upper floor of the Museum. It was therefore not possible to dictate the route of visitors within the gallery. After considerable discussion within the Department, it was therefore agreed that the concept of money would be presented in an assembly of themes, such as the impact of the discovery of Californian and Australian gold on the world economy, or the impact of the rise of Islam on monetary systems in the Middle East. It was also agreed that the themes would be presented in a chronological framework to show broad historical trends, allowing visitors passing through in both directions to move forward or backward in time through the history of money.

There was also strong agreement that the display would not be 'British' in any sense, but would present money as a world-wide phenomenon. This position was also incidentally seen as likely to be attractive to potential donors.

Getting the Go-Ahead

In 1995 HSBC Holdings PLC, the international financial group, with a deliberate focus on the increasingly globalised nature of monetary transactions, agreed to provide a donation worth £2,000,000 for the project, enabling the Department to go ahead and open its new Money Gallery, the HSBC Money Gallery in January 1997. With about 700,000 objects in its own collection and with numerous other related objects available for the Museum's other departments, together with promises of help from the HSBC Group Archives, the Royal Mint, the Bank of England and De La Rue, the banknote printers, the generous funding placed the Department in an excellent position to put on whatever type of display it liked.

The experience of the 1986 temporary exhibition and the decisions made during the focus on raising the funding necessary helped shape the Department's objectives. Once the money had been raised a team of five curators was chosen to deliver the content of the display and the accompanying text. They worked directly with a team of designers from the Museum's design office to turn the concept into reality. They also called upon the broader resources of the Department's full staff and the Museum's architectural team and Public Relations Department. Colleagues from other Departments and from other Museums and collections were also approached for advice and assistance.

The guiding principles for the team of curators who worked on the Gallery were Access and Excellence. The whole project was designed to make the collections and the expertise of the Department available to as wide and as varied an audience as possible. In order to bring the collections within the

understanding of this audience, it would be presented within a concept, i.e. money, which would be intelligible to all visitors to the Museum, rather than in the traditional frame of numismatic research. The team also laid equal emphasis on the need to provide access to the quality of the Museum's collection by putting on display the best possible material from it to represent the history of money. The Department's full team of curators participated in the project and consulted widely with colleagues from the rest of the Museum and from other institutions to ensure the highest possible quality in the presentation of that history.

In the Gallery close attention was paid to both the design and the concept of the display to ensure that visitors to the Museum would feel able to engage with the displays and to learn from them about the history of the monetary objects with which they already had an everyday familiarity.

The Whole Package

To reach an audience beyond visitors to the Museum the project was carried forward from the opening of the gallery to include the publication of the associated books, a teachers' pack and CD-ROM and the establishment of an on-going assessment and development programme (including improvements to the gallery), together with a website and regular educational activities. All these were intended to enable the concept to reach forward in time over the likely life of the Gallery and to reach outside the Museum to new and old audiences.

The associated books *Money, a History* (Williams 1997), *The Story of Money* (Orna-Ornstein 1997, a book for children) and CD-ROM, *The World of Money* (Williams 1998) complemented the gallery, but each presented the concept of world monetary history and the material in the gallery in different ways, so that they acted both as records of the gallery and as extensions of it. The teachers' pack, *Money, Resource Pack for Teachers* (Woff 1997) provided school teachers with classroom materials for introducing their students to the concept before, during or after a visit to the gallery.

The whole package of the HSBC Money Gallery, including the related building work, the outfitting, additional staffing, publications and development programme, was funded by the HSBC Holdings PLC donation. This was a vital element of the strategy to ensure the project was protected from any changes in the Museum's government grant. This has ensured that the Gallery and its forward-projected development have not been affected by the Museum's current financial problems.

