Highlights from the collection
Explore wonders at the V&A

Use this guide to discover 20 highlights in the museum. The location of each object is indicated on the map. Visit as many as you like or choose your favourite.

While we have made every effort to make sure that each of the 20 objects are on display, sometimes galleries have to be closed for renovation or objects need to be conserved.

Please ask a member of staff if you cannot find an object or need any help.

Find out more

See the V&A collection online [vam.ac.uk/collections](http://vam.ac.uk/collections)

Discover the museum’s history and architecture in the V&A Story guide or go to [vam.ac.uk/vamstory](http://vam.ac.uk/vamstory)

Families can uncover the secrets of the V&A by playing V&A Secret Seekers online when exploring the museum. Go to [vam.ac.uk/secretseekers](http://vam.ac.uk/secretseekers) and start seeking!

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The Victoria and Albert Museum is the world’s leading museum of art, design and performance. Founded in 1852 by Prince Albert, it is home to over 2.3 million objects that span 5000 years of human creativity.

Prince Albert’s wish was to create a museum that would improve British industry by displaying works of art and design to educate and inspire designers, manufacturers and the public. Today, many of the UK’s national collections are housed at the V&A, alongside some of the most outstanding examples of ceramics, furniture, architecture, fashion, glass, jewellery, photography, painting, sculpture, textiles and theatre and performance works.

This short guide cannot cover all of the wonders the museum has to offer. Instead it features 20 objects that represent some of its most precious, famous or intriguing highlights, providing a taste of the exceptional and diverse collection on display at the V&A.
By the 17th century, European men wore loose gowns instead of formal fitted suits when at home with family or entertaining friends or business associates. Called *robes de chambre* in France, they were made of different fabrics according to the wearer’s needs and tastes. Wool provided warmth while patterned linens, cottons and silks were colourful fashion statements. The silk of this rare gown was one of the more expensive and luxurious choices. It is from China, with a long and impressive pattern of an incense burner displayed to full effect on the back of the robe. The garment’s cut is based on the Japanese kimono, which, along with the Chinese fabric, reveals the growing importance of global trade at the time. The matte and shiny surfaces of the damask fabric would have given the wearer a magnificent presence in flickering candlelight. Many artists and aspiring intellectuals chose to sit for their portraits in gowns like this.

Museum no. T.31-2012

The museum purchased this *cabinet*, or garden room, as an exceptional example of the Neo-classical style of decoration fashionable in 1770s Paris. It was designed for Madame de Sérilly, the 16-year-old bride of the Paymaster General to the French army. His family owned the Hôtel Sérilly in the Marais district of Paris. The tiny room was attached to the main house of the hôtel, but could only be accessed from the garden. Whether or not this allowed Madame de Sérilly to escape her in-laws and older husband, the garden room was intended as a private retreat for the young woman. Sadly, financial difficulties forced the family to give up their townhouse only four years after the cabinet was completed. When it was dismantled and sold to the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) in 1869, it became the first of several ‘period rooms’ the museum acquired.

Museum no. 1736-1869
Betel nut container, 1780–1885
SOUTH-EAST ASIA, Room 47a, Level 0

The bird-shaped box is designed to hold betel, a mild drug like tobacco used throughout Asia. Traditionally made from areca nuts and lime wrapped in a leaf from the betel tree, betel was offered as a mark of respect during ceremonies. For centuries, most households kept equipment for its preparation. This box represents a sacred bird or hintha. It is special because it formed part of the royal regalia of Burma (now Myanmar). These richly decorated and valuable ceremonial objects, symbolising the power of the Burmese monarchy, belonged to King Thibaw, the last King of Burma. When the British overthrew King Thibaw, they seized the regalia and brought it to England. It was displayed in the museum from 1890 until 1964, when it was returned to Myanmar. As a gesture of friendship and thanks, the Myanmar government gave the container back to Britain. It has remained at the V&A ever since.

Museum no. IS.246&A-1964

Evening coat, 1937
Elsa Schiaparelli (1890–1973)
FASHION, Room 40, Level 0

Witty and elegant, this evening coat is typical of the designs of Italian-born Elsa Schiaparelli, who ran a highly successful couture house in Paris in the 1920s and ’30s. In 1931 she opened a branch in London which was patronised by flamboyant clients like Viscountess Doris Castlerosse. A prominent socialite of the time, the Viscountess ordered the coat from Schiaparelli’s autumn 1937 collection. The design was embroidered by the leading Parisian workshop Lesage, following a drawing by the French artist and film-maker Jean Cocteau. He was one of many key Surrealist artists with whom Schiaparelli collaborated. The vase holding the roses that adorn the shoulders is made up of two faces in profile, their lips puckered ready to kiss. The double image was a recurring motif for Cocteau and other Surrealist artists, including Salvador Dalí. Schiaparelli herself once wrote: ‘Dress designing... is to me not a profession but an art’.

