

# 'Pick 'n' Mix' – Multidisciplinary displays in the new Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum

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## Kelvingrove New Century Project

The current Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum first opened to the public as the Palace of Arts, part of the 1901 International Exhibition. It officially opened as the Art Gallery and Museum on 25 October 1902.

After 100 years, Kelvingrove's facilities were no longer up to the standards expected in 21st-century museums. The decision was made to fully refurbish and re-display the entire building – the £35 million Kelvingrove New Century Project.

The museum closed to the public in June 2003 and re-opened in July 2006.



Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum – the UK's most visited museum and gallery outside London.

## Multidisciplinary

Before Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum was refurbished, the displays were arranged traditionally in separate galleries by subject area: Natural History, Ethnography, Art, and Human History. As part of the refurbishment, curators were encouraged to 'pick 'n' mix' objects from different disciplines. Staff worked together and became familiar with other parts of Glasgow Museums' collections.

Natural history objects have been used in a wide variety of displays. While many objects are engaging in their own right, this new approach enables objects to tell stories and to reach new audiences. Unusual combinations of objects act as a visual grab, encouraging visitors to look at a wider variety of objects – getting an art lover to appreciate geology, or a naturalist to look at furniture in a new light.



Saw the carving on the chair and had a closer look, then realised there was a lemur there. I wouldn't have looked at a case full of monkeys – visitor comment.

In the Wildlife in Danger display, we positioned a familiar object, a dining room chair, in a case with several threatened primates. This helps visitors relate to the threats facing some endangered animals.

Natural history, ethnography and arms and armour are displayed side by side in the Animal Armoury story. This shows the similarities between human and evolutionary solutions to the problems of defending yourself and attacking others. Visitors are often amazed by how alike these are.

In the display Understanding a Landscape, an oil painting of a view down the Clyde valley is shown above four rock specimens. An AV display projected onto the painting shows where the different rocks are found and how different geological processes formed them.



Not interested in geology but the painting drew me in – visitor comment.



So that's what a wild haggis looks like – visitor comment.

bottles of whisky next to grouse. We even put a haggis next to a model of the 'real thing', mixing fact and fiction for the confusion/entertainment of our non-Scottish visitors!



A medieval helmet has been placed alongside a stuffed toucan, the idea being to demonstrate how the shape of the armour evolved from the defensive strength of the bird's beak. – journalist comment.

To show how the human inhabitants' way of life in the Scottish islands of St Kilda was linked to their natural environment, various animals were placed next to objects once used by the St Kildans.



Showing a mouse next to a pile of cat bones may make visitors look twice – curator comment.

Scotland's most iconic plants and animals have long been used in advertising. In the Famous Scottish Wildlife display, we've placed



Having drawn you in through narrative, they keep you hooked with odd life-art juxtapositions – like a real butterfly among the ornamental ones in the Mackintosh rooms – journalist comment.

suspended above a collection of record-breaking animals. These include an elephant and a giraffe that almost touches the plane's wing.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Multidisciplinary Display

### Advantages

- We can make connections between disparate objects and collections.
- Visitors with different interests are attracted into parts of the museum they might not otherwise visit.

### Disadvantages

- There is a danger that messages can become confused – people may make their own, sometimes mistaken, connections if text and graphics don't explain clearly why objects are displayed together.
- Visitors may not like natural history objects next to 'high art' or 'precious relics'. Some 'would rather have similar things together'.

