

Theme 1: Approaches to Reinstallations

Montens & Balace, the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels

Reframing Decorative Arts Displays at the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels: Challenges and New Directions

As part of an ongoing renovation of the Decorative Arts wing, the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels inaugurated in June 2024 two newly reimagined galleries, devoted respectively to the 19th century and to Belgian Art Nouveau and Art Deco. These new presentations mark a departure from the traditional linear and stylistic approach, proposing instead a contextual reading of objects that foregrounds national identities, artistic exchanges, and lesser-known makers.

A new project is now underway for a major gallery dedicated to the 18th century. This future space will form a conceptual and spatial bridge between the long-established “Middle Ages to Baroque” section and the recently reinterpreted 19th-century gallery. Previous presentations, mainly focused on a highly academic perception of art history, have overlooked some significant aspects.

The main challenge is to integrate the new gallery into the existing layout while adopting a renewed curatorial approach—one that resonates with contemporary audiences and allows for more layered, interpretive experiences.

In preparation, several initiatives have been launched. A small semi-permanent exhibition, *A Story of Power and Beauty: Masterpieces of the 18th Century*, presents a thematic selection of objects. While limited in scope, it opens the door to reflections on how such collections might eventually engage more directly with current societal concerns. It also serves as a platform to reassess the role of interpretive texts—questioning how to balance the evocative power of objects with the explanatory voice of the institution, without imposing a singular point of view.

Collaborations have also been developed with art and design students who were invited to reinterpret 18th-century objects through contemporary creation, resulting in personal works exhibited alongside the historical collections. Additionally, a joint research project with museology students from KU Leuven explored object-centered methodologies for future displays. Rather than starting from curatorial concepts, this exercise focused on letting the objects guide the narratives. Various display formats—such as period rooms, repertory galleries, or hybrid solutions—were examined to assess their potential for engaging diverse audiences.

This presentation will give an overview of these ongoing reflections and experiments, and open a broader discussion on the possibilities and challenges of curating historical decorative arts in a way that is inclusive, critical, and relevant to today’s museum visitors.

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Bios:

Valérie Montens is Curator of Ceramics and Glass (16th-19th c.) at the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. She holds a PhD in History from the Université Libre de Bruxelles and teaches at the Institut Supérieur d'Histoire de l'Art and ENSAV La Cambre. Her research focuses on material culture and the interpretation of decorative arts in historical and curatorial contexts.

Sophie Balace is Curator of Metalwork (10th-19th c.) at the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. A specialist in Mosan art and medieval goldsmithing, she holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Liège. Her research focuses on Christian art, medieval metalwork, and historiography.

Theme 1: Approaches to Reinstallations

Andersen, Sjögerén & Kilner, Röhsska Museum

Design Stories Reimagined: A Thematic Approach to Curating at Röhsska Museum

Röhsska Museum is Sweden's museum for design, craft, and fashion. Its collection comprises more than 50,000 objects, and around 100 new acquisitions are made annually to reflect contemporary design and craft practices. In 2024, the museum opened a new permanent exhibition titled *Design Stories* – a large-scale thematic display that reconsiders how we present design to a diverse audience.

Rejecting traditional chronological narratives and stylistic taxonomies, *Design Stories* explores the idea that design is not only about iconic makers or singular masterpieces. Instead, design is everywhere: in the clothes we wear, the city we live in, the interfaces we navigate daily, and the objects that shape our homes. The exhibition embraces design in its broadest meaning, encompassing craft, fashion, urban planning, mobile applications, and architecture.

The curatorial process involved collaborating with reference groups, particularly younger audiences, who emphasised the value of thematic and relational storytelling over chronological progression. Their input directly shaped the exhibition, leading to replacing the museum's previous linear design history-based display with thematic groupings organized around six key concepts: Desire, Innovation, Change, Creativity, Efficiency, and Belonging. These themes offer new ways of interpreting both iconic and overlooked objects, encouraging comparisons across histories, time and categories, by creating physical and intellectual spaces for dialogue and more critical perspectives in lieu of the more traditional model of storytelling the museum presented in the past.

By adopting a thematic, non-linear approach, the exhibition also addresses key curatorial challenges: how to balance historic and contemporary objects, how to engage diverse audiences, and how to communicate the cyclical and pluralistic nature of design. This strategy aims to destabilise dominant historical narratives, highlight recurring ideas and forms, and create an inclusive framework that foregrounds dialogue, experimentation, and reflection.

Design Stories occupies 800 square meters across five galleries and includes around 600 objects. Four thematic vitrines, referred to as "Windows to the Collection", displays ceramics, glass, furniture, and jewellery. The final gallery introduces a flexible exhibition space called Super Ö, intended for experimentation and ongoing public engagement and collaboration. This paper reflects on how the exhibition negotiates the juxtaposition of historic and contemporary design, how audience engagement informed curatorial decisions, and how thematic, accessible displays can foster a more nuanced understanding of design today.

