

SELECTIVE TOUCH

My name is Liz Pye. I am a conservator and I believe there is no substitute for the real object!

What are the crucial factors in ensuring that our first-hand encounters with works of art are as powerful as they should be? (this is a recent quote from Luke Syson, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum)

- I believe conservators should have a role in making 'real' objects accessible much more widely through touch and handling
- While acknowledging the potential for damage, I am keen to give visitors the same powerful experience as we enjoy behind the scenes
- Using our hands is a vital aspect of human experience; our opposable thumbs and manual dexterity have been crucial in our evolution and in our technical achievements.
- We have huge numbers of sensory receptors in our hands and fingers constantly sending messages to our brain, so touch provides us with very sensitive - often instinctive and certainly essential - means of testing and understanding our surroundings
- Displayed objects, or objects on a screen, are inevitably distanced from the viewer and the viewpoint is pre-determined
- But touch provides an intimate and exciting means of exploring, enjoying and understanding objects - discovering weight, apparent temperature, surface topography such as tool marks, and so on - putting the handler in direct touch with the past, and with the people who made and used the objects (Image shows a student exploring an African basket in the UCL collections)
- Although we know exposure to light can damage, we select significant but potentially vulnerable objects for display in lighted conditions
- Of course we know touch can damage, but we can limit the effects through careful selection and rotation of objects. We would certainly avoid the exaggerated damage we see here - the result of encouraged and uncontrolled

touch (Image shows part of the display at the former Liverpool Conservation Centre)

- We have large numbers of stored objects, surely we can select some to provide this form of encounter?
- However, I am well aware that this is not easy - such handling sessions need space, adequate time, and above all, appropriate facilitation - people to discuss the objects and stimulate discovery. Nevertheless I argue that selective touch in controlled conditions is an important means of providing very powerful experience
- Considering the focus of this conference, I must add that experience of real objects can be enhanced by craft replicas, digital reproductions, or digital animations. These provide additional means of access to very fragile or incomplete objects, or to those with moving parts (to discover 'how it might have worked'). But this access should be provided while viewing and comparing with the 'real' original.