

5 SEPTEMBER 2014 - 1 MARCH 2015  
HERMITAGE-AMSTERDAM EXHIBITION CENTRE

# DINING WITH THE TSARS. FRAGILE BEAUTY FROM THE HERMITAGE

LIES WILLERS

THIS WAS COMPARABLE TO CREATING THE SET DESIGN FOR THE GRAND OPERA. THE STAGE NEEDS TO LOOK IN SUCH A WAY SO AS TO EMPHASIZE THE PLOT AND THE DRAMA BUT NOT OVERSHADOW THE MUSIC AND THE SOLOISTS. FOR US AN ITEM FROM A MUSEUM IS ALWAYS A PRIMA DONNA, IT IS THE START AND END POINT OF THE DESIGN.





I see museum experts and designers as a single team of creators of the exhibition when they determine its contents, the principles of display in terms of preservation, advertising, educational programmes, management and design. All these components are key factors in achieving the final goal. I am not an autonomous artist, I like intense discussions at the beginning of each new project. What sort of an exhibition is it? What do we want? What is our collective point of view? How do we want to inspire the visitors with the splendour of the collection? How do we deliver quality and the unique nature of the objects to the audience? What are we going to attract visitors with? What will they find out and what impressions will they share with their friends? And who are our visitors? What are they like and what do they expect, why have they come and what are they hoping to see?

Is it possible to keep the balance right between the items and the subject? Will the exhibition be a novel or an encyclopaedia? Such questions are discussed among the organisers, first in a rather abstract manner; this is where the design starts. And most importantly, the answers are different for each exhibition, there is no single design strategy that would work for everyone. Some experts think that the item is secondary to the idea it represents. Others say, "Let the objects speak for themselves", but their language and messages are often difficult to understand without a relevant context. Therefore every exhibition is unique.

The team that prepared the exhibition could take an encyclopaedic approach but decided against it for various reasons. We worked with Jeanine Aalfs, one of the top stylists in the Netherlands, from the moment of developing the concept throughout its implementation. She was perfect.

The Hermitage Museum Amsterdam is not a museum of design, as, say, V&A. The exhibition centre also lacks the mag-

PHOTO: EVERT ELZINGA, AMSTERDAM



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## AN EXHIBITION OF FAMOUS PORCELAIN DINNER SETS AT T

**Lies Willers** (born 1960) is an independent designer from the Netherlands and a professor at the Utrecht School of the Arts. In 1984 she graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie specialising in Architectural design. Her latest projects include a permanent ceramics exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Victoria Revealed exhibition at Kensington Palace in London and the entrance zone for the Amsterdam Tropical Museum.

nificent authentic context, provided in abundance to the visitors of the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg. I see the natural habitat for the porcelain in St. Petersburg — history is where it happened, as they say.

I knew that Russian visitors are familiar with the history of these famous items which represent a part of a common cultural background and are an object of national pride. The other visitors to the exhibition in the Netherlands, mostly European nationals, require more information in order to fully appreciate the value of these stunning pieces. The audience at the Hermitage Museum Amsterdam centre is varied: different age groups, levels of education and nationalities. We needed to provide all these people with enough information, details and history while being serious and entertaining at the same time.

Dining with the Tsars is a lavish exhibition which marks the fifth anniversary of the Hermitage Museum Amsterdam centre and pays tribute to the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg with its priceless vast collection.

In this case we decided to apply the principle of combining several contextual layers, without overworking the design, of course, not to push the exhibits themselves into the background.





Here are two more examples from my own experience that demonstrate the differences in approaches to designing exhibitions. In 2009–2012 my design company worked on two permanent expositions; both were close to each other, in the centre of London: ‘Ceramics Study Gallery in Victoria and Albert Museum and Victoria Revealed Installation at Kensington Palace, Hyde Park.

V&A hired us to create installations using their collection of ceramics. It was meant to be an installation over an area of a thousand square metres, where curators could work and visitors and students could study the exhibits. And most importantly, all the 26 thousand objects were to be displayed with no prior selection but only divided into groups by their age, material and origin. This installation represented an ‘encyclopaedic’ museum in its original sense. At the same time Historic Royal Palaces commissioned us to design a permanent exhibition about the ‘love and loss’ of Queen Victoria

within the renovated Kensington Palace. It was intended as a very personal story. Not about a queen and an empress as such but rather about a working mother and a faithful wife to her husband Albert, who died young leaving Victoria to mourn for as many as 40 years, until her death. For the team of the organisers it was obvious that Victoria would be at the forefront. Her diaries served as a vast resource for the exhibition. Her personal belongings, jewellery, dresses, love letters, children’s shoes and widow’s weeds were equally important and brought excerpts from her diary to life. Since we were also in charge of the restoration of the palace interiors, in order to create a complete story, we extended the story onto the fabrics, the finish of the walls and the floors. We added details wherever we could: romantic paper inserts around Victoria’s wedding dress, embroidery on pillow-cases, artistic insets in the show-cases etc. This exhibition is “a love story in letters”.

## THE ‘HERMITAGE-AMSTERDAM’ EXHIBITION CENTRE. SEPTEMBER 2014 – FEBRUARY 2015

One of the usual problems with organising an exhibition is keeping the balance between wanting to provide plenty of detailed information (like in a textbook) and wanting to offer a more entertaining, more open experience which would appeal to a wide audience. I am well aware of the tightrope that contextual design balances on. When too much attention is paid to the arrangement, the exhibits pale by comparison.

First layer. We tried to recreate the atmosphere of the historical context and used the colours and shades typical of the interiors of the 18th–19th centuries throughout the space of the exhibition.

Second layer. It seemed obvious to choose a separate table for each set over panoramic show-cases. The tables were decorated with historical accuracy: laid for 24, 12, 20 or a different number of guests. We did some prior research of existing similar exhibitions where various sets were displayed on one enormous table and did not find it suitable.

As a result, we had five laid tables and decided to add some extra decoration based on the historical context, some amusing stories about the owners or some matching decorative details. We made this choice as designers but the concept was discussed with the whole team of the exhibition.

The third layer was the subtle decoration of the tables with fruit and flowers, so that the sets stay untouched but the tables look livelier.

The fourth layer is more abstract and emphasises how unique every set is. For this purpose we used medallions, stuffed peacocks and a little chipmunk, a cloud of flowers and cameo-embroidered portraits of Catherine the Great and Prince Potemkin.

The fifth layer is a set of obstacles. We designed elegant and very effective barriers that divide the exhibition and the visitors and symbolise chairs for the guests. A state of the art alarm system finishes the picture.

The sixth layer is factual information, texts for the exhibition and the audio-tour.

We wanted to keep away from any imitations, reconstruction and styling in design. The difference between the authentic real object on the one hand and design and pastiche on the other has to be absolutely clear to everyone and at all times.

By combining impressionist abstract installations with refined elements, bright colours and amusing details, we strived to create a suitable setting for this amazing porcelain.





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