Bios:

Jessica Sjögerén is Exhibition Producer at Röhsska Museum. She works with developing and coordinating large-scale exhibitions with a focus on accessibility and audience engagement.
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Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Josefin Kilner is Curator of Collections at Röhsska Museum. With a background in design history and museum studies, she focuses on inclusive and critical approaches to collection-based exhibitions, exploring contemporary interpretations of historical design objects.
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Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Theme 1: Approaches to Reinstallations

Monica Obniski, the High Museum of Art

Taking a Position with Design

At the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, Georgia, USA), we bring art, ideas, and people together to amplify the importance of artistic expression, envision a better future, and positively change our community in Atlanta. Decorative arts and design, as one of seven curatorial departments, is uniquely positioned to contribute to the High's mission through its collection displays. Currently, I am working on a collaborative display (between three curatorial departments) for the High's American galleries, set to open in June 2026. One of the challenges of this reinstallation is exhibiting historic (18th through early-20th century) decorative arts for contemporary audiences, especially in the Southern capital of the US that was the seat of the Civil Rights Movement. One strategy that we are employing includes using contemporary objects as transhistorical touchstones to offer new interpretations for historic material. By offering dialogues around cultural identity, race and gender, and colonization within the Atlantic World, we can ensure that we are not reinforcing hegemonic US narratives and, instead, are bringing to the fore more objects by women and people of color to complicate conventional histories.

In addition to this project, I have been strategically updating the contemporary design galleries to reflect broader societal and global issues, which is part of my larger goal to shift the traditional narrative and the composition of the collection to one that is more global and can comment on pressing topics of the day. For example, the impact of climate change is well established, and part of my collecting strategy has included designers who explore social responsibility and sustainability within their practice. Within a recent installation I have included objects within this category that have strong storytelling potential, are visually captivating, and have resonance with other works. By interrogating the future, I hope to create a space for museum visitors to think about the impact of their own behaviors through subtle cues, demonstrating the tangible impact of design on our daily lives.

My aim for this paper is to share some of the strategies that I am deploying by using design in two ways: to offer alternative narratives for our historic decorative arts collection and to interrogate the future within our contemporary design galleries—in other words, taking a position with design.

Bio:

Monica Obniski writes, lectures, and maintains a curatorial practice that engages critical social issues and is rooted in architecture and design history. Currently, she is Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the High Museum of Art. Obniski received an MA from Bard Graduate Center and a PhD from University of Illinois at Chicago.

Theme 2: Perspectives on House Museums

Lessing, Castellani & Toneguzzi, Iuav University of Venice

Beyond Heroization: Living Heritage and Contemporary Collection Displays. An Experimental Proposal for the Doge's Apartment at Palazzo Ducale, Venice

This proposal articulates an innovative museological paradigm conceived over research-through-teaching methodology, undertaken with the Musei Civici Veneziani—an interdisciplinary design atelier integrating exhibit design, environmental graphics design, and history of museum displays. The course focused on reconceptualising the Doge's Apartment at Palazzo Ducale, Venice, fundamentally interrogating conventional taxonomic display methodologies by cultivating a "lived heritage" paradigm that transmutes canonical museum spaces into contemporary, yet historically stratified domestic environments.

Currently vacant and hosting temporary exhibitions with traditional white cube logic, the Doge's Apartment houses even hidden masterpieces like Titian's *San Cristoforo* fresco, typically invisible to visitors. Our proposition transforms this space by engendering discourse between historical masterworks of Venice and contemporary design exemplars within a unified domestic tableau. The experimental installation reconceptualises the residence as actually inhabited by a fictional Doge's descendant—a contemporary connoisseur who works and lives there—thereby establishing

an immersive milieu wherein visitors assume the role of privileged guests rather than passive spectators. This methodology cultivates intimate relationships between visitors and artifacts, dissolving the conventional chasm between the 'unreachable hero' and contemporary audiences whilst fostering profound historical comprehension of innovations that the Serenissima Republic engendered across centuries.

Drawing parallels to extant Roman noble residences where descendants live today amongst absolute masterpieces—such as Palazzo Odescalchi housing Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saul*—our approach renders Venice's historical actuality tangible and contemporary.

This methodology directly interrogates several symposium themes: it transcends maker heroization by contextualising objects within elevated domestic environments; renders collections accessible to international audiences unfamiliar with Venetian history through profound emotional engagement; and establishes meaningful dialogues between historical and contemporary masterpieces. The project demonstrates how celebrated artworks and design objects from disparate epochs may coexist organically, eschewing sterile white cube presentations whilst preserving their individual significance and cultural resonance.

The curatorial strategy employs theatrical scenographic principles, orchestrating spatial sequences wherein twentieth-century design furniture classics intermingle with extraordinary historical artefacts. This juxtaposition generates phenomenological encounters that transcend pure aesthetic appreciation, engaging visitors as active participants in an evolving cultural narrative whilst challenging entrenched museum hierarchies.