Access

This year the British Museum will have been open to the public for 240

years. This long experience has given the Museum a firm commitment to presenting its collections to the public. The meaning of this commitment has, however, radically changed over the last few decades. The Museum has both developed and adjusted its methods of display to satisfy the needs and aspirations of a new kind of public. The democratisation of education in Britain has changed the nature of museum visiting, making the British Museum one of the most popular public destinations for British visitors to London and for Londoners. In the same period the growth of international travel has brought millions of tourists to Britain, many of whom include a visit to the Museum in their itinerary. The British Museum can now claim about five million visitors a year.

Simply placing any object in our galleries guarantees that a broad cross-section of the 'public' can have access to it. In planning and designing the HSBC Money Gallery, however, the Department had a much broader concept of Access, than that of simply placing a selection from its collection in a well-used public space.

We saw Access as fundamental to everything we were planning. Physical access was assured for us by the positioning of the gallery in the Museum. Located on a primary circulation route at the top of the main staircase of the Museum, close to the front entrance, the gallery could be guaranteed to receive a high proportion of the Museum's five million visitors, even if it had no displays at all. Our intention was to make the displays so attractive and interesting that visitors passing through would stop and look.

With a large budget we could afford new brightly lit cases. We had the best material in our collections available to catch the eye and imagination of our visitors, but we had some problems. Firstly we could not display all our departmental collection without completely discouraging the visitors, so we selected about 4,500 objects, less than 1%, in order to make it possible for visitors to have a sense of the range and quality of the collection. Secondly coins are small and to many visitors their size is a barrier to understanding – so we had to shift the focus away from the size of the objects in order to engage their attention.

An Access Strategy

Our primary strategy for making the display accessible to the broadest possible public was the presentation of our collection in the context of money – a subject familiar to the whole of our potential audience. This context created for us a secondary means of opening up the display to visitors. We were no longer restricted to just displaying coins, but were able to introduce a wide range of other objects alongside them. We were able to integrate into the displays material from our paper money collection and seek the support of other departments in the Museum and of other institutions to include other forms of non-coin money, such as ingots, shells,

salt, cloth etc. We could also seek the help of HSBC archives to include aspects of computerised money, including an experimental system of direct card payments. As well as objects for monetary payment we were also able to include a range of objects illustrating the use of money, such as weights, money boxes, legal codes, minting and paper money printing machines and coin-shaped amulets. In addition to the introduction of diverse objects to the displays, the theme also allowed us to add graphic material, drawing attention to the individual topics being presented and offering explanations of their context. The addition of such material created a varied visual impact which offered more points of contact, attention and curiosity than possible through a display of coins alone.

In addition to the range of visual and conceptual points of access, the very nature of the vision of the gallery provides added focal points for most visitors. The gallery presents the history of money throughout the world over the last five thousand years, so there is something from most parts of the world to stimulate a sense of connection on the part of the visitor, wherever they come from. There are also numerous familiar links to most of the fields of interest of visitors to the Museum. In the modern section special attention has also been paid to including objects still in use today, or drawn from the memories of older visitors.

Access to the display was offered to the Museum's visitors through this dynamic combination of material and ideas, inviting them to make initial engagement with the collection in a variety of ways. These different ways of making contact with the public are important, because *«each visitor learns in a different way, interpreting information from their previous knowledge, experience, and beliefs»*. (McLean 1997, p. 82) Their intellectual interest could be captured by the familiar concept of money and the themes of the sections of the display while their emotional attention could be captured by reminders of their own place in the world. The style of display also recognised the range of visual stimuli likely to engage the individual visitor's attention, providing a mixture of large and small objects, two-dimensional images and a range of text sizes, each of which might give visitors a point of initial engagement, according to their own taste and temperament.

The British Museum Way

The Department's strategy was delivered as part of a broader Museum-wide approach to display. Since the 1970s the British Museum has developed a display policy for its permanent galleries which puts visitors first, as outlined by the head of the Museum's Design Office:

«It is not enough to put objects in cases to keep them safe. The visitor will want to know what he is looking at, why it was collected, how it was made, what it has to do with the other objects nearby, and to be given enough information «to make sense» of it». (Hall 1987, p. 10)

To support the work of curators the Design Office has a team of designers and editors who have a clear mission to deliver the curator's vision within the Museum's display policy.