Museum no. T.59-2005
Given by the American Friends of the V&A
The Ardabil Carpet, 1539–40

**Islamic Middle East, Room 42, The Jameel Gallery, Level 0**

The Ardabil Carpet is one of the world’s most significant carpets, important for the quality of its design and craftsmanship, as well as its history. It was woven over 400 years ago for a shrine in north-west Iran. The carpet was then sold in the late 19th century, possibly to fund urgent building repairs to the shrine. We can date it exactly thanks to an inscription in Persian woven at one end, which contains the date ‘946’ from the Muslim calendar, equivalent to about 1539–40.

The dramatic medallion design at the centre of the carpet forms part of a repeat pattern, with quarter medallions in each of the four corners. Two hanging lamps in the middle recall the original sacred context of the carpet – the Ardabil shrine. The designer William Morris recommended the museum purchase the carpet in 1893, describing it as ‘by far the finest Eastern carpet which I have seen’.

Museum no. 272-1893

Tipu’s Tiger, about 1793

**South Asia, Room 41, Level 0**

Tipu’s Tiger is seen as a symbol of the strength of its owner, Tipu Sultan. Tipu was ruler of Mysore in south India from 1782 to 1799. A powerful leader, he fought back against attacks on his kingdom from the British East India Company. The tiger was Tipu’s personal emblem – he had many of his possessions decorated with tiger designs, including his throne. This almost life-sized model shows a tiger devouring a European enemy. A handle on the side of its body can be turned to work a mechanical organ hidden inside, which makes the sound of the growling animal and cries of its victim.

Tipu was defeated by the British in 1799, and this tiger was taken from his palace and brought to London. It was exhibited in the East India Company’s museum where it became a favourite with visitors. Moved to the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) in 1879, it continues to intrigue.

Museum no. 2545 (IS)
The artist Giovanni Bologna, known as Giambologna, was admired for the sense of action and movement in his sculptures. Here Samson wields a jawbone to strike a Philistine, in a scene from the Bible’s Old Testament. His muscles are tautly drawn and he looks down over his shoulder at his victim, raising his right arm for the deathly blow. The dramatic pose was based on a composition by Michelangelo.

This sculpture was commissioned in Florence by Prince Francesco de’ Medici, a member of the ruling Medici dynasty known for their patronage of the arts in Italy. It came to London in 1623 and rapidly became the most famous Italian sculpture in England. It is considered to be the most important group sculpture by Giambologna outside Italy. The sculpture’s spiralling, interconnected bodies mean it has no single viewpoint. Its visual appeal and technical skill have challenged and inspired artists for centuries.

Museum no. A.7-1954
Purchased with Art Fund support

The Mazarin Chest is made from black lacquered wood with lavish gold and silver lacquer decoration. Some of Japan’s most highly skilled craftsmen worked on chests like these, which were made specifically for export to the West. During the 17th century wealthy Europeans developed a taste for these exotic luxury goods and displayed them as symbols of status and power.

The chest is named after the Mazarin family. One of its first owners was Jules Mazarin, a famous French statesman and Catholic cardinal. After his death it was handed down through his family. In 1800 William Beckford, an eccentric English novelist and avid collector of Japanese lacquer, bought the chest. Beckford later fell into debt and had to sell large parts of his collection. Eventually the V&A was able to buy the chest in 1882 for the then enormous sum of £772.

Museum no. 412:1, 2-1882

Mazarin Chest, about 1640
Japan, Room 45, The Toshiba Gallery, Level 0

Samson Slaying a Philistine, 1560–62
Giambologna (1529–1608)
Medieval & Renaissance, Room 50a, The Paul and Jill Ruddock Gallery, Level 0

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Museum no. 412:1, 2-1882
Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, known as the Forster Codices, about 1487–97, 1505
Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

MEDIEVAL & RENAISSANCE, Room 64, The Wolfson Gallery, Level 1

An artist, draftsman, inventor and philosopher, Leonardo da Vinci’s contributions to society were numerous and can still be felt today. Throughout his lifetime he kept dozens of notebooks which he used to record his thoughts and ideas on a huge variety of subjects, ranging from architecture to anatomy and philosophy. Five of these notebooks are now in the V&A collection, bound in three volumes or ‘codices’.

The notebooks are written in Leonardo’s famous ‘mirror writing’. There has been much speculation over the years about why he used this method of writing. Was he trying to make sure that only he could read his notes? Or was it that he was left-handed and found it easier to write from right to left? Writing masters of the period taught mirror writing, so it may not have seemed as strange during Leonardo’s time as it does today.