This pedagogical approach generates knowledge through experiential engagement rather

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

than merely didactic instruction, theoretically particularly efficacious for diverse international constituencies, including casual visitors with limited prior acquaintance with Venetian heritage. The investigation proffers a concrete paradigm for reimagining collection displays as sites of active cultural discourse, demonstrating how comprehensive displays may serve as powerful cultural vehicles, rendering historical narratives more accessible while fostering enduring connections with cultural heritage.

Bios:

Emanuela Bonini Lessing

Associate Professor at Luav University of Venice, she holds a PhD in Design. Her research focuses on visual design theory and cultural heritage enhancement in museums and local contexts. She is member of the board of Luav Design Ph.D. Program. She serves as Associate Editor of InfoDesign Journal.

Francesca Castellani

Professor of Contemporary Art History at Luav University of Venice. Her research focuses on exhibition history and the Venice Biennale, with a particular interest in Display as a critical dispositif. She has organized conferences and authored or edited several publications, including *Esposizioni/Exhibition* (2018), *Storia degli allestimenti e storia dell'arte* (2023), and *Questioning Exhibit Display* (2024).

Gabriele Toneguzzi

Professor of Exhibit Design at Luav University of Venice, architect with PhD in Design. Twenty years of teaching experience across multiple universities. Authors publications on exhibition design and museum architecture. Active designing permanent and temporary exhibitions, with research focus on storage, including an interactive robotic visible storage project at MarTA national archaeological museum

Theme 2: Perspectives on House Museums

Helena Gomez, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

Pastiche as Practice: Contemporary Interventions at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, a historic house museum, offers a unique lens into American Gilded Age material culture and European design within the vibrant, contemporary context of Miami. Originally conceived as a winter estate in the early 20th century, Vizcaya today is a preserved architectural and decorative site, as well as a dynamic space fostering dialogue between past and present through artist commissions and public programming.

This presentation explores how Vizcaya serves as fertile ground for experimenting with inclusive narratives, digital integration, and adaptive curatorial models through site-specific commissions. It examines the 2024 exhibition, *Pastiche*, a site-specific project by Miami-based artist Lauren Shapiro, as a case study of how contemporary design installations can engage with collection displays and interpretive narratives within historic house museums.

A South Florida native, Shapiro has long centered her practice on fragile marine ecosystems, which she captures and preserves through ceramic media. In *Pastiche*, she extends this philosophy to Vizcaya, approaching the house as a vulnerable ecosystem with its architectural fabric and historic collections increasingly threatened by the coastal environment and mass tourism. Drawing on the design principle of pastiche, playfully employed throughout Vizcaya's original design, Shapiro reframes imitation as a creative strategy that negotiates design, preservation, and reinterpretation.

Her three installations integrate Vizcaya's architecture, history, and environment with traditional and modern materials, such as ceramics, glass and plexiglass, and fabrication methods including casting and 3D scanning. These works reimagine decorative objects and motifs found at Vizcaya, like lanterns and seahorses, in ways that activate the different decorative interiors, exploring their functions and idiosyncratic décor.

Pastiche shows how contemporary art interventions can activate historic spaces without compromising their material integrity or historical specificity. Through the lens of Shapiro's ceramic and mixed-media works, this presentation addresses key questions: How can historic and contemporary objects meaningfully coexist in display? How can installations help reframe collections for today's audiences? And what challenges arise when placing contemporary works in historic settings?

It contends that artist-led interventions, when conceptually grounded and site-responsive, can serve as powerful curatorial tools for reactivating historic house museums. They preserve and expand narratives, inviting visitors to reflect on the interplay between past and present, conservation and innovation.

Bio:

Helena Gomez, Curator at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens since 2022, oversees the research of its art collections and spearheads its Contemporary Arts Program, a commission-based

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

exhibition series. Trained at The Courtauld Institute and Providence College, she previously spent eight years in curatorial roles at Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico.

Theme 2: Perspectives on House Museums

Haitang Zhang

The Challenge of virtual house museums: Reclaiming intimacy, atmosphere, and trust

"House museums are products as well as purveyors of history. This has been obscured, however, since frequently the actual histories of house museums have been superseded by vague, mollifying 'creation myths,' which give conventional form to early missions and institutional self-conceptions."

——Patricia West, (1999, first published 1958), *Domesticating History*, p. xii.

Patricia West highlights a central challenge faced by house museums: the curatorial task of balancing historical accuracy with emotional resonance—evoking a sense of domestic warmth while functioning within the framework of a public exhibition. These collections are steeped in memory, yet frozen in dusty silence, their stillness lending a sense of haunting. Nevertheless, it is precisely the dwelling atmosphere they carry, along with the way domestic space reflects human subjectivity—qualities closely tied to intimacy and trust—that offer profound inspiration for digital museology. In virtual contexts, the challenges of cultivating intimacy and trust become even more pronounced. The sensory and atmospheric qualities of space risk being flattened through digitisation, while questions surrounding the authenticity of data sources may erode audience engagement. The convergence of house museums and virtual heritage thus opens up new curatorial possibilities—inviting us to reimagine presence, affect, and authenticity in digitally mediated environments.

