JOB DESCRIPTION

Job Title: Postdoctoral Research Fellow, V&A Research Institute Pilot Project

Division: Collections and Learning

Department/Section: Research

Pay band: 5

(Full time)

Reporting to: Head of Research and Head of Postgraduate Programme

Background

The V&A is the world’s leading museum of art and design. We enrich people’s lives by promoting the practice of design and increasing knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the designed world.

The V&A’s Research Department works with other Museum departments to support and further the role of research across the organisation. It consists of a core of permanent staff, a larger number of staff seconded from other Museum departments, and externally funded fellows. In collaboration with the Royal College of Art, it runs a leading postgraduate programme in the History of Design, with currently three main taught strands: Modern and Contemporary; Renaissance and Early Modern; and Asian, Early Modern to Contemporary.

The V&A has recently secured the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to run a Pilot Project examining models for a future V&A Research Institute. The Project is designed to experiment with new models of collaborative, cross-disciplinary object-based research, providing a strong base for the establishment of a major new V&A Research Institute. As part of this project, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow will be based in the V&A’s Research Department in order to participate in the Museum’s vibrant research culture and support the project’s successful delivery.
Pilot Project for a V&A Research Institute

Recent thinking on material culture within the humanities and social sciences has highlighted the intellectual inadequacy of, and increasing discontent with, traditional ‘Western’ hierarchical systems of knowledge that place thinking above doing and theory above practice. This approach has created dichotomies such as ‘design’ and ‘execution’, and separated approaches for apprehending objects into disciplinary, professional and physical contexts that rarely meet. Not only do we fragment our understanding of material things into a myriad of different sub-disciplines (including art and design history, anthropology, sociology, science and technology, socio-economic history and materials science), but we also routinely segregate academic work from curatorial, conservation and practice-based knowledge. Distinctively, this project will give prominence to approaches and questions derived from a direct engagement with practice. This methodology allows not only for a challenge of the conventional epistemological hierarchies that place practice-based knowledge (techne) in a lowly position, but recognises the unfulfilled potential of the new questions that such central engagement might generate. While much recent scholarly discussion has acknowledged the importance of allowing practice to speak up so as to instigate genuinely new thinking into our understanding of the making of things and of knowledge, such novel models have not yet been given a sustained opportunity to fully develop within a dedicated cross-disciplinary context that not only foregrounds it but also records and disseminates it for further practice.

Museums such as the V&A possess a distinctive ability to foster a focus on material culture and its ability to shed light on the lives of individuals and societies. Building upon these ideas, and set in this context, the V&A Research Institute Pilot Project will create a novel, interactive and dynamic setting for challenging existing divisions. It will be the testing ground for articulating new models of collaborative research practice, ultimately providing a fertile base for the establishment of a new V&A Research Institute.

Inspiring, and inspired by, practice since its very foundation, the V&A is well prepared to support such a new approach. It holds one of the world’s greatest collections of art, design and performance, spanning international cultures from ancient times to the present day. As a global organisation, it is strongly placed to develop and disseminate cross-disciplinary research to audiences worldwide, including fellow museums and their users. The Museum is developing ambitious long-term plans to create a dedicated V&A Research Institute for cross-disciplinary object-based and practice-led research, involving key museum experts in curation and conservation, creative industry professionals, artists and designers, and academics bridging the humanities, sciences and social sciences. Through fostering interdisciplinary and international dialogue, this Institute would help advance the development and dissemination of new models of museum practice and object-based research.

The V&A Research Institute Pilot Project is designed to explore different models for the
potential delivery of such an institute. A cross-disciplinary project integrating academic, art and design practice, curation and conservation, the project is intended to form a vibrant cultural nexus bringing together diverse constituencies. Participants will collaborate on a range of discursive and productive project activities, enabling the continuous sharing of knowledge-making and experience-based practices. The project would use new models for collaboration and a series of permanent and temporary spaces to explore new research approaches to the study of textiles and fashion. The pilot will be based at the V&A and bring together the Research Department, Textiles and Fashion Department and the newly opened V&A Clothworkers’ Centre for the Study and Conservation of Textiles and Fashion. It will also temporarily make use of studio spaces borrowed from a number of academic partner institutions.

Advised and supported by a cross-departmental group of senior advisors and a dedicated Steering Board, the project postdoctoral research fellow (supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) will help create a team of collaborators from a range of disciplines and institutions, and from textiles and fashion practice nationally and internationally. The project team will focus on a series of object-led research questions and themes – rooted within the V&A Textiles and Fashion collections but designed to open broader debates around the Museum collections as a whole – through a series of collaborative workshops and a final forum (including seminars, practice-based making sessions and object-handling sessions) in which object-based research and making will be closely intertwined. These activities will create a series of research ‘models’ designed to instigate new thinking around objects and inspire new collaborative practices of researching, curating, conserving and making. This, in turn, will allow us to better understand what is required to develop a 21st century Research Institute at the heart of a Museum whose mission is to inspire a wide range of practitioners: academics, artists and designers, curators, conservators, professionals from the creative industries and postgraduate students.

