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THE ROYAL COLLECTION E-GALLERY

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Abstract

To mark the Golden Jubilee of HM Queen Elizabeth II in 2002, the Royal Collection opened two new galleries in London and Edinburgh for the display of special exhibitions of the collection of art gathered together by successive British Sovereigns. In planning the galleries, it was decided that technology should have a role. However this was technology on a tight budget, with limited resources and a tight timetable.

The challenge was to produce an installation that captured the complexities of a collection that has been built by successive sovereigns with widely differing tastes and yet also present objects in their context and in ways not possible in traditional publishing and object display.

The aim was to tell more about the pieces in the Collection, explaining their function, the fact that many remain in the context for which they were acquired and are still in use today. The ‘e-Gallery’ not only presents the Collection in the context of its acquisition but also attempts to bring an intimacy to the study of the art, an appreciation of its variety, and recognition of its association with buildings and people known the world over.

This case study looks at the lessons learnt in the development and maintenance of a system in a short period of time with limited resources, using systems that are updateable, economical to develop and maintain and can continue to add new dimensions to the interpretation of the Collection.

Keywords: Royal Collection, Multimedia Kiosks, British Monarchy, digital interpretation

The Royal Collection e-Gallery

2002 saw the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, celebrating and commemorating fifty years of her reign. As part of the celebrations, the Royal Collection oversaw the reconstruction of The Queen’s Gallery at Buckingham Palace in London and the development of a new gallery at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh. Highlights of

the Collection—selected from several hundred thousand objects—were to be installed in a special inaugural exhibition. Royal Collection staff set about overseeing the major design and construction project, and planned a scholarly catalogue for the opening exhibition. However in addition, the Department wanted to provide visitors with a way of presenting context to both appreciate the art and also understand the Collection as a whole.

The Royal Collection is one of the finest accumulations of art in the world built up by the sovereigns of the British Isles over the past 400 years. It now contains over 500,000 items including 35,000 drawings and watercolours - including 600 by Leonardo da Vinci—as well as works by Holbein, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Canaletto; 9,000 paintings and miniatures ranging from Duccio to Lucian Freud, fine French and English furniture, sculpture, silver, ceramics, Sèvres porcelain, arms and armour, jewellery, one of the largest collections of works by Fabergé, 150,000 books and some 150,000 photographs.

Unlike the art in most museums, each item also has a historical context associated with its acquisition, the fact that it often remains in the place for which it was first purchased or is still used for the purpose for which it was acquired. In addition, unlike the other Royal Households of Europe, care of the art collection continues to be directly cared for by a part of the Queen's Household. To start, we wanted to give visitors a sense of how the collection of art is connected to The Queen and the current royal family. How, in short, could we demonstrate the rich strands of function and meaning for the objects on display? We suspected that one answer might lie in digital technology.

We knew that other institutions were either experimenting with interactive technology or even adopting it as a core part of their activities but we had neither resources nor experience in this area.

To gain more experience and to receive guidance on a possible way forward, the Collection commissioned Dr Vicki Porter, then a freelance consultant, to propose a strategy on using digital technology to enhance the visitor experience. Dr Porter was coincidentally working on a similar issue for the Tate Gallery in the planning of Tate Modern.

Our strategy needed to address several concerns. One was that the Collection, despite its great accumulation of art is in many ways not well known, though the locations where it is displayed, Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle, the Place of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh, Hampton Court Palace, and many more, are known the world over. Equally well known are those who have amassed and cared for the Collection over the years, in particular Charles I, George III, George IV, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and Her Majesty The Queen. Another problem was that the scope and size of the Collection meant that it was hard to identify which areas, objects and places could or should be presented using new technology. In addition, very few of the images in the Collection were digitised. Whatever was to be done, the Collection was effectively working from a standing start, and with significant resource constraints.

To give the Royal Collection flexibility, Dr Porter presented a selection of options ranging from not installing any multimedia at all to a full Royal Collection interactive experience. Considering the range of possible approaches, management was concerned about attempting yet another project in parallel with two major construction projects and exhibition development. Understanding the resources and staff effort it would take to execute a digital project successfully, we decided to postpone any such undertaking until after we opened the new galleries.

Despite the difficulties that the Collection recognised were involved in implementing a digital project and the earlier decision, there was still a desire to go ahead, so 15 months before the London Gallery was to open it was decided to include interactive media whatever the obstacles. While the Collection faced a development task in a very short time it did mean that some of the broader questions had to be answered quickly and decisively. There was no question of finding a new team to develop content, we had to use what was available to us, we had to be focused, but equally we set ourselves the challenge of trying to develop something new, and to develop a system that was not just for the opening of the first exhibition but was a long term investment for the Collection.