«To reach the new and wider audience curators call on designers and those with editorial and allied skills for help in presenting and explaining their material in a simpler way. And to do this the designers and editors must see matters through the eyes of the visitor» (Hall 1987, p. 21). It is also of course equally essential that curators also consider their own work *"through the eyes [and minds] of the visitor.* » The permanent nature of gallery display calls for a particular focus for both curators and designers. Fashionable gimmicks cannot play a part in the design, because a few years after the gallery opens they will seem out of date. The Museum has therefore had to develop *«a classic style which is comparatively ageless»*. (Wilson 1989, p. 84) The curators working on the HSBC Money Gallery were fortunate in being able to take advantage of the framework evolved through two decades of design experience in delivery such an ageless display, while at the same time escaping from the traditional style of coin display.

The Structure of the HSBC Money Gallery

The more obvious product of this framework for the HSBC Money Gallery was the integration of the displays into the original architecture of the Museum, designed by Sir Robert Smirke between 1825 and 1852, and its location on a main route around the upper floor of the Museum. The room containing the new display was built in 1841, as attested by dated cast-iron beams in its roof. The room has a simple neo-classical form and ornament. Its architecture creates the sense of containing three equal spaces, separated by inconspicuous pilasters and beams, with a rectangular roof lantern in the centre of the ceiling of each space. The display reflects the room's division into three spaces and reinforces them by the placing of the display cases. Each of the spaces represents a period of time in the display. Visitors pass through each of these spaces, moving forward or backwards in time depending upon the direction from which they entered the gallery. Each of the three spaces, containing four large wall cases can stand alone as a representation of the history of money during the period in question, together they tell the whole story from the earliest evidence of the use and form of money in ancient Iraq during the third millennium BC down to the present day. The cases on the floor contribute to the breaking of the room into three spaces, but also expand the story of money being presented in the wall cases (fig.5).

The three time zones are intended to give a sense of history and the transformation of money through time. The divisions are weakly expressed both by the space and by the content of the displays. Apart from an awareness of change, the visitor will only be able to detect the three

zones by the shaping of the space and by the dates included in the titles of the cases. The boundaries of the three zones, c. AD 600 and 1700, were chosen to reflect major periods of change in the nature of money.

Awareness that visitors could enter at both ends encouraged us to adopt the open double-ended display. Likewise the breadth of the gallery suggested to us that the displays down each side of the gallery should represent a coherent element in the displays, because a visitor could easily view only one side of the gallery. We therefore located on one side all the themes which related to the development of the physical appearances of the different forms of money, such as the discovery of New World gold and silver or the technology of manufacturing paper money. Down the other side the themes displayed deal with the political and social aspects of the development of money, such as the burial of money with the dead or the globalisation of western-style coins and paper money.

The structure therefore provides an unstated framework at whatever point visitors find something that encourages them to engage with the display. For the visitor who feels the need for a structure, the relationships between the parts of the display are explained on a leaflet available from a holder in the gallery and the cases are numbered.

Comfort

The whole vision of the display as the story of a familiar concept, one in which every visitor has a part to play, was designed to create a sense of intellectual comfort for the visitor. This comfort encouraged access by every Museum visitor who entered the gallery, in spite of the obviously large and apparently complex display.

The layout of the cases within the gallery and the objects within the cases was also designed to create a sense of comfort, and therefore easy access, in engaging the display.

Physical comfort was addressed by placing the main cases along the walls, away from the thoroughfare effect of the gallery. Visitors engaged with the main cases would not be jostled or obstructed by visitors passing through. The cases were large, high and well lit, so that visitors did not feel cramped or oppressed by them and several visitors at a time could look at the same display. The objects were placed in the case in as accessible position as possible, as though the visitors were holding them in their hands. The ceiling lanterns provide some daylight, reinforced by ceiling mounted lighting. They are positioned on slopes, to catch light from above (both within and outside the case), as close to the front of the case as possible, with none above average eye level and all within the normal viewing range of the average visitor. The ideal being sought is to replicate the effect of holding the object in the hand in front of a sunlit window. The

floor cases were intentionally less complex than the wall cases, so that visitors did not spend long at them and impede the flow or be jostled by other visitors. They were placed to lead visitors off the thoroughfare to engage with the wall cases.