This research explores how virtual house museums can provide alternative approaches to design display by foregrounding notions of dwelling, intimacy, narrative layering, and sensory affect. Using autoethnography and a case study of the Glasgow Tenement House, the research examines how physical house museums foster emotional connection through spatial orchestration, ambient cues, and everyday material culture. It then considers how these curatorial strategies might be translated or reimaged in digital form.

Through the use of speculative design methods, the study introduces and refines the concept of digital intimacy, proposing it as a way to restore qualities of inhabitation, presence, atmosphere, and participatory potential in virtual house museums. The research argues that such digital museums require distinct display strategies—ones that move beyond object-centred or documentary models, and instead seek to evoke the domestic, the sensory, and the personal. In doing so, virtual house museums may challenge dominant museological hierarchies, offering more inclusive, emotionally charged, and immersive encounters with design history.

Bio:

Haitang Zhang is a researcher in design studies focusing on virtual museums and digital heritage. Her work explores how virtual environments can evoke intimacy and emotional

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

engagement through speculative design, spatial ethnography, and material research. She integrates interdisciplinary methods to examine how personal memory informs virtual museum concepts and experiences.

Theme 3: Sustainability and Self-Questioning

Eleanor Watson

The curse of permanence: curating design collection displays in an era of rapid climate change

The climate crisis is a key concern within current museological discourse, with many design museums world-wide pledging direct and sustained action to help address environmental collapse. While considerable research has been undertaken to develop sustainable approaches from an operational perspective, very little has been formulated in terms of curatorial methodologies outside of temporary programming. The purpose of the collection, and the way that it is shared with the public, has remained largely beyond scrutiny, despite the fact that an estimated 60% of design museums internationally have undertaken significant redevelopments of their collection displays since 2018. As such it is currently unclear how, or even whether, this traditional museum format can adapt to the changing requirements placed on museums in the twenty-first century, and in particular to the material and intellectual ramifications of the climate crisis.

Based on an extensive mapping exercise conducted as part of my PhD research, the presentation offers an overview of the curatorial approaches currently adopted for the production of design collection displays and the ways in which these succeed, or fail, to meaningfully engage with the climate crisis. The data, drawn from desktop research, online surveys, and an extensive interview process with a broad variety of International institutions, reveals the gulf that currently lies between the stated intentions of design museums to act as agents of change, and the realities of their curatorial operations.

Fundamentally conceived as a call to action, the presentation of these findings is followed by a series of prompts and questions to invite further reflection on what curating sustainably might look like, and how this can be achieved within the specific parameters of the design collection.

Bio:

Eleanor Watson is a curator and academic based in London. She is currently undertaking a Collaborative Doctoral Award between the Design Museum and Kingston University under the supervision of Professor Penny Sparke. Her doctoral research explores the challenges and opportunities of curating design collection displays in an era of rapid climate change.

Theme 3: Sustainability and Self-Questioning

Cilla Robach, Nationalmuseum Stockholm

Curating the Audience?

To be a curator is also to be a storyteller. Our stories are rooted in historical or contemporary facts. However, regardless of what stories we want to tell, as we all know from Communication Theory – it is all about the receiver. In the case of the Museum, the receiver is the audience, with all its differences on interest, pre-knowledge and expectation. Therefore, I would like to address the question on Museums Curating the Audience at the conference Design Collection Displays Reassessed.

Having been working as Design Curator at Nationalmuseum Stockholm during the last three decades, I have seen an enormous change in the way we experience the audience and how we try to communicate through exhibitions. As in other countries, the

Nationalmuseum's Design Displays have evolved from telling the story of names (designers and manufacturers) to providing stories of context, processes, users

experiences, materials, questions on sustainability, social and cultural identity etc. This development has, of course, followed new research perspectives on design history.

Being a child of Post-Modern criticism of Modernism's conviction on the existence of one ultimate solution, that would suit everybody's need, I believe that I have contributed to the development of Nationalmuseum's collection of objects as well as introducing

different kinds of storytelling. Also in my own research, I have always connected design to economics and politics more than art. Being aware of the existence of several parallel, and sometimes contradictory, stories is part of my research blood system.

However, looking back at the experiences I have of making exhibitions and design collection displays, I am becoming a little bit worried about how we connect with our audience. I don't know how many exhibitions labels I have written (all with maximum

400 signs including blanks) and never really got a respond on how they are received by a wider audience. I feel more and more that I have become a megaphone, shouting what I believe to be important questions out in the dark.

Therefore, I believe that whatever stories or research questions we, the curators, ask in our displays, digital information, labels, audio-guides etc., we need to be better to

include our audiences. The questions I would like to address at the conference are: Do we need (or even want to) to educate the audience to become interested in new

perspectives on design? If yes, how do we do that successfully? Isn't there a risk that we, with our best educational intention, reinstall the styluses of modernism's convictions of right and wrong, that we have so hard have fought to crack?

