

## ***The Enchanted Palace.* Uniting fashion, art, performance and spectacle to bring new life to a historic house**

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### **Abstract:**

Between 2010 and 2012, Kensington Palace, one of six palaces managed by the charity Historic Royal Palaces, showcased its royal and ceremonial dress collection in a radical new way. The curators brought together fashion designers, artists, writers and theatre-makers, to make a participatory immersive experience for visitors, with the objective of making them look at both the palace, and its collections of historic artefacts, with new eyes. The experiment was called *The Enchanted Palace*.

Content: Introduction / Kensington Palace and a display challenge / Designing a display framework with artist collaborators / The visitor journey / Evaluation

### **Introduction**

For a curator, the artefact, be it a painting, a precious jewel, a hat or a dress, is pivotal to our work. It is the vehicle, unparalleled, to the unlocking of the past. Dress may be the most fleeting of the arts, prey to fashion but nevertheless it is the art which relates most closely to the narrative of our lives. Clothes reflect our passions, taste, and personality. Fashion reflects the character of our community, our nation and our generation.

Dress is most intimate and potent evidence we leave behind us as record of our lives. As validation of this, one has only to consider how often clothes are venerated as relics. For centuries pilgrims have travelled to Durham Cathedral to honour St Cuthbert whose relics include textiles, or to Padua pray before the fragments of St Anthony's girdle retrieved from his tomb in 1263.<sup>1</sup> The fame of St Hugh of Lincoln, even in his own lifetime, caused his stole left behind at the Grande Chartreuse in 1186, to be preserved, and become its own pilgrimage destination. This reaction is mirrored in the secular sphere with the setting up of the effigies by Augustus the Strong in Dresden, and Czar Peter the Great in St Petersburg. As 18th century visitors to the Winter Palace filed past Rastrelli's waxwork of the Czar, made in 1725, dressed in his own clothes, M. Stahlin-Storchesburg records they whispered 'What a great man'.<sup>2</sup> But whether unlocking the histories of past heroes and celebrating their achievement, or telling the story of the common man, to a future generation, using dress as the medium, requires the help of interpreters. In *The Enchanted Palace* the curators explored new ways of doing just this.

### **Kensington Palace and a display challenge**

In 2003 HM Queen Elizabeth II gave Historic Royal Palace the responsibility for managing gardens to the east of the palace. The decision presented a wonderful opportunity to make a new visitor entrance, rationalise and update technical services, and to make the visitor route through the palace much more coherent. The ambition was to complete the transformation by 2012, the year of The Queen's Diamond Jubilee. But to achieve this objective would require a lengthy complicated programme of building work. A decision had to be made whether the palace should be shut to visitors during this time.

Shutting the palace for two years would have had considerable repercussions. The jobs of the front of house guards would have been put in jeopardy and the bank of knowledge vested in them could, potentially have been lost. During a period of closure access to the collections, which had recently been designated of national and international importance,

would become difficult, and the visitor base would have to be re-won once the palace re-opened.



Fig. 1: The Gallery of War and Play. Designer Bill Mitchell. Installation for the King's Gallery, Kensington Palace decorated by William Kent 1725-1727.  
©HRP/Newsteam. Richard Lea-Hair.

The curators were confident there were other options that should be investigated, and marshalled all the assets that would remain available. It would be possible to maintain access to the 17th and 18th century state apartments, which included small wood-panelled closets used by Queen Mary II, and grand lofty rooms, with ceilings painted by William Kent, commissioned by King George I (fig. 1). To reach these spaces the visitor would need to enter through a garden door and ascend by a backstairs, but perhaps this unusual means of access could be played to advantage. As the builders moved through the various phases of the construction work the route the visitors followed would need to change which brought another challenge, but one which was surmountable with the appropriate display approach. Of greater concern was the need for much of the furniture and all of the ceramics to be cleared in case they were damaged by vibration. However, even with these constraints the rooms still remained redolent with atmosphere. This was where history really happened – Queen Mary II died in 1694, Peter the Wild Boy, a feral child roamed in the early 18th century, Princess Victoria received the news she had become queen in 1837, and Princess Margaret and Diana, Princess of Wales held their parties. It was also possible to retain the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection on the site, and although the building programme meant placing the biggest and most fragile items on display was not an option, there were still wonderful things that could be deployed. The curatorial team were also aware over the years just how many friends and contacts they had made in the world of fashion, as designers came and used the collections for inspiration. If historic dress were too vulnerable for use in the new situation, there was still an excellent opportunity to show-case contemporary work (fig. 2).