The intellectual comfort of the gallery was provided by the simplicity of its conceptual structure and the familiarity of its subject matter. The gallery had a single message which was divided into three chronological zones, each of which matched the thematic splitting of the gallery into two sides. In each zone there are four main cases, two on each side of the gallery. Each case addresses one aspect of money during the period of the zone, and depending on which side it is located, the aspect will relate to the form of money or the use of money. Within each case the chosen aspect is divided into three or four topics. Each topic is broken down into three or four sub-topics, each containing a group or groups of individual objects. Each aspect, topic, sub-topic and group is designed to stand alone within the broad framework, so that a visitor can engage at whatever level catches his eye or imagination and still understand why the objects are in a money gallery and the role they play in the story of money as it progresses through time towards the money the visitor is familiar with from their daily experience of it.

The visitors are assisted in this process by an integrated text. This text has a similar structure throughout the gallery for the comfort and therefore the easy access of the visitors. Four levels of text were used. The highest level was the introductory panel at each end of the gallery, including the title and a hundred words, informing the visitor of the subject matter and range of the gallery being entered. The second level was the title and introduction to each case. The title contained the date range of the case, and the introduction outlined the significance of the aspect addressed in thirty words. The third level of text was the titles and explanations (in eighty words) of the three or four topics in each case. The lowest level explained the sub-topics and described the groups of objects. Within this level, no part of the explanation exceeded eighty words.

The positioning and the uniform arrangement of the text were also dictated by the need to achieve maximum comfort. The main title and introduction to each case was placed in a large type case across the upper part of the case, like a banner, so that visitors close to the case could see it easily, but they did not hide the purpose of the case from those behind them. Each topic was presented as a distinct unit by its title and introduction, also located above the display. The topic title was accompanied by a characteristic image, adding a visual indication of the topic. The sub-topic level text was placed in vertical columns as close to the groups of objects as possible. Wherever possible the location of text in relation to the cases and the objects respected the natural inclination of visitors to read from left to right.

The importance of making it clear at the entrance and throughout the gallery what is being exhibited and what is intended by the displays has been stressed by critics of the Museum's permanent galleries: «*I think this slight lack of clarity about intention does not help the building, since it does not help to counteract that initial impression that this is a monolith with lots of things in it*» (Nichola Johnson in Cherry and Walker 1996, p. 25). The size and the position of the introductory text make it virtually impossible for visitors not to know they are in the HSBC Money Gallery.

The whole structure including the layout of the room, the distribution of topics and objects and the arrangement of the text was specifically designed to enable visitors to make their own choices about the display, even if that means ignoring it completely. The use of the room as a route around the Museum makes it impossible to oblige visitors to follow a particular path or direction. The subject matter is presented historically and with indications of development, but the story of money never moves consistently in a straight line, so a linear or sequential display would work against the concept. By providing the visitor with markers, such as the gallery leaflet and numbers on cases, the limited number of visitors demanding a discipline for engaging the gallery are catered for, but not at the expense of the majority who feel more comfortable engaging with the display in their own way. «*It is sensible, therefore, to design exhibitions that enable people to choose their own physical and conceptual pathways*». (Durbin 1997, p. 108) An experiment in directed and undirected use of a gallery reported by Falk (Durbin 1997, pp. 117-122) shows just how much more effective it can be to leave the choices about movement within the gallery to the visitor.