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Bio:

Cilla Robach, PHD and Assoc. Professor, is Design Curator and Head of Collection Unit at Nationalmuseum Stockholm. Since 1998, she has curated several Collection

Displays as well as temporary exhibitions, for example *Swedish Grace – Art & Design in 1920'ies Sweden* (2022), *Slow Art* (2012) and *Conceptual Design* (2005). Her PHD is on the Swedish Design Debate of the 1960'ies.

Theme 3: Sustainability and Self-Questioning

Bárbara Coutinho, MUDE – Museu do Design

Recycling is not enough: how museography and scenography can promote sustainability and raise awareness about the durability of things

Museums are revisiting history and historiography, moving beyond an object-oriented perspective and away from laudatory narratives built around extraordinary pieces and notable authors, to encourage an understanding of design in its context and as a creative, plural and participatory process. While the architecture and interiors of their buildings are also being rethinking, a plurality of themes related to the challenges we face as a society is being considered in curatorial discourses. Sustainability and accessibility are at the top of the agenda. It is therefore essential to further develop sustainable museography and scenography that using the principles of universal design broaden these perspectives and transform museum spaces into more conscious places. This paper was developed to contribute to this, using as a case study the refurbishment of the MUDE – Museu do Design building (2016–2014) and its new long-term exhibition, What are things for? Pieces from the MUDE Collection 1900–2020, which opened in 2024. The museological programme considered the building as a museum's content and a living archive of architectural culture, reinforcing its durability and environmental, economic, cultural and social sustainability. Important premises were the conservation and restoration of most of the existing structures and coverings, and the adaptive reuse of spaces with their resignification. This resulted, for example, in an effective reduction in construction waste and in the production of new building materials. Sustainability was also in the core of the creative process of the long-term exhibition from the outset, adopting a systemic approach, as has been the strategy and practice at MUDE. A central role was the reuse of construction materials from the building's refurbishment works and the adaptation of scenic devices from previous exhibitions, extending their useful life. The exhibition was conceived going to the essential with modular systems and solutions designed with the future life of each material in mind. Building and exhibition presented multiple challenges and required close coordination between all the teams working on them, demanding rationality at all stages of construction and assembly. They are therefore good examples of the relevance of museography and scenography as practical tools towards sustainable development. Both are design issues, thus reinforcing the mission of the museum itself, which name in Portuguese demonstrates its goal of being a catalyst for change.

Bio:

Bárbara Coutinho

PhD in Architecture and master's degree in Contemporary Art History. Founding director, programmer and chief curator of MUDE - Museu do Design, in Lisbon, since 2006. Invited Associate Professor at Instituto Superior Técnico (Lisbon University) since 2006 and researcher at CITUA - Centre for Innovation in Territory, Urbanism and Architecture.

Theme 4: Design Mediating Design or Exploring Process

Allouche & Munch, the University of Southern Denmark

Made in Denmark: Using design collections to reconnect citizens with the realities of production.

In today's Denmark, the average citizen is radically disconnected from the production of the many designed objects that have come to define a cornerstone of Danish identity.

This lack of understanding production can be seen as detrimental to the consumer's ability to critically engage with the consequences of mass production and consumption, including programmed obsolescence and fast fashion, which have come to define the Danish consumer's interaction with design. This issue has rarely been alleviated in contemporary museum exhibitions, where production has often not been covered.

To broaden the understanding of the role of production within historical and contemporary design, eight Danish museums and Design Culture Studies at the University of Southern Denmark have joined forces to form the Centre for Design and Production History.

Within this framework, four Danish Museums, each custodian of a sizable Danish collection in either silverware, ceramics, glass or textiles, and Design Culture Studies at the University of Southern Denmark will, funded by the Augustinus foundation, commence the Projekt *Made in Denmark* in 2026.

In the project, the museums will use their collections to implement a series of object interviews, where we, together with former employees in the design industry and museum visitors, who take the role of consumers, will use the museums' objects to uncover new information about the production of design and provoke new discussion about production and consumption.

In doing so, the project breaks with the traditional public role of a design museum as the sole authoritative mediator of the collection, becoming a space where both curators and citizens can interact with and develop knowledge about the collection together.

In this paper, we will present the project's main ideas and methodology, including some of the interviews which have already been conducted as a prelude to the project.

Bios:

Anders V. Munch is Professor of Design Culture at the University of Southern Denmark. Recent books are *The Gesamtkunstwerk in Design and Architecture* (Aarhus University Press, 2021); *Design Culture. Objects and Approaches* (Bloomsbury, 2019) co-edited with Guy Julier, Mads Nygaard Folkmann, Hans-Christian Jensen and Niels Peter Skou; and *Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation, 1960-1980: Revolt and Resilience* (Routledge, 2023) co-edited with Kjetil Fallan and Christina Zetterlund. Munch is Danish representative in Nordic Forum for Design History.

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Joachim Allouche, Head curator at the Museum of Southeast Denmark and PhD student,
University of Southern Denmark.