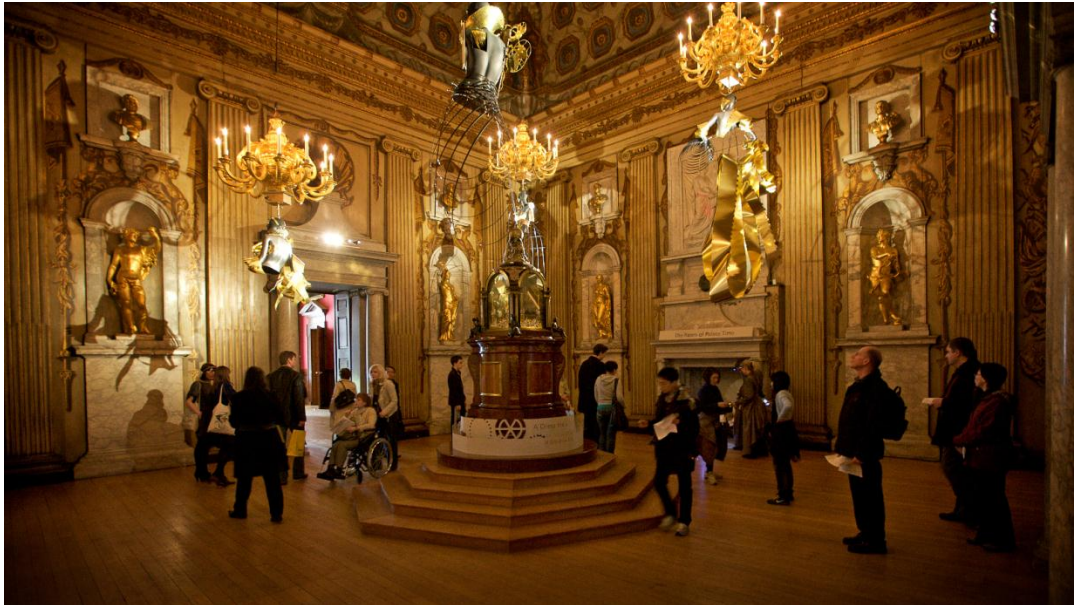


Fig. 2: The Room of Palace Time. Designer Bill Mitchell, with fashion designers Boudicca. ©WildWorks/Steve Tanner.

### Designing a display framework with artist collaborators

The curators' first idea to reconcile all the opportunities that had been identified, was to create a 'world' in the palace, which would be facilitated by theatre-makers. The theatre-makers would help draw visitors round the complicated site, telling traditional stories in new surprising ways. After much research a theatre company called *Wildworks*, based in Cornwall, was identified. They had achieved a great reputation of making work, and indeed creating 'worlds', within unusual spaces – beaches, dockyards and industrial sites, recruiting members of local communities into the heart of their projects. A palace for them was a very different stage, but they embraced its community of curators and conservators, guards and administrators, educators and the schools and colleges they worked with, and fashion designers who were long-standing champions and supporters.

To make the new-style visit work, it was important that a careful intellectual framework was devised and put in place. The visitors would be set on a quest, during which they would hunt for the stories of the people who had once inhabited the palace. The curators and artists narrowed the number of these stories down to those relating to seven princesses, Queen Mary II from the 17th century, Queen Anne and Queen Caroline of Ansbach from the 18th century, Princess Charlotte of Wales and Princess Victoria of Kent, later Queen Victoria, from the 19th century and Princess Margaret and Diana, Princess of Wales from the 20th century. Each princess was allocated a palace room, which was in some way touched by their history. Within each one, the detail of their lives would be explored through installations made by a fashion designer, artists and community partners, as well as through historic dress associated with them (fig. 3). In undertaking the quest visitors would find themselves lingering for longer in the much reduced site, hunting for clues about the identity and histories of these women. Acquiring information in a specific order became less important; the circuitous entrance arrangements could even be played to advantage.





Fig. 3: Royal baby bonnets and tiny royal gloves from the historic collections at Kensington Palace, in the Room of Lost Childhood. Designer Sue Hill. ©WildWorks/Steve Tanner.