Museum nos. MSL/1876/Forster/141/I-III
Bequeathed by John Forster

Pomona, 1872
Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79)

PHOTOGRAPHY CENTRE, Room 100, The Bern and Ronny Schwartz Gallery, Level 2

Julia Margaret Cameron was one of the most important and innovative photographers of the 19th century. Best known for her bold, close-up portraits and depicting her sitters – friends, family and servants – as characters from biblical, historical or allegorical stories, she often cast women as powerful figures. The model in this photograph is Alice Liddell who, as a child, inspired Lewis Carroll’s book, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Here, Alice, aged 19, gazes confidently back at the camera as Cameron places her in another role: Pomona, Roman goddess of orchards.

The South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) purchased and exhibited Cameron’s photographs and even allowed her to use a room as a portrait studio. Today, the V&A holds the largest collection of her photographs in the world.

Museum no. RPS.1271-2017
The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the V&A, acquired with the generous assistance of the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Art Fund
Joey Puppet from *War Horse*, 2009
Designed by Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, Handspring Puppet Company

Michael Morpurgo’s acclaimed children’s novel *War Horse* tells the story of a horse, Joey, and his young owner, Albert. Joey is taken from England to France to serve in the First World War and Albert sets out on a mission to bring him home.

Since it opened in 2009, over seven million people worldwide have seen the National Theatre’s record-breaking stage adaptation of *War Horse*. Joey convincingly comes to life on stage through a horse-sized puppet designed by the South African puppet company, Handspring. Using the Japanese *bunraku* ‘exposed’ style of puppetry, three puppeteers operate Joey’s head, heart and hind to bring him into galloping reality.

Joey is one of several animal puppets in the show. In 2009, theatre critic Michael Billington wrote of Handspring: ‘They have created, out of skeletal bamboo frames and internal hinges, the most plausible and expressive quadrupeds ever to have graced the London stage.’

Devonshire Hunting Tapestries, 1430–50

The Devonshire Hunting Tapestries are four intricately designed large wall hangings. Tapestries were expensive and highly sought after during the medieval and Renaissance periods, but very few of this scale and quality survive. The examples in the V&A were owned and preserved by the Dukes of Devonshire for centuries at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire.

These tapestries were probably made in Arras in modern-day France. The town was known for supplying the courts of France and Burgundy with magnificent wall hangings to decorate and insulate palaces and castles. Their imagery also provided entertainment and interest, depicting well-known stories from the Bible and mythology, as well as universal themes like love and war. The Devonshire Tapestries show the popular courtly pastime of hunting. The scenes in Room 94 depict falconry and hunts of deer, swans and otters. Ferocious boar and bear are hunted in Room 10a.
Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Ground, 1823
John Constable (1776–1837)

Dr John Fisher, the Bishop of Salisbury, was Constable's friend and patron. He commissioned this painting and is shown in its bottom-left corner with his wife, admiring Salisbury Cathedral. Constable found the cathedral difficult to paint, labouring over its architectural detail, but he enjoyed the play of light and shadow in the scene. Fisher however complained of the 'dark cloud', preferring 'a clear blue sky'.

Today Constable is one of the nation's best-loved artists. This painting embodies his fresh, naturalistic view of the British landscape. But two years before he painted it, he wrote to Fisher: 'I shall never be a popular artist'. It was only after Constable's death that he became widely appreciated. This work was part of a collection of paintings given to the museum in 1857 by John Sheepshanks to found a 'National Gallery of British Art'. The gift formed the basis of the V&A paintings collection.

Museum no. FA.33[O]
Given by John Sheepshanks, 1857

Queen Victoria’s coronet, 1840–42
Designed by Prince Albert (1819–61)
Made by Joseph Kitching

Prince Albert designed this coronet for his wife, Queen Victoria. After their marriage in 1840, they took pleasure in commissioning a suite of sapphire jewellery together, including this coronet. In 1842, the year the coronet was completed, Victoria wore it in a portrait by court painter Franz Xaver Winterhalter. The portrait was an immediate success and the image of the young queen was carried around the world in copies and engravings.

When Albert died in 1861, Victoria was overcome with grief. For nearly five years she could not face the ordeal of the ceremonial Opening of Parliament, but in 1866 she undertook this duty for the first time since his death, wearing the coronet Albert had designed for her.

The coronet is one of the most important jewels of Victoria’s reign. It is a lasting testament to the love and devotion between her and Prince Albert.

Museum no. M.2017-2017
Purchased through the generosity of William & Judith, Douglas and James Bollinger as a gift to the Nation and the Commonwealth
The Great Bed of Ware, about 1590

The Great Bed of Ware has been famous since its earliest days. In 1601, Shakespeare joked about it in *Twelfth Night*, suggesting it was already a byword for its enormous size. We think the bed was made for a coaching inn at the town of Ware, which was one day’s travel north of London. It must have been an effective way to attract customers, whether they slept in it, or simply paid to marvel at it. The bed soon became the subject of many humorous and exaggerated tales about bawdy goings-on. One story from 1765 tells of 26 butchers and their wives spending a night in it for a bet.