Theme 4: Design Mediating Design or Exploring Process

Pamela Bianchi, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville

Encyclopaedic Displays for Open Narratives

** This proposal is part of ongoing research exploring the relationship between exhibition design, museum architecture, and contemporary art practices. It follows the project I presented at the ICOM Conference on Museum Storage in Paris (2024), focused on architectural innovations at the Narbo Via Museum (France).*

While the art of living has historically played a fundamental role in understanding and exhibiting (as all-encompassing installations) the relationship between design, decorative arts and interior design ("How should we live?", MoMA asked in its 2017 eponymous exhibition), recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the various "modes of existence" (Simondon, 1958) of cultural heritage, providing an opportunity to reconsider the curation of design and decorative arts.

Beyond the question of "How" to exhibit, the issue of "How many" pieces to display has now gained importance. Inclusivity, omission, objective decision-making and the extent of display are all crucial considerations in contemporary museum practices. How can we prevent cultural heritage from being confined to a selective exhibition approach by instead making it accessible to audiences from diverse cultural and social backgrounds? How can we incorporate architectural design into this museological purpose? How can we promote the adoption of inclusive and innovative exhibition methods that align with these objectives?

These questions have reawakened humanist and Renaissance encyclopaedic thinking, inspiring exhibitions such as Herzog & de Meuron's *Archéologie de l'Imaginaire* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal (CCA, 2002-2003); the 55th Venice Biennale, *The Encyclopaedic Palace*, curated by Massimiliano Gioni (Venice, 2013); Rem Koolhaas's exhibition *Fundamentals* during the 14th International Architecture Exhibition (Venice, 2014); and the 4th Lisbon Architecture Triennale (2016), where the architecture firm Microcities curated the exhibition *The Form of Form*, inspired by the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities. More recently, to name a few, the V&A East Storehouse, designed by Diller Scofidio+Renfro (London, 2025), and the new permanent exhibition, *Open Storage*, at the Deutscher Werkbund, Museum der Dinge (Berlin, 2025), continue this critical reflection.

In these instances, the imagery of the Wunderkammer, and more generally, the devices and structures—particularly display cases and shelves—used to address both preventive conservation and presentation needs, act as ontological tools aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and, at the same time, conveying to a diverse audience, from various cultural and social backgrounds, the concept of holistic production within a historical multiplicity. Building on these premises, the article proposes a historiographical and critical examination of the emergence of open

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

storage in contemporary design museums, approached from a curatorial perspective. It primarily emphasises the exhibition mechanisms and the semantic openness that an encyclopaedic display may promote.

By directing research on the aesthetic and social concepts of habitability, flexibility, openness, and inclusiveness, this article's primary objective is ultimately to analyse and comprehend the sociocultural and political implications of these exhibition strategies (built on open and multiple narratives) within museum contexts, and their future developments.

Bio:

Pamela Bianchi (PhD, Paris 8 University, 2015) is an art historian specialising in the relationship between art and architecture, exhibition history, and display practices.

She is a lecturer in art history and exhibition design at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris- Belleville (ENSAPB) and École Boulle in Paris. She was a researcher for the Kandinsky Library and the Centre Pompidou on two research projects: "Exhibitions History" (2013) and "Gallery / Anti Gallery" (2021).

Her recent publications include: "Habitable Storage in Contemporary Museum Architecture", forthcoming in ICOM-Storage (Routledge, 2025) and [«The Drama of the Exhibition Space: hybrid overlaps between display and design»](#), in *Theatre and Performance Design* (2022). She has authored three monographs: *The Origins of the Exhibition Space* (AUP, 2023), *Dressing up Spaces* (Postmedia Books, 2021), and *Espaces de l'œuvre, espaces de l'exposition* (Connaissances et Savoirs, 2016).

She is preparing a monograph on exhibition design practices from the 1980s to today and their impact on contemporary art.

Theme 4: Design Mediating Design or Exploring Process

Bracke & Regenmortel, Design Museum Gent

Models from the Past for the Future. A new collection display for Design Museum Gent.

On 3 October 2026, the Belgian Design Museum Gent will reopen after several years of renovation. There will be a new collection display showing about 500 collection pieces, spread over two floors. The concept of this presentation, which has the working title “Models from the Past for the Future”, is based on the museum’s initial mission (from 1903) to be a collection of models for craftsmen. The display explores how a decorative arts and design collection can still function as a collective memory today, in these turbulent times when designers are looking for new ways of designing, producing, distributing and using. The collection pieces will be grouped according to five themes, in line with present urgencies, and in which objects from the collection function as models (good or bad): copy, migration, comfort, to fold / to bend, and connections. Within these topics, certain aspects of design such as materials, techniques, stylistic features or uses will be highlighted.

