

The Phoenician “permanent” display at the National Museum of Archaeology, Malta

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Instead of only placing our objects on pedestals,
it's time we placed our visitors on pedestals as well
– Mc Lean 1993, 5 cited by Black 2005, 7

The aims of museums all over the world have been changing throughout the years, but it is only recently that a critical objective of their existence, namely their visitors, is being taken into consideration. If people do not visit museums then these may as well close their doors and the care that the museum staff lavish on their collections would be futile since it would remain inaccessible. An audience-focused approach should not deter from having the collection as the main focus but it should unite the needs of the audience with the stories that the collection can tell.

Although the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the Phoenician period display at the National Museum of Archaeology took place on the 27 February 2013, the initial meetings with the various stakeholders took place a number of years preceding that. During this period plans changed and ideas had to be rekindled especially since the planning process was not a continuous one. This was due to the lack of human and financial resources, a syndrome which people working in public museums have unfortunately learnt to live with.

The setting up of a museum display requires a multidisciplinary approach, involving people from various working backgrounds, and the crux towards a fruitful outcome is proper channelling and homogenising of the ideas of all the stakeholders

from the initial stages. The people on board varied. We had curators, a consultant, exhibition designers, conservators, IT personnel, production team, proof readers, and the list goes on. Apart from the academic consultant – Dr Nicholas C. Vella from the University of Malta – the team working on this project consisted of Heritage Malta staff.

An audience survey carried out in 2008 questioned Maltese households about local museums (Sultana 2008). Specific questions were targeted at expectations of the projected halls at the National Museum of Archaeology. When asked about preferred means of information dissemination, 75% chose audiovisuals and 43.7% opted for texts and images on interpretative panels.¹ With this information in hand, we analysed such responses during our decision making process for the Phoenician hall. The storyline, which was drafted together with the academic consultant, evolved from generic information about the Phoenicians, to the Phoenicians' arrival in Malta and their cultural practices. The chosen themes were the following: Who were the Phoenicians? Phoenician seafaring and trade (including sections on Metal, Textiles and purple dye, Glass and Wood); Ceramic forms from Phoenician Malta; Foreign pottery and local imitations; Phoenicians in the Maltese islands; Phoenicians and Death, A Phoenician coffin; Tophets;



Figure 1. Selecting the artefacts for display.

Containers for the dead; Tomb groups; Faces from the Phoenician past; and Afterlife. The text for the interpretation panels could not exceed 150 words for each of our official languages, and archival images, cartoons and audiovisuals were integrated into the design as supportive tools.

An obvious integral part of the preparation stage was the choice of artefacts. Choosing a good representative sample from the thousands which were sourced, researched and documented from the reserve collection, whilst keeping in mind the space allocation we had for this period, was not easy (Fig. 1). This exercise was carried out by the curators, consultant and the lead designer. The first draft layout reflected the chosen themes (Fig. 2a), which was then consolidated by listing the required artefacts for each showcase so that we could finalise the showcase size and type needed (Fig. 2b). In turn this turned into a scaled plan of the room, an important step in the development of the tasks to follow (Fig. 2c). The artefacts were sourced and sent for conservation. The manufacturing team started working on the structural shell of the display whilst the consultant started producing the text. The designers could then embark on producing the interpretation panels, in

constant liaison with the curators and consultant especially with regard to the accompanying images. In the meantime, some of the pieces earmarked for display underwent extensive research and analysis, resulting in some original conclusions (Vella *et al.* 2009; Vella 2012, 2013).

It is worth pointing out at this stage that, in parallel, there were also structural works being carried out on the building. Conservation works at the National Museum of Archaeology, the former Auberge de Provence, had already been carried out on the outer masonry on Melita Street to eliminate water infiltration. Having a museum housed in a scheduled building is very prestigious, however this brings with it a number of challenges which practically dictate some display outcomes. With a multidisciplinary approach and great teamwork such challenges were always overcome and in some cases even turned to our advantage. Thus, for example, the space which existed under the timber flooring of the hall earmarked for the Phoenician period display was exploited to house a tomb reconstruction in order to give visitors a better understanding of one of the Phoenician burial methods. The timber flooring beams were restored, while the ones which had to make way for the tomb

reconstruction were stored underneath the same flooring as part of the reversibility process which we always adhere to.

