Manchester, UK

Object Lessons

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What is the value of engaging with the physical object within design research and education, evaluated through the application of the “Material & Process Innovation Collection”, at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections
Iznik Vase by William De Morgan. 1888-1897

Original watercolour illustration from “Columbia’s Courtship”, by Walter Crane, 1892

“Recommendations and Suggestions”, by Walter Crane, 1893
The Language of Process:
How new materials and technologies are changing product design

23RD SEPTEMBER – 20TH DECEMBER 2013

FREE ADM
Monday – Friday (10am – 4.30pm)
Thursday (10am – 4.30pm)
Saturday / Sunday – Free

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Figure 1
Compared with viewing objects as images, how informative was experiencing the physical object in enabling you to:

- Understand the material and process of making & manufacture?
- Understand the construction of multi-part & multi-material objects?

![Bar chart showing responses](chart.png)
Figure 2

Compared with viewing objects as images, how useful was it to:

- view the work from multiple angles?
- feel the weight of the work?
- see and feel the surface finish or texture of the work?
- smell an object?
- help you decide what your overall feeling about an object was?
“Seeing objects in galleries is always a little frustrating to me though as I want to pick them up and inspect them properly from all angles. When I found out that one of (Formafantasma’s) Bone Jug was in Special Collections I was so excited as this meant I could actually handle the object I had been so inspired by”

…“Being able to pick up the jug, handle it, see it from all angles and inspect exactly how it had been put together was really useful for my practice and I felt really lucky to have that privilege.”
“If I had just seen photographs of the Bone Jug I may have assumed it was fully functional, but being able to handle it in person enabled me to discover its flaws in functionality. This didn’t make me like the object less, as I love it for reasons besides its functionality, but it did help me further understand how I feel about functionality, and in turn, assisted me in developing my own practice.”

Bone Jar - Formafantasma
“(I particularly remember) the Bloom Table Lamp by Patrick Jouin, because it was 3D printed in one process, I could see the detail and structure better by viewing it in person. This provides deeper understanding of how it works which impressed me a lot.”

“It was obvious to me that when I actually looked at an object with a view of seeing how it was manufactured etc, it was so much more beneficial than looking at it on a screen. You’re able to compare and contrast with other objects because you can see it in detail. Images do not provide this benefit.”

Bloom Table Lamps - Patrick Jouin
2010 : image Thomas Duval
“...it made me realise the potential for working with CAD/CAM, before I felt that you don’t have to engage with CAM process as much as you actually do, I felt you just press ‘go’ and that’s it”
“There is something I find really inspiring about handling a piece of work that has been created by designers who I aspire to be like. It sounds kind of silly, but handling artwork in the reading room as opposed to seeing flawless, professional photographs of artwork makes me feel like success is more achievable”

“It makes me think further about my future career, moreover, it develops my focus in specific area such as production process and material use. In addition, by viewing those collections, some of them really broaden my mind about product design, that’s really helpful while I am developing my personal ambitions”
“I believe the Special Collections is essential for the university. I have had the luxury of being able to attend design shows in London, Eindhoven and will be attending Milan in the April. For students who cannot attend these design shows or get a personal experience with products, the Special Collections gives them that opportunity. If anything growing it more would be a must. Lectures referencing objects and telling students they can go and physically interact with them on University premises is fantastic. Increase the collection!”
Conclusion

We think that the student responses indicate that access to physical objects is important in developing design ideas and practice.

Similarly the development of collections using a large pool of expert suggestions, looking at material that speak to the “now”, not collecting with the established canon in mind, is not a risk, but a venture into collaborative collections development that has enriched the museum for both current and future users.