An important part of the idea is that the concept of models will be put into practice in the collection display itself. Several contemporary designers are commissioned to develop new work inspired by the themes and models in the collection presentation. In addition, the scenography (Bureau Nord in collaboration with Laura Muyldermans), making use of the reusable steel construction system ‘Skellet’, also refers to spatial characteristics of the original museum of models. At that time individual space for design objects seemed secondary to the aim of displaying as many examples as possible, close together and sometimes on top of each other. Thirdly, there will be so-called ‘studiolo’s or spaces of study and activity for the public on the exhibition floor, referring to the museum’s origin as a study collection.

Challenges along the way were, amongst others, to make a representative selection of the collection from a transhistorical approach, and to reconcile the choice for an open scenography with conservation guidelines. Within a few years, we will consider this new collection display working if we succeed in showing visitors that designers of all times look at the past to shape the future, proving that way the ungoing potential of design collections and design museums as sources of inspiration.

Bios:

Evelien Bracke (BE, 1980) is curator at Design Museum Gent. She holds a master’s degree in Art History from Ghent University. She curated and coordinated several design exhibitions in Belgium and abroad and worked at Z33, House for Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture (BE), Atelier LUMA (FR) and Design Academy Eindhoven (NL). She was curator of Design Museum Gent’s previous collection display ‘Object Stories’ (2017) and is currently curating the upcoming one, ‘Models from the Past for the Future’ (working title) (2026).

Eva Van Regenmortel (BE, 1978) holds a master’s degree in both History and Art History from Ghent University. Before 2016, she worked successively for the Flanders Heritage Institute

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

(VIOE), the heritage department of the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi) and The Maarten Van Severen Foundation. Since 2016 she's Head of Research within the Collection Department of Design Museum Gent. She collaborated on 'Object Stories' and is involved in the research for 'Models from the Past for the Future'.

Theme 5: On Specificity and Subject Matter

Henri Cosemans, PhD student University of Antwerp

Beyond the coach house: carriages and the challenges of museum display

Historic carriages occupy a liminal position in museum collections: too large for most galleries, too fragile for functional use, and often interpreted solely as vehicles or symbols of dynastic prestige. Yet they are among the most complex artefacts of the decorative arts, encompassing painting, gilding, sculpture, upholstery, and metalwork, while also serving as powerful markers of ritual, hierarchy, and spectacle in public space. This paper considers the evolving museological strategies for exhibiting such mobile monuments, drawing on case studies from European collections and reflecting on my own research into eighteenth-century state coaches.

I am affiliated with the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, which houses one of Europe's most significant collections of horse-drawn vehicles. The collection spans both ends of the coachbuilding spectrum, from richly adorned ceremonial carriages to humble service vehicles, offering a valuable lens through which to examine not only technical and stylistic developments but also the social hierarchies embedded in mobility culture. My master thesis focused on the museum's mid-eighteenth-century gala carriage, an exceptional example of transnational decorative arts practice. Featuring *vernis Martin* panels, gilt bronze mounts, elaborate wood carving, and fine upholstery, the object exemplifies the intersection of artistic disciplines in the service of public display and dynastic representation.

Despite their richness and narrative potential, carriages have historically been challenging to integrate meaningfully within broader collection displays. This has been especially evident in Brussels, where the carriage collection (though extensive and of high quality) has long been relegated to its own isolated gallery spaces, often in peripheral or basement locations. Rarely has it been considered in direct relation to the museum's other holdings in decorative arts, design, or material culture. This spatial and conceptual separation has contributed to a broader undervaluation of the collection, reinforcing the impression that carriages exist outside the main narratives of museum interpretation.

This paper explores how curators might move beyond such compartmentalised approaches. How can we recontextualise carriages not simply as vehicles, but as charged artefacts of political ceremony, craftsmanship, and mobility? What curatorial strategies might enable these objects to resonate with contemporary audiences and engage with broader museological themes, such as inclusivity, transnational exchange, and the entanglement of design with social order? Rather than proposing fixed solutions, this paper offers critical reflections intended to stimulate renewed attention to the possibilities and responsibilities of exposing carriages today.

Bio:

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Henri Cosemans began his doctoral research in 2023 on the material oilcloth. Under the supervision of prof. Natalia Ortega Saez, prof. Vincent Cattersel and prof. Ulrike Müller, he combines principles of technical art history, art history and conservation- restoration. Besides a keen interest in historical interiors, he is attached to the carriage collection of the Royals Museums of Art and History in Brussels, where oilcloth finds very practical applications. The 18th century has long fascinated him in his research, he wrote his master's thesis on an opulent Portuguese gala coupé from the aforementioned collection.

2023 - 2027 PhD in Conservation–Restoration
University of Antwerp

La Toile Cirée: An Art Historical and Material-Technical Investigation into the Forgotten and Diverse Applications of Oilcloth in the Decorative Arts.