The V&A bought the bed in 1931 as a national treasure. The oak frame is laden with fashionable, Renaissance-style carved decoration, originally brightly painted, and much of it symbolic of love, fertility and duty. Textile hangings made in 2001 recreate the bed’s likely appearance in 1600.

Museum no. W.47-1931
Purchased with Art Fund support

Crown, about 1740

Amid growing calls to return cultural objects plundered during Britain’s imperial past, this gold crown is the subject of ongoing discussions between the V&A and the Ethiopian Government. It was probably commissioned in the 1740s for a church in Gondar, Ethiopia, for a priest to wear. During the 1860s, Emperor Tewodros II kept it in his treasury at Maqdala. In 1864, frustrated that Queen Victoria would not support his political ambitions, he took several European envoys hostage. In response, Britain sent 13,000 British and Indian troops to secure their release. After a one-sided battle, the soldiers ransacked Maqdala.

The crown is among thousands of items taken as war booty which are now in Britain’s museums. The V&A acknowledges that it is a product of the British Empire and is contributing to debates about returning looted objects to the countries from which they were taken.

Museum no. M.27-2005
Deposited at the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) by H.M. Treasury in 1872 and officially entered the museum’s collection as a result of the 1983 National Heritage Act
Head of a Laughing Child,
about 1746–49
Chelsea porcelain factory

With its lively expression and sense of movement in the face and hair, this head is one of the most fluently modelled examples of English sculptural porcelain ever produced. The sculpture dates from the early years of the Chelsea porcelain factory, one of the first and most significant factories set up in England after the European discovery of soft-paste porcelain.

The head was probably cast from a model by the celebrated French sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac, who was a friend of Nicholas Sprimont, the first owner of the Chelsea factory. Roubiliac was one of the few sculptors working in London capable of such life-like modelling. He is known to have had a keen interest in the sculptural possibilities of porcelain. This exciting new material allowed for intricate, detailed modelling in soft clay to be translated into a durable, hard, shiny and brilliant white sculpture.

Museum no. C.37-2019
Purchased with support from Art Fund and V&A Members and with funds from the Hugh Phillips and the Murray Bequest

Armchair (‘Fauteuil Transatlantique’)  
1925–30
Eileen Gray (1878–1976)

With its visible construction and suspended seat, the armchair evokes the shape of ocean liner deckchairs, known in French as ‘transats’. Eileen Gray made only 12 of these chairs for Jean Désert, the Parisian gallery she opened in 1922 to sell her designs. A photo from the 1920s shows one of these chairs on the balcony of ‘E-1027’, the house she designed with writer and architect Jean Badovici on the French riviera.

Gray was a pioneering architect and furniture designer of the 20th century. Born in Ireland to aristocratic parents, she moved to Paris via London in 1902 and remained there for most of her life. In her work and her private life, Gray subverted many expectations of the era. She enjoyed relationships with both women and men, moving in avant-garde, feminist circles associated with the Paris Left Bank. She had this chair in her home until the early 1970s, when she gave it to the V&A.

Museum no. Circ.578-1971
Given by Eileen Gray
Matching Pair, 2017
Grayson Perry (born 1960)
ceramics, Room 145a, Level 4

Grayson Perry made Matching Pair following the 2016 referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union. He invited Leave and Remain voters to submit images of themselves and of things they loved about Britain for him to reproduce on each vase, illustrating either side of the debate. This method of crowd-sourcing represented a new approach for the artist, while the vases themselves – among the largest Perry has ever made – reflect perhaps the most significant British political issue of our time.

Perry is a prominent figure of the art world today. Made famous as the cross-dressing potter who won the Turner Prize in 2003, he has become a household name, both as an artist and a social and cultural commentator. Perry works in a range of media, including tapestry and prints, but he remains best known for his seductive yet challenging pottery.

Narcissus, 1972
Erwin Eisch (born 1927)
contemporary glass, Room 129, The Märit Rausing Gallery, Level 3

In Greek mythology, Narcissus fell in love with his own beauty and drowned while entranced by his reflection in a pool of water. In this interpretation, Narcissus is both man and mirror. He sees himself reflected in his own swollen belly, as if giving birth to himself. The work is a metaphor for Eisch’s artistic creation – the moment when he abandons learned techniques and past influences in favour of his own instinctive urges.

Until the 1960s, art glass production was almost exclusively limited to decorative objects like vases, bowls and figurines. Erwin Eisch was one of the first artists to use glass as a material for pure artistic expression. Rejecting the smooth beauty of glass achieved by technical fluency, he instead wanted his works to show the physical evidence of the hot-working process. You can see the rough marks left by the scissors and pincers Eisch used to shape the toes and fingers of Narcissus.