Everyone was aware it was essential that the contemporary installations were inspired by the historic narrative of the palace, and amongst the devises used to achieve this were poems based on the life histories of each princess commissioned from writer, Mercedes Kemp. The curators provided Mercedes with biographical information, letters and diary accounts, inventories of the princesses' possessions as well as showing her the dress and other artefacts that survived as their legacy. From this inspiration she wove her own tales, which went beyond the specific detail of these past lives, and drew on the universal – Mary II became the princess who cried, for the loss of her childhood, the loss of her homeland, and for her barrenness. Caroline of Ansbach was the princess who collected and organised a library, a cabinet of curiosity, a collection of art and community of scientists and philosophers within her court, in the face of a chaotic family dynamic. Princess Charlotte of Wales became the princess who ran away to love and death: having rejected the suitor proposed by her warring parents, and she held out for a man she would love deeply, but died giving birth to her first child.

Mercedes' poems were given to the designers, artists and the community partners. They suggested a rich creative province in which all the artists could work, but by working from a common inspiration and stimulus, their installations built into a great story. Fashion designers Aminaka Wilmont made a *Dress of Tears* for Mary, Echo Morgan, a student at the Royal College of Art made a *Dress for Collecting the World* for Caroline. Vivienne Westwood made a *Dress for Rebellion* for Charlotte (fig. 4). In each room the names of the princess, and clues about their history were hidden and a map given to each visitor had spaces left for visitors to note these down as they were discovered. The figures in the installations were made to be faceless; the dresses were empty as they flew or danced. Only in the Queen's Gallery, just before the visitors exited, were the faces of the princesses finally revealed, together with the dates and facts of their lives, beneath an artists' film projected across the ceiling, of shadowy figures dancing to the princesses' favourite music.



Fig. 4: The Room of Flight. Designer Mydd Wannell, with fashion designer Vivienne Westwood.  
©WildWorks/Steve Tanner.

It was necessary to encourage visitors to be inquisitive and in this the theatre-maker team played a vital role. They had become fascinated with the present communities of people who managed and cared for the palace – the present holders of posts which had existed in similar forms in the palace for many centuries. A small team of professional performers joined the palace teams, as *Detectors*, the curators of the human stories of the place (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Explainers and detectors in the Gallery of War and Play. Designer Bill Mitchell.  
©WildWorks/Steve Tanner.



Their role during the building project was to capture the stories that are escaping and put them back in place, by presenting and recounting them to visitors. This framework was so flexible it allowed the curator and conservator teams to work in the rooms when necessary; they just become additional inhabitants within the new strange and timeless palace world.

### The visitor journey

Everyone can recall a day out or an experience had in a public space, which stayed with them. The occasion may have been so impressive that they told everyone about it, or so powerful and personal they kept it all to themselves. When analysing what is at the base of such experiences is invariably something that has touched the emotions – awe, beauty, achievement, scale, surprise, or a human connection; things which bring an understanding of a shared humanity across boundaries of language, culture and time. In many of the rooms within *The Enchanted Palace* some device was introduced to bring empathy between the visitor and the historic figure – something that brought an emotional connection that could cross the centuries.

The curators and artists were also aware that an experience is made more powerful if you have contributed to it in some way; a great memory will never be made by reading an object label, however erudite. Within *The Enchanted Palace* activities were introduced to bring connection with the princesses' stories. In Queen Mary II's, restyled the *Room of Royal Sorrows*, the sadness which could result from the royal tradition of diplomatic marriage was touched on, and visitors are invited to write a note of the last time they cried (fig. 6). Such moments of connection proved very powerful – the notes which were left were personal and poignant, and the visitors' book would be filled with comments expressing just how powerfully the life history of a historic figure had been given new focus and potency.



Fig. 6: The Room of Royal Sorrows. WildWorks designer Bill Mitchell, with fashion designer Bruce Oldfield. ©HRP/Newsteam. Richard Lea-Hair.