Theme 5: On Specificity and Subject Matter

Vanessa Ferey, Les Savoir-faire du Cognac

Cognatheques as Living Displays: Reassessing Bottle Collections through Sensory Design and Territorial Museography

This presentation proposes to reassess *cognatheques*—dedicated spaces for the display of Cognac bottle collections—as emerging forms of living, territorial design museography. These installations, found within historic merchant houses, distilleries, and contemporary visitor centers, serve not merely as decorative showcases but as active interiors that mediate between material design, sensory memory, and intangible cultural heritage. In this sense, *cognatheques* are not fixed museum cases, but evolving devices for storytelling, transmission, and convivial engagement.

Drawing on the fieldwork and community-based initiatives led by the *Association Les Savoir-faire du Cognac*, currently coordinating the application for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage recognition, this paper considers how the display of bottles reflects and sustains broader cultural systems. The diversity of bottle forms, glassmaking techniques, label aesthetics, closure innovations, and packaging strategies act as carriers of traditional knowledge, craft evolution, and global design diplomacy. Beyond aesthetic and functional aspects, these objects activate rituals of tasting, gifting, collecting, and narration—social interactions that continuously regenerate meaning and identity.

This talk explores how *cognatheques* can inform future curatorial practices in the decorative arts and design. It advocates for a shift from linear, taxonomic display models to narrative, performative, and participatory approaches rooted in lived experience. As hybrid design environments, *cognatheques* offer insight into how territorial museography might reconcile local heritage with global audiences, combining affective encounters, sensory immersion, and intergenerational transmission.

The discussion also addresses the challenges of curating interactive and sensorially charged design objects within both institutional and house-museum settings. How can we exhibit objects that are meant to be smelled, touched, and shared, without compromising their material integrity or cultural agency? How do we ensure inclusivity and avoid reinforcing hegemonic design histories, particularly in regions where gendered, vernacular, and community narratives remain underrepresented?

By positioning the *cognathèque* as both a design artifact and a performative stage, this presentation argues for the integration of intangible heritage, community voices, and ecological thinking into the display of design collections. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about the role of museums as relational spaces—places not only of preservation, but of sensory activation, resilience, and territorial intelligence. The *cognathèque*, in this regard, becomes a prototype for the design museography of tomorrow: convivial, contextual, and critically engaged.

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

Bio:

Vanessa Ferey, Ph.D., ICOM member #53070 since 2014, is a museologist and intangible heritage specialist. Director of Les Savoir-faire du Cognac, she leads the UNESCO candidacy of Cognac Culture and designs immersive, community-based exhibitions. She teaches museology at Sorbonne University and is affiliated with CERLIS, CELAT, and UQAM.

Theme 5: On Specificity and Subject Matter

Dr. Julia Meer, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg

Activating the collection – Mind the gaps and dare to be vulnerable!

Tulga Beyerle has transformed the Designmuseum Hamburg into a more open, inclusive, and contemporary space—one that actively engages with the political and social dimensions of design. As curator and head of the poster and graphics collection, I am taking advantage of the fact that due to conservatory regulations, works from this collection may only be displayed for 4–6 months. The necessity to stage at least two exhibitions per year has turned the so-called ‘permanent collection’ spaces into laboratories for curatorial practice.

In my presentation, I will share strategies that aim to engage audiences and challenge conventional narratives in design exhibitions.

For my first exhibition, all museum staff were invited to select one object from the collection. Each object was accompanied by a personal statement explaining the choice. This approach allowed me to get to know the collection through my colleagues’ interests and demonstrated that anyone can have a meaningful opinion about graphic design—no PhD required.

Another exhibition featured 16 contemporary works. In collaboration with a group of students, we conducted interviews with the designers, resulting in short audio commentaries.

These explored the constraints and motivations behind the designs, such as briefs, tools, budgets, political contexts, and clichés around creativity. This approach emphasized the social and material conditions behind the objects, rather than framing them as the result of individual genius.

The exhibition “The F*word – Guerrilla Girls and Feminist Graphic Design” addressed the stark imbalance in the collection: only 1.5% of the works were designed by women. The show asked why this was the case and proposed ways to collect differently in the future. It was followed by “Wiki Women”, which presented works by female designers from across the museum’s collections, and included a series of Wikipedia editing workshops to create and expand entries for these designers.

The most recent exhibition focuses on new acquisitions. It analyzes them statistically and presents commentary from various perspectives, offering insight into the museum’s everyday collection work. Informal blue notes taped beside objects reveal behind-the-scenes stories—restoration challenges, customs issues, or the rationale behind their acquisition.

Across all these exhibitions, I have sought to activate the collection through curatorial strategies that foster critical reflection on design practices and open up the museum as a space of dialogue—not only about what is shown, but how and why it is shown.

Links to the exhibition websites:

<https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/tigers-tampons-and->

Design Collection Displays Reassessed Symposium
ICOM-DESIGN and National Museum, Oslo

tourism <https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/audio-graphic>
<https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/the-fword>
<https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/wiki-women>
<https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/flat-files-and-paper-pies>

Bio:

Dr. Julia Meer co-edited the book *Women in Graphic Design*, conducted research, realized exhibitions and taught at institutions including Humboldt University of Berlin, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Since 2020, she is head of the Graphic and Poster Collection at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Germany.