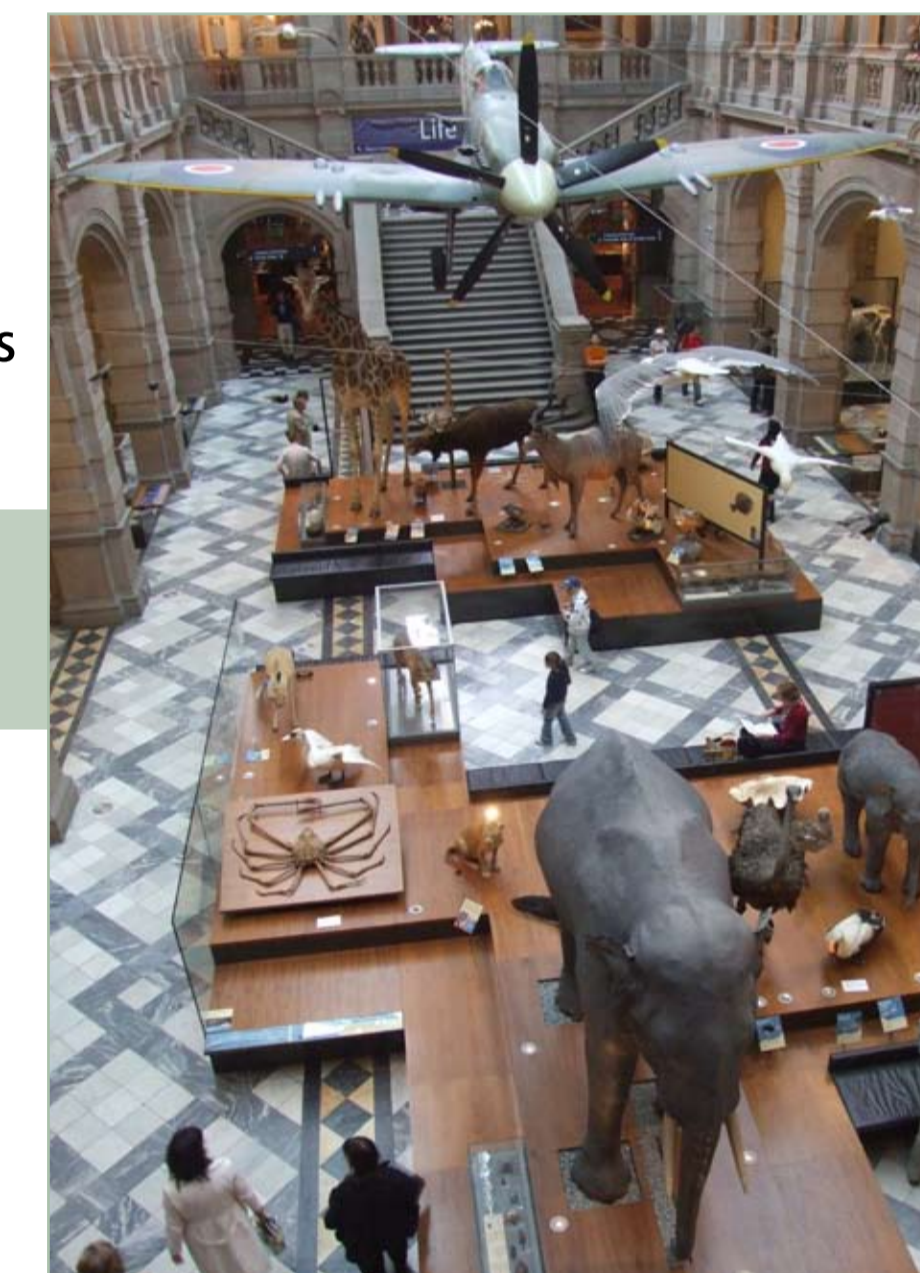
## Conclusions

Critically, some of the most popular displays are the ones with a good mix of objects. Most visitors seem to understand and enjoy the mixing of disciplines; there may be initial confusion, but then they express more interest. However, not every gallery or case is a mix of objects. We still have some more traditional displays, for those visitors who are happiest with a room full of paintings or a case full of swords.

Finally, based on 93% of visitors polled saying the displays were good or very good, the decision to 'pick 'n' mix' objects appears to have been a good one.

Nature as an inspiration for artists and designers is a major part of the Glasgow Style, epitomised by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Images of peacocks and butterflies are found on several ornaments and pieces of furniture, so placing real animals among these objects was a natural step.

Perhaps one of the most impressive and best-received multidisciplinary displays is at a gallery level rather than story level. In the West Court, a World War II Spitfire, surrounded by gulls and starlings, is



'This is one of the most eclectic museums I have ever been to! We loved the fact that over the stuffed elk and moose, you could view an old WWII Spitfire aircraft.' – visitor comment.