The integration of historic dress and the work of contemporary designers was managed in a variety of ways within *The Enchanted Palace* as a whole. For example, underlying the installation relating to Princess Victoria, which was devised for the bedroom she occupied as a child, explored the strangeness of royal childhood. Victoria, like many of her predecessors, was a political pawn, with her family members and their intimates, using her dynastic capital to their advantage. This led to her being raised in relative seclusion with little access to the world, or the even the notion of a loving family. Her childhood diaries and letters reveal the importance she placed in her dolls, who became her friends, how she would lose herself in reading, and how much she longed to be like other children. The curators made a display of tiny royal baby shoes, including some of Victoria's own, which was annotated with her words and those of other royal children. The fashion designer William Tempest made her a *Dress for Dreaming of Freedom* composed of 1000 origami birds – the making of 1000 birds traditionally can allow you one wish, and William's for Victoria was for freedom. The flock of birds was suspended from the cornice over her bed and dressing table. A high chair was introduced, symbolic of a childhood that was always scrutinised and minutely monitored. However, to represent Victoria's later rebellion, the barriers were made of garlands of fluttering pages from books, and there were shadows of fluttering birds projected on the ceiling – the accession saw Victoria ready to escape into an adult world of self-empowerment and marital love.

While Mercedes Kemp wrote poems for the 20th century princesses, a decision was made to use their own dresses rather than a designer contribution. The dresses worn by Princess Margaret and Diana, Princess of Wales were generally more robust in construction than royal dress of earlier generations and fit within the conservation parameters achievable during the building construction work. For Princess Margaret a dress made by Norman Hartnell in 1955 was chosen for the exhibition. It was a beautiful, youthful day dress with a matching bolero, made of oyster-coloured lace. Mercedes' poems still provided the inspiration for the design of the display. As part of the research the curators, Mercedes, and Sue Hill, a *WildWorks* artist walked with through Princess Margaret's apartment and examined photos of it in its heyday. From the sound archive and indeed from within the present palace community there were accounts of the many parties and dances held there. Sue Hill subsequently designed a room filled with trees for the Princess - a forest in which she could dance forever. The conservation team worked hard to make the mannequin appear to be in frozen motion as she skipped in red ballet shoes. Suspended above the dress is the Princess's own copy of the Poltimore tiara which she had worn on her wedding day and indeed on occasion in her bath.

## Evaluation

The impact made by The Enchanted Palace astonished both the Kensington Palace team, and Historic Royal Palaces its governing body. Over the period of building construction the palace was able to achieve very significant visitor numbers, with a younger audience and families supplementing the traditional demographic (fig. 7). Following this result there were additional experiments to open the palace up for evening viewing and hundreds came, spontaneously dressing up as for a masked ball on occasions held throughout the summer months. The efforts of the team to engineer moments of connection between visitors and historic figures of the palace brought rich rewards. Visitors were observed dancing with the shadowy projections, they left letters and messages adding to the beauty and poignancy of the installations, and became deeply engrossed in hunting for the clues to make up the stories of Kensington's princesses. It was a delight when they were found in the bookshop requesting books to provide them with more information.



Fig. 7 Young visitors playing with toy soldiers in the Gallery of War and Play.  
Designer Bill Mitchell. ©WildWorks/Steve Tanner.

*The Enchanted Palace* had its critics too. It was a bold and unusual approach to the presentation of a royal palace. Within the visitors' book there are many comments which were vehemently negative, though these were thankfully outnumbered by many more which were outstandingly positive.

When the palace reopened fully, in 2012, with all the new facilities in place, it embraced many of the lessons learned from *The Enchanted Palace*. Perhaps one of the most significant was about the power of storytelling – the front-of-house team, their work lives and morale transformed, were only too ready to be empowered as storytellers. A visit to Kensington Palace is now a much more social occasion – the solemn, and on occasion rather intimidating silence which had earlier reigned has been broken forever. Historic Royal Palaces will continue to find imaginative ways to work with young designers and artists. Historic dress which carries a uniquely intimate connection with the lives of our predecessors continues to prove the most valuable asset in making important transformative moments for the visitor, as it opens a door to the past.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Venerable Bede (672/673-735), St Cuthbert was first buried on the island of Lindisfarne in 687AD. (*Vita Sancti Cuthberti* in Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert; A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, Cambridge, 1940). Following subsequent Danish incursions in north east England, his remains were moved, and by 995, were reburied in Durham. It was in 995, during this peregrination, while the casket lay at Chester-le-Street, that King Aethelstan introduced a set of vestments, made in the *Opus Anglicanum* style of embroidery. The casket in which his body was contained was opened in 1104, and several relics removed, for display.

<sup>2</sup> The dress in which the effigy of Peter the Great was dressed comprises a coat, waistcoat and breeches of blue silk damask, worn with a belt and silver embroidered sash. The ensemble was completed by the insignia of the Order of St Andrew.