BRITAIN 1500–1900
TEACHERS’ RESOURCE

Britain and the World

Explore British art and design at the home of creativity

Key Stages 1 & 2: History, Art & Design
Introduction

The V&A's Britain 1500–1900 galleries take you through an extraordinary four centuries of British art and design. Spanning two floors, these richly immersive, chronological displays showcase the finest examples of ceramics, glass, furniture, metalwork, textiles, costume, wallpapers, sculpture, prints and paintings. The galleries include Discovery Areas with hands-on activities relating to the collections.

Four thematic threads run through the galleries:
• Style
• Who Led Taste?
• Fashionable Living
• What Was New?

This resource is designed to support exploration of how Britain has influenced, and been influenced by, the wider world. The Great Exhibition of 1851 is used as a case study of a significant historical and cultural event.

A companion resource Change through Time is available, with further learning activities for Key Stages 1 & 2 inspired by the Britain 1500–1900 galleries.

Pre-visit activities

• Create an image bank of British objects from the 17th century using Search the Collections: collections.vam.ac.uk
Using a world map, plot where each object or material originally came from.

• Plan a pretend tea party. What would you need? Where do these items come from? Tea, coffee, sugar and porcelain are now everyday items in British homes, but they were once luxuries, imported from China, South America and the Caribbean.

• Watch this introductory video to the Great Exhibition: vam.ac.uk/content/videos/a/video-day-at-the-great-exhibition/

The Museum visit

The displays in the galleries reveal how Britain developed relationships with countries all over the world. Trace the international influences of British-made objects, and discover the areas of design where Britain led the field. The following themes may be starting points. We recommend downloading the accompanying activity sheets, dividing the class into small groups, and rotating round the activities.

Import and Export

In the early 17th century, Britain’s trade with Europe, Asia and the New World expanded. This was led by the British East India Company, which was established in 1600. It imported porcelain from China, textiles from India and lacquer from Japan. Britain also traded glass and silk from Venice, and gold, tobacco and dye from the Americas.

Displays in Rooms 52, 56, 56c and 125c show how British designers began to mimic popular styles from abroad. At this time Britain’s main export was woollen cloth. With the founding of the Royal Society in 1660, a spirit of intellectual enquiry arose, which led to the development of new technical skills amongst British craftsmen. Britain became the world-leader in precision devices such as locks, clocks and scientific instruments (see displays in Room 56).

The Great Exhibition

In 1851 Britain hosted the internationally significant event the Great Exhibition. Organised by Prince Albert to showcase the best of British design and innovation, it then became an international fair, with over 40 countries exhibiting. Joseph Paxton’s remarkable ‘Crystal Palace’ housed the event in Hyde Park. Over 6 million visitors attended the Great Exhibition. It put Britain and British design on the global stage.

Objects from the Exhibition formed the founding collection for the South Kensington Museum in 1857, later to become the V&A. A selection of these pieces are displayed in Room 122, revealing Victorian taste and skill. Marvel at the designs and model of the Crystal Palace, before building your own in the Room 122b Discovery Area.

Follow-up activities/find out more

• Write a postcard or tell a story to a friend about your visit to the Great Exhibition.

• Design a poster advertising the Great Exhibition to a Victorian audience.

• Use clay to create pots, vases and cups and hold a class exhibition to represent Britain.

• Gather a selection of modern day items that have labels stating which country they were made in. Plot the countries on a map to discover current trade links with Britain.

• Read Queen Victoria’s journal extracts about the Great Exhibition and make drawings of the scenes from her vivid descriptions: vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/great-exhibition-queen-victorias-journal/

• Visit: vam.ac.uk/page/b/british-galleries
In Room 56c find the large folding screen and the cabinet in front of it. They have a very similar design, but one is Chinese, and one is English. Can you tell which is which? Here are some clues:

The Chinese object has:
- large carved pink and white flowers
- a pattern round the edge
- a stripy cat

The English object has:
- people
- small painted birds flying through the air
- darker colours

Choose one animal or plant from the folding screen. Look at it closely, and draw it with as much detail as you can.

In Room 52b look at the display of teapots. Only two of these were made in China – can you guess which?
- How many have animal designs?
- Can you spot some unusual spouts?

Choose your favourite teapot to draw. Now create a new teapot design of your own.

In Room 118a look at the incredible automaton clock, made for the Chinese market in 1780. Guess how many moving parts it has? Watch the film to the right of the display to find out more.
IMPORT AND EXPORT

Key Stage 2

National curriculum links

History:
Learn how Britain has influenced, and been influenced by the wider world

Art & Design:
Understand the historical and cultural development of art and design
Create a sketch book to record observation

• In Room 56c look at the Chinese Lacquer Folding Screen.
  – What do you notice about the design?
  – What are the similarities and differences with the English cabinet in front of the screen?
  – Choose a section of the screen to sketch.

• Go to Room 52b and find the Taking Tea display. Tea is considered very British, but where does it come from?
  – What do you notice about the teacups and teapots on display, compared to ones we use today?
  – Two of the teapots were made in China – can you guess which?
  – What are the different materials that have been used to make the teapots?
  – Choose your favourite teapot to sketch or create a new teapot design.

• British designers were influenced by designs from the Middle East and Asia. In Room 125c, find the Spot the Difference exhibits. Can you guess which objects are English?

• Britain was famous for making clocks. In Room 118a look at the incredible automaton clock, made for the Chinese market in 1780. Can you list the different design and craft skills required to make this object?
  – How many different moving parts do you think it has?
  – Watch the film to the right of the display to find out more.
THE GREAT EXHIBITION

Key Stage 1

National curriculum links

History:
Learn how Britain has influenced, and been influenced by the wider world
Learn about significant historical events

Art & Design:
Understand the historical and cultural development of art and design
Evaluate and analyse creative works

• Look at the painting The Opening of the Great Exhibition in Room 122f. Recreate the scene with your group. Who will be Queen Victoria? And who will be Prince Albert?

• Imagine you are a visitor to the Great Exhibition. What can you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Touch?

• Find the display of grand chairs. Choose your favourite, and describe it to a partner – can they guess which one it is?

• Go on a hunt and see if you can spot an object where the design includes the royal family? Greek mythology? Birds?

• Build your own design for a Crystal Palace using the blocks provided in Room 122b.
THE GREAT EXHIBITION

Key Stage 2

National curriculum links

History:
Learn how Britain has influenced, and been influenced by the wider world
Study a significant turning point in British history

Art & Design:
Understand the historical and cultural development of art and design
Evaluate and analyse creative works
Create a sketch book to record observations

• In Room 122 study the painting *The Opening of the Great Exhibition*. What can we learn about the event from this painting?

• Imagine you are a visitor to the Great Exhibition. What can you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Touch?

• Find the display of jugs and bottles in front of the bench. Choose your favourite, and describe it to a partner – can they can guess which one it is?

• Sketch a design for your own Crystal Palace. Now head into Room 122b and build it using the blocks.