

# Nick Humphrey: *Creating a New Furniture Gallery at the V&A*

17 November

Nick Humphrey, curator at the V&A and council member of the society, introduced his lecture with highlights of the final stages of the development of the new furniture gallery (which opened on 1 December). In the vast top floor space, facing west across Exhibition Road to the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum, the protective covering was being removed to reveal Aston Webb's teak flooring. The acid-free covers were coming off the objects and, for the first time, the exhibition team were able to see the 200 selected items together in the space - objects ranging from an English medieval book cupboard c.1420, to the Fractal table, made in 2011 using digital 3D printing technology.

The gallery focuses on form, function, techniques and materials, with the aim of communicating to visitors the techniques of making which are essential to understanding the object. Along the spine of the gallery, 25 key pieces are shown in chronological order. They are displayed in the round, to encourage visitors to examine the structure. There are then 16 'making' displays which explore techniques of construction and decoration. Seven displays feature individual designers. Workshop practices and the inter-relationship of trades are examined.

The gallery is named after Dr Susan Weber, the founder and director of the Bard Graduate Center for studies in the Decorative Arts, New York. This is the first comprehensive gallery of western furniture in the V&A and is part of the museum's FuturePlan, following the opening of study galleries for silver and ceramics. It focuses on the V&A's own collection, with non-western pieces included for comparative purposes. The choice of objects is the result of a four-year process of selection, where curators looked for the best examples within each technical category, in collaboration with conservators. Scientific analysis, including dendrochronology, has contributed to a fuller interpretation of the making of the objects.

Innovative digital labels present interpretive data and additional images. Short films have been commissioned, and audios and replicas enhance the range of interpretive techniques, with large portable print labels as another alternative. Full-length catalogue information, as available online, is accessible in the 'Search the Collections' gallery terminals. The 'How was it made?' videos, including Boulle marquetry, the dovetail joint, the mortise-and-tenon joint, and the Fractal table, based on the form of the dragon tree, are also available on the museum's website.

Nick's lecture presented a comprehensive perspective on the creation of the gallery, revealing the decision-making processes and the wide range of professional

expertise that has contributed to the making of the gallery. He finished by referring to a conference in May 2013 with a making furniture theme. For further details, see the V&A's website at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/f/furniture/>

*Liz Hancock*

## Visit to the new Furniture Techniques and Materials Gallery at the V&A

12 December

The V&A's new furniture gallery opened in November, the latest in its series of galleries devoted to specific types of decorative arts where the displays explore materials, techniques and notable designers. There is no narrative, no constraint over chronology or limits as to cultural origins; the gallery is divided into sections on aspects of production and decoration, such as turning, carving, joinery, moulding, lacquer and gilding and the displays comprise objects which best demonstrate these themes.

Down the centre is an eclectic display of pieces from 1400 to today, each chosen for a different technique and standing on a raised plinth to allow close inspection. So as furniture curator Nick Humphrey, our guide for this early morning private view, explained, this is not a gallery of 'great' furniture, rather it shows how furniture is made and where these traditions originated. Digital captions on easy-to-use touchscreens provide detailed information on the objects and associated context. There is plenty to discover here, even for the specialist, and it is a tribute to the curators that furniture, ever the orphan Annie of decorative arts, is at last given a gallery to itself. Our special thanks to Nick Humphrey for showing us the highlights; the gallery is a triumph.

*David Dewing*