Challenges are constant but the rewards greatly outnumber them (Fig 3) The feedback we received post-opening was very positive. The museum’s comments book is evaluated on a monthly basis to assess if there are any things that need to and can be changed. At times the feedback gives positive new insights to decisions taken. One such example is the case of the main audiovisual which was filmed to give a better oral interpretation of the Phoenicians and their impact on the local scenario. Whereas our decision to film the narrator speaking in Maltese, and provide English subtitles, was purely a patriotic one, foreigners constantly comment that they are fascinated by the sound of the Maltese language, since as they rightly point out, they are rarely exposed to it during their stay on the islands.

One may have noticed that the word permanent in the title appears in single quotation marks. The reason is simple. There is no such thing as a permanent display in a museum. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, a museum needs to acknowledge and appease visitors’ needs, which are constantly changing, as should a museum display after a number of years, if one aims for a living museum and not a mausoleum.

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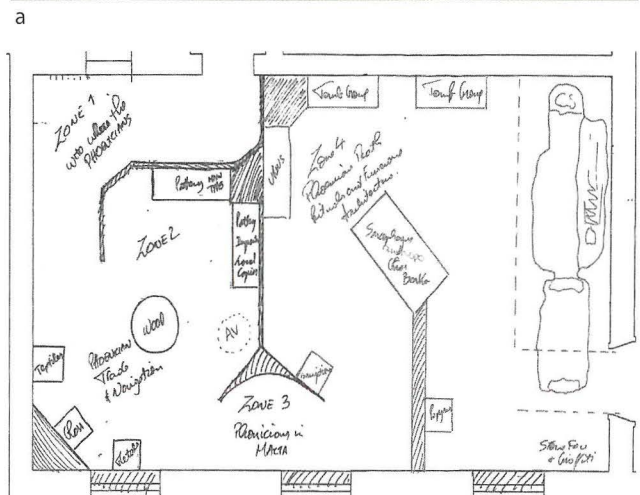
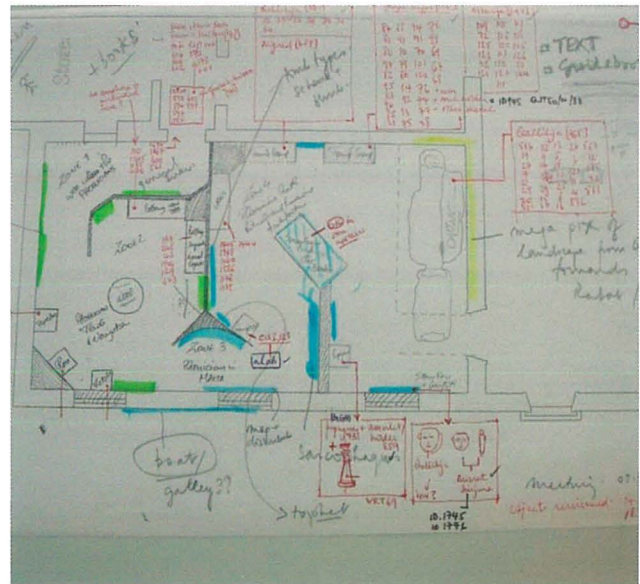


Figure 2. (a-c) Working plan of the display area and contents in its progressive stages.



Figure 3. Section of the Phoenician Hall, National Museum of Archaeology, after completion.

VELLA, N.C., 2013. Vases, bones and two Phoenician inscriptions: an assessment of a discovery made in Malta in 1816, in O. LORETZ, S. RIBICHINI, W.A. WATSON & J. Á. ZAMORA (eds) *Ritual, Religion and Reason: Studies in the Ancient World in Honour of Paolo Xella* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament series): 589-605. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag.

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Notes

- 1 Respondents could choose more than one option. Moreover 29.7% chose audio guides, 18.7% guidebooks and catalogues, and 10.9% take home leaflets. Other suggestions included interactive spaces especially for children, different types of media, simple language use, help at hand by staff, and more consideration for a wider audience including persons with disabilities and the illiterate.