Excellence

The motive for creating an intellectually and physically comfortable environment for the HSBC Money Gallery was to provide the widest possible access to the British Museum's numismatic collection. The associated publications and development activities also had the same objective. Throughout the project the curatorial team was very conscious of the need to show the high quality and immense breadth of the collection in our care. We were all committed to creating access to the excellence of the British Museum's numismatic collection. We were also committed to making best use of the expertise and experience of the Museum's design team to deliver this excellence. We also strove to make best use of our own expertise and experience to the same end. The curatorial team represented over sixty years of working in the Department of Coins and Medals, but also included its most recently recruited curator.

The staff of the British Museum's Department of Coins and Medals would like to express their deep gratitude to HSBC Holdings PLC for the

opportunity it created and to their colleagues in the British Museum, HSBC Group Archives, the Royal Mint, the Bank of England, De La Rue, and to the many individual collectors and dealers, who helped them to achieve their aim of delivering to the whole of the Museum's audience access to excellence in the HSBC Money Gallery.

Afterword

In 1999 as part of the project a large-scale assessment of the HSBC Money Gallery was carried out. Specialists in museum studies, museum education and museum disability access were invited to review the success of the gallery in meeting its aims. Various visitor surveys were conducted to assess visitor satisfaction and visitor behaviour. The results of this assessment are now at press. Of course we have been able to learn that we were not as successful as we hoped and we are already at work making changes to the gallery to take account of areas of failure. The assessment has produced many suggestions on the effectiveness of the process of creating a permanent display on the history of money, and I recommend all involved in such projects to read it once it is published (Orna-Ornstein, Goldsmith & Cribb 2000).

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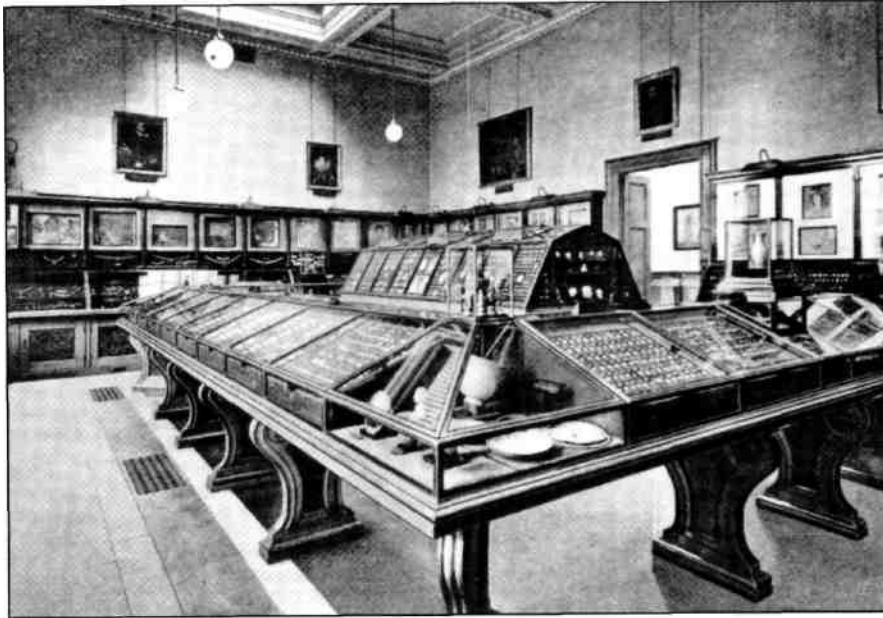


Fig. 1 The British Museum coin display, c. 1880. The display did not include real coins, but for security reasons consisted of electrotypes. The electrotypes were coloured to match the original coins and also added the advantage of displaying both sides of each coin together.