Resources were even tighter than before, since this was the period in which the Foot and Mouth outbreak was causing visitor numbers to tourist attractions to fall. The Collection, which is totally self-funding and receives no public or government subsidy, is heavily

reliant on the tourist industry and its fluctuations can significantly affect its income. The further collapse of the tourist market after the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington added yet other challenges. Design and development would need to be sourced from outside but from thereon in the Collection's already fully occupied staff had to support all functions.

With these constraints in mind, Dr Porter recommended that we approach Rory Matthews, a freelance designer whom she felt was well suited to the Collection. Mr. Matthews swiftly developed a proposal which was reviewed by independent consultants and accepted by the Collection. Production started about a year before opening. The development received a boost around this time with the generous support from Sir Kashing Li, Chairman of Hutchison Whampoa towards the installation of the system in the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace to mark The Queen's Golden Jubilee. This was followed by additional financial support later in the year from Hutchison Whampoa's telecoms company '3' for the Edinburgh installation.

We knew we needed to have a very flat management structure that could make quick decisions and fortunately, with the support of our director we were able to avoid cumbersome committees. Early crucial decisions were to avoid the encyclopaedic approach. We would not attempt to retell the history of art but would focus on the Collection itself. Initial content would be based on the opening exhibition catalogue, which included some 450 items. By doing this we avoided burdening curators with even more work than they already had. However there was a desire to do more than just produce an electronic view of the exhibition catalogue. The desire was – even in a small way – to use the medium to present the Collection in ways that the catalogue, the Gallery and the exhibition could not.

Two areas struck a chord from the beginning. Firstly we wanted to show the hidden features of objects, what did they look like inside, what did the other pages of a book show, where are the secret compartments, how did it work or was put together, what did it mean, what had conservation revealed. Secondly we wanted to bring the context of the Collection to the fore. Here was an exhibition of some of the finest pieces from the Collection brought together since the early 16th century, by a remarkable group of

individuals - the sovereigns of the British Isles, their consorts and families - to decorate and furnish palaces and castles which are still lived in by their successors. The exhibition was not a series of masterpieces collected together by a museum or gallery following a specific collecting policy. We wanted to use the system to bring this sense of context and continuity to the fore.

We agreed that curators could not start producing more research and catalogue records, however the Collection is rich in archives, accounts, photographs, letters, comparative illustrations and explanatory documentation, which in some cases was referred to in the catalogue but was not illustrated. In other words, many objects could have a wide variety of additional material added to them in the manner of a ‘scrapbook’. And it was from this concept that the section took its name - any additional material that related to an object found its place in the ‘scrapbook’. Visitors would be able to explore these at will, with simple explanations but no detailed curatorial interpretation — we also hoped that this immediacy would give them a sense of discovery and intimacy with the Collection in a way a formal catalogue or exhibition might not.

Early on, the team drew out the themes that it wanted to address, the exhibition with the 15 subsections of the Collection that were covered, the acquirers of the Collection, the locations where the Collection is or has been displayed, a timeline of the Collection showing how the art, individuals and places are interconnected. Commissioning the additional texts was an issue and, as in most organisations, they had to be reviewed and rechecked, again and again, a process that was time consuming but it was important for it to be right.

Photography was another issue. While many items had been photographed for the catalogue they had often been photographed as groups which, when the transparencies were scanned, meant that many items had a limited file size and in some cases, new photography was required. In addition, the amount of new photography that was generated to produce the animations and features was more than we had at first expected. All was photographed using traditional 5 x 4 format or medium format and all had to be scanned. Some thousands of images were scanned which then had to be processed.

The collection did not have a full time digital imager until May 2001 and all images needed to be scanned, stored and filed from scratch. Outside support provided help with image processing and programming.

The core team of two worked on all aspects of the project, from the design of the kiosks, hardware, content identification and editing to screen design. Neither was dedicated exclusively to the project. In addition, the Collection's Photographic Services – three photographers, the scanner and administrative staff - assisted the project in addition to full-time and voluntary staff who worked on texts.

In early April 2002, with seven weeks to opening, we reviewed the project. We had been developing content on a wide range, scrapbook material had been identified, photographed and processed. Multimedia material had been photographed, catalogue material was being processed, all the strands were there but there was a realisation that what could be achieved for opening day was less than the totality of the work that had been developed.