The findings of the project will be made publicly available through a scholarly publication, an online library of research resources, a project website, interactive webinars and a blog. The project will end with a research forum in which participants would gather to reflect upon their research, their experience of thinking-making and the collaborative process. Additional practitioners will be invited at this stage to respond to the project’s findings and expand the discussion still further. We will also seek to develop an innovative augmented layer of object-specific digital content for selected artefacts within the V&A’s permanent galleries, highlighting how this approach can offer new avenues and insights for understanding objects on display.

The pilot project will not only generate a template of innovative research on textiles and fashion, but it will also foreground a distinctive new methodology, breaking down boundaries between thinking and doing, curating and conserving, historical and contemporary research. It will build a distinctive legacy through a working model of
collaborative and cross-disciplinary research constructed around the ‘cross-skill’ project team. In addition to informing the working practices of the future Research Institute, the pilot project will also shape the V&A’s approach to the more immediate project of developing a new V&A Textiles and Fashion Gallery. One of the project’s key contributions here will be to establish, via debate at the collaborative workshops, appropriate ways of making the Gallery relevant and inspirational to the creative industries. The project team will also provide input during the development of digital content for the general public designed to complement the Gallery displays.

**Purpose of job**

Managed by the Director and the Head of Collections and with support from the Head of Research and the Head of Postgraduate Programme, the Fellow will take a leading role in the running of the pilot project.

**Main tasks**

1. To assist in the day-to-day administration of the V&A Research Institute Pilot Project.

2. To help organise a series of collaborative research workshops and a concluding forum.

3. To contribute to the research undertaken by the project team.

4. To co-edit the subsequent scholarly publication.

5. To develop digital research outputs, including an online library of research resources, a project website, interactive webinars and a blog.

6. To contribute to the development of an innovative augmented layer of object-specific digital content for selected artefacts within the V&A’s permanent galleries.

7. To contribute to the Museum’s reputation for scholarship, nationally and internationally, through your own work, building on your existing research and developing new ways of working with the Museum’s collections. You will maintain a strong commitment to publishing, lecturing and participating in academic conferences and collaborative projects as agreed with the Head of Research and Head of Postgraduate Programme.

8. To be committed to health and safety and ensure familiarity with all of the Museum’s health and safety policies and procedures.
9. Promote equality and diversity in all aspects of your work by developing and maintaining positive working relationships, ensuring that colleagues are treated fairly and with respect/dignity and actively contributing to developments that support the museum’s strategy for widening access, inclusion and diversity.

10. To be security conscious, ensure familiarity and co-operation with all museum security procedures and ensure you wear a security pass at all times when on museum premises.

11. To carry out ad hoc duties as requested by the Head of Research and Head of Postgraduate Programme.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Essential requirements

1. A doctorate in a relevant field of study.

2. A proven research interest in the interface between history, theory and practice and evidence of scholarly promise in the form of publications and other achievements.

3. A strong intellectual engagement with the issues involved in researching the Museum’s collections.

4. The ability to be a successful ambassador for the V&A Research Institute Pilot Project within and outside the Museum.

5. A proven ability to work as part of a team.

6. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively with colleagues, in order to create a supportive and productive environment.

Desirable requirements

1. Expertise in the field of fashion or textiles history, practice or conservation.

2. Experience with the creation of digital resources.

3. Working knowledge of at least one language in addition to English.
OTHER INFORMATION

Hours/Salary
Net working hours (i.e. excluding meal breaks) are 36 per week.

The salary will be within V&A pay band 5 (£25,407 to £27,000 per annum). Future pay progression will be in accordance with the V&A's Pay Agreement(s). Normal level transfer and promotion rules will apply for internal candidates.

Annual Leave
28 days plus 8 days public holidays

Pension benefits
The Civil Service offers a choice of either an occupational pension or stakeholder pension, giving you the flexibility to choose a scheme that suits you best. The occupational pension scheme currently has a 3.5% - 8.25% member contribution rate dependent on annual pensionable earnings, with an employer contribution rate of between 16.7% - 24.3%.

The 'Partnership' pension account is a stakeholder money purchase pension with an employer contribution based on age. Further details are available upon request or appointment.

Other benefits
Free entrance to all the major museums in London as well as many others.

An interest free season ticket or bicycle loan is available after three months.

Subject to the society’s terms and conditions, V&A staff are entitled to membership of the Benenden Healthcare Society. Further information is available from HR or via their website on www.benenden-healthcare.org.uk

To apply
To apply online, please go to the V&A’s website at www.vam.ac.uk/jobs

If you have any queries regarding the recruitment process, you can email us – hr@vam.ac.uk or telephone us on 020 7942 2937.

Closing date for receipt of applications is 22 April 2014.

Interview expenses will not be paid unless there is a prior agreement.