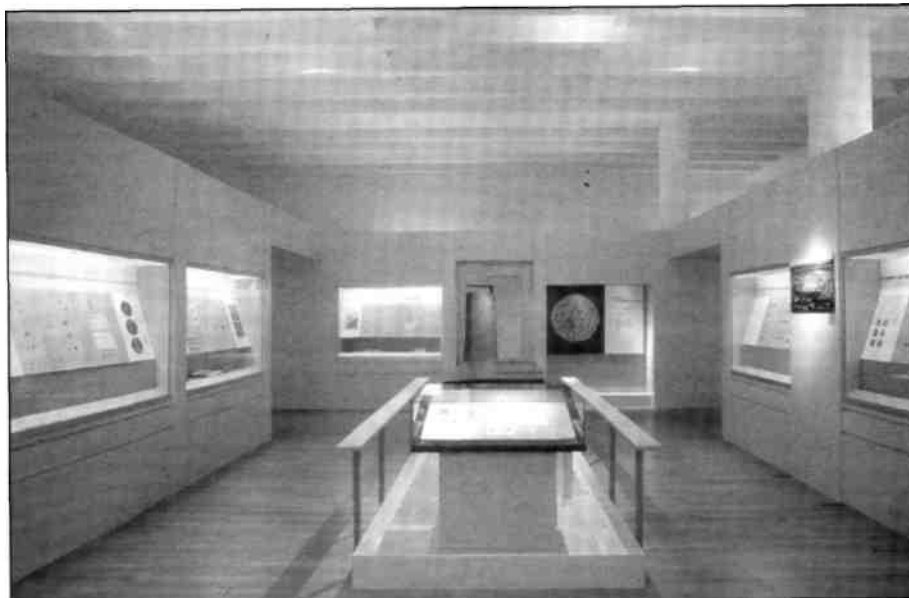


Fig. 2 General view of the central room of the exhibition.

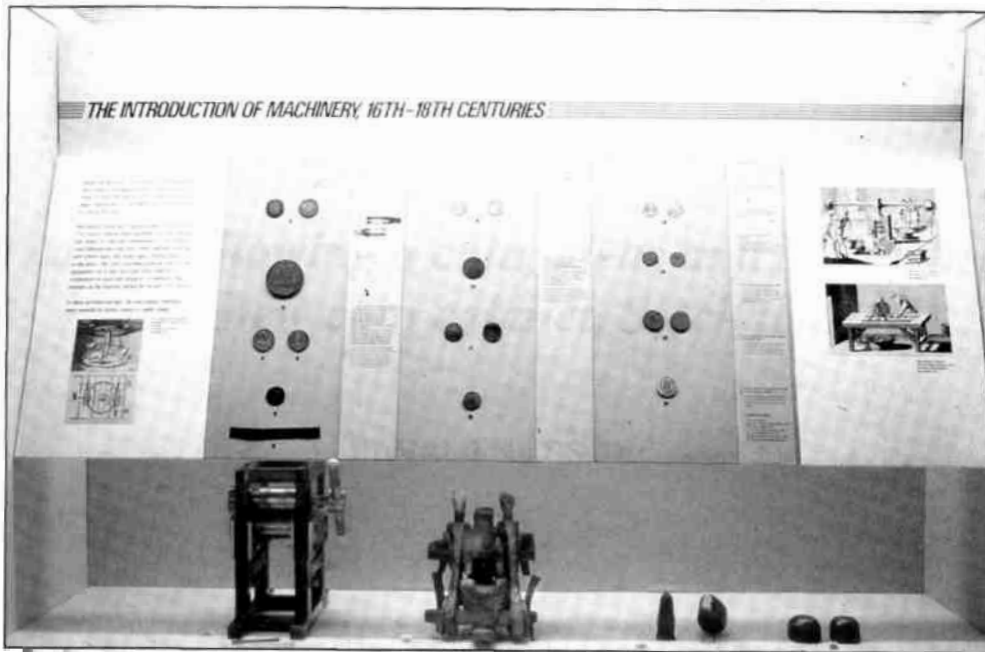


Fig. 3 Close up of a display case on the introduction of coining machinery.



Fig. 4 The HSBC Money Gallery. Permanent display of monetary history at the British Museum, opened January 1997. The gallery presents global monetary history from third millennium B.C. down to present day