We identified that in the heart of this material was a core that fulfilled our initial objectives: we could explore items, we could zoom in on them, we could add scrapbook material to them and we could add value and a new dimension to the exhibition that was being installed. We saw we had an operational system within the heart of a larger project and one that could be presented to the public fulfilling the original goals of the project. The opening by The Queen of the new Gallery included the presentation to Her Majesty of the e-Gallery, on time, on budget, and fully functioning.

While the e-Gallery project got its impetus from the original deadline—the opening of new Queen's galleries in London and Edinburgh, our strategy was much longer-term than opening day in May 2002. Clearly, it was important to build on the investment of the initial system and also to provide the structure to include future exhibitions as well as material relating to items in the Collection not part of exhibitions.

From the outset, the system was designed to allow for expansion and development, in particular to allow for future integration with a new Collections Management System,

currently in development, and to facilitate the development of a web version of the content. To these ends the system content is managed from a simple database and system text is handled as HTML.

Also planned from the beginning of the project was a transition to content being developed and added to the system in-house, reducing external costs and dependencies. This transition is being staged to fit with the development of in-house skills and facilities.

The separation of content (in the database) from the program "shell" means that re-purposing of the content to different uses (such as the web) is made as painless as possible. It also means that the processes of adding new content can be kept as simple and non-technical as possible. The e-Gallery shell was created using Macromedia Director and we chose to adopt a programming style that emphasised robustness, as this was a key objective for opening day. This has resulted in a simple and straightforward shell that has proved readily adaptable and extensible as the project has developed.

The next stage of the project is to adapt the e-Gallery to the Web. With a database-driven system we aim to translate the kiosk to a browser-based system and thus massively increase access to the resources we are building. While the particular goals and requirements of the Royal Collection shaped this strategy, we might offer some general lessons that allowed us to achieve our goals. First, the decision-makers should be kept to a minimum. Equally, a small staff team has its value beyond financial considerations. Keeping ambitions in control and always measuring expectations against key requirements helps to contain scope, but in parallel an ambitious strategy and longer view gives the team confidence in the adaptability of the system.

By launching with a system that was rounded and complete but could be adapted and expanded, the Collection had been able to give itself the flexibility to meet its targets and yet not over reach from the outset. We knew the system would grow incrementally and that this gradual expansion was a natural consequence of our normal exhibition activities. In addition, the reuse of material from catalogues ensured that well researched texts could be relied upon for content without having to require already overstretched curators to produce new material. All 'tombstone' data is derived from catalogue entries. Exhibition

graphic panel texts – where the content is brief and focused – provided the basis of background information on sections of the Collection. Texts cannot be reused without being ‘massaged’ to fit the context, but minimal editing to meet the style of a digital system is significantly more efficient than having to commission new texts.

In special ‘explorations’ of featured objects for example the turning of an object to reveal all its sides and features, we were able to reuse material as much as possible. Yet the explorations add an interactive element that was not provided by the catalogue or the exhibition. For much of our audience, these explorations help to involve their imagination in ways that simple texts may not. By designing the interface so that these featured objects are prominent, the audience has a choice, to view single sections of the Collection or to focus on the interactive items. In addition the interconnection of people, places and objects give a flavour of why the Collection is so special. And if they want to learn more about an object, the texts can then provide more background. Because the ‘explore’ features can be added incrementally, photography that was carried out for a feature in advance but not implemented for the original opening day could be added gradually when appropriate. A feature adding pages to a book can be equally incremental.

The scrapbook allows objects to be seen in context and calls upon the wealth of collateral material in the Collection. Context is important for a Collection that is still in use: candlesticks and salts used on the table for a state banquet, the diamond diadem worn by The Queen on the way to her Coronation and to Open Parliament, photographs of original owners, donors or recipients, of buildings where gifts had been made, invoices, designs, preparatory sketches, images of a chair in use over nearly 160 years, a piece of jewellery being worn by three generations and an album of photographs showing a diamond being cut all add context and add an intimate aspect to the Collection.

Where next? As the Web site develops and the process of transferring future exhibitions at the London and Edinburgh galleries to the system becomes more routine for curators, exhibition staff, and catalogue editors, the next move will be to install kiosks at sites which are currently without, Windsor Castle for one. The development of content not related to exhibitions becomes a new challenge, as is integrating the system with the developing Collections Management System. While the Royal Collection is recognised as one of the finest art collections in the world, the interactive media we are developing is by

contrast being built by a small team, with a modest budget, and with severe time constraints. Having articulated our long-term goals, though, we have support to continue building this important tool for both education and outreach. E-gallery can reflect the long history of the Collection, its richness and breadth, and provide context that surrounds art that is still used – often in the same place for which it was commissioned or bought over the past 400 years.