

## HONOR AWARD

### Victoria Revealed

Historic Royal Palaces

Kensington Palace, London

**Design**  
OPERA Amsterdam

**Design Team**  
Deirdre Murphy *lead curator*;  
Ruth Gill, Rhiannon Goddard,  
Alex Gaffikin *interpretation*;  
Jo Pike *project director*;  
Renata Alvares *senior  
designer*

**Fabrication**  
The Hub Ltd. *primary  
fabricator*, Meyvaert  
*exhibition showcases*,  
SP Production, *graphic  
application*, Ege Carpets  
*production custom carpets*,  
Sysco AV *AV hardware*

**Consultants**  
Spiral Production *AV  
production*, Cristina Guitan  
*artist*, Rebecca Morrison  
*costume designer*, Andy  
Singelton *paper artist*

**Photos**  
Richard Thwaite, ©OPERA  
Amsterdam



◀ The design team collaborated with several artists as well as the charity Fine Cell Work. Seventeen prisoners in four different facilities embroidered the cushions for the “Falling in Love” room. Each consists of 11,000 stitches featuring words and imagery symbolic of the royal couple: “bliss,” “dream,” an interlocking “V” and “A,” and a crown.

▲ A laser-cut and powder-coated steel screen comprised of words from love letters exchanged between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert adds another layer of intimacy to the “Falling in Love” room; some of the words are highlighted in gold paint for emphasis.

▶  
Reproduction despatch boxes covered in red leather and silkscreened text contain interactive games and puzzles that educate visitors about life in the Victorian era.



# Victoria Revealed

**In a new exhibition at Kensington Palace, OPERA Amsterdam paints a compelling picture of Queen Victoria, literally in her own words.**

By Jennifer M. Volland

## **PRESIDENTS AND PRIME MINISTERS.**

Foreign leaders and heads of state. Celebrities and historical figures. The general public tends to have strong and fixed impressions of powerful individuals. Shaped by media and public opinion, these one-dimensional interpretations are often difficult to shake. This was the overriding challenge faced by Historic Royal Palaces in staging the *Victoria Revealed* exhibition at Kensington Palace, London. How is it possible to tell the story of arguably the most important person who ever inhabited the palace, bringing together the Queen Victoria of familiar lore—a somber older woman dressed in black—and the younger, romantic woman destined for greatness?

There seemed to be only one appropriate solution: Let Victoria speak for herself.

Jo Pike, Director at OPERA Amsterdam, the firm responsible for the art direction and all the two- and three-dimensional design for *Victoria Revealed*, developed a concept that would tell Victoria's history in a visually and emotionally engaging way.

"Everything is based on her words," Pike explains. "We didn't follow a traditional exhibition approach. It is not didactic and it does not move from one object to the next. Rather, the client wanted something that was multi-sensory, where visitors could follow Victoria's emotional journey."

## **Setting the stage**

The historic spaces of Kensington Palace provide the setting for visitors to explore the various stages of Victoria's life, from her childhood through her many decades as Great Britain's monarch. Memories were reconstructed through Victoria's diaries, personal documents, and letters, and contextualized with a selection of objects—including garments, jewels, sketches, portraits, furniture and toys—from the personal collection of Queen Elizabeth II.

At the exhibition's entrance, animated title plates are projected onto the wall, as if written while visitors watch. A few ink splashes fall on the words, followed by a red wax seal. A portrait of Victoria accompanies the animation, creating the sense that the visitor is experiencing something autobiographical.

But rather than follow a chronological organization, the exhibition adopts a cinematic view of history. The rooms are arranged by theme—love life, duty or work, mourning—or by where certain events took place. As visitors ascend the palace's central staircase on their way to the exhibit, they get a glimpse into Victoria's emotional state on her first day as queen: her words are woven into the red carpeting. The first room visitors see is the Red Saloon, where the 18-year-old queen held her first Privy Council meeting. Artifacts include a table from the royal collection adorned with the queen's impressions stenciled on the surface and a glass display case holding the dress she wore on that pivotal day. Gobo projections of Council members loom along the walls, while an audio track of voices representing the council members fills the room. No natural daylight enters the space. By activating surfaces and creating a multi-sensory environment, the design team captured the seriousness of the event without resorting to explanatory panels.



▲ In a room dedicated to Albert's career and personal pursuits, a 3D representation of the Crystal Palace is a dominant feature. Fabricator The Hub cut layers of printed Plexiglas in the shape of the building, creating a sort of life-size peep box.



▲ Victoria and Albert's monogram, wallpapered in a light beige pattern, provides the backdrop for Albert's favorite portrait of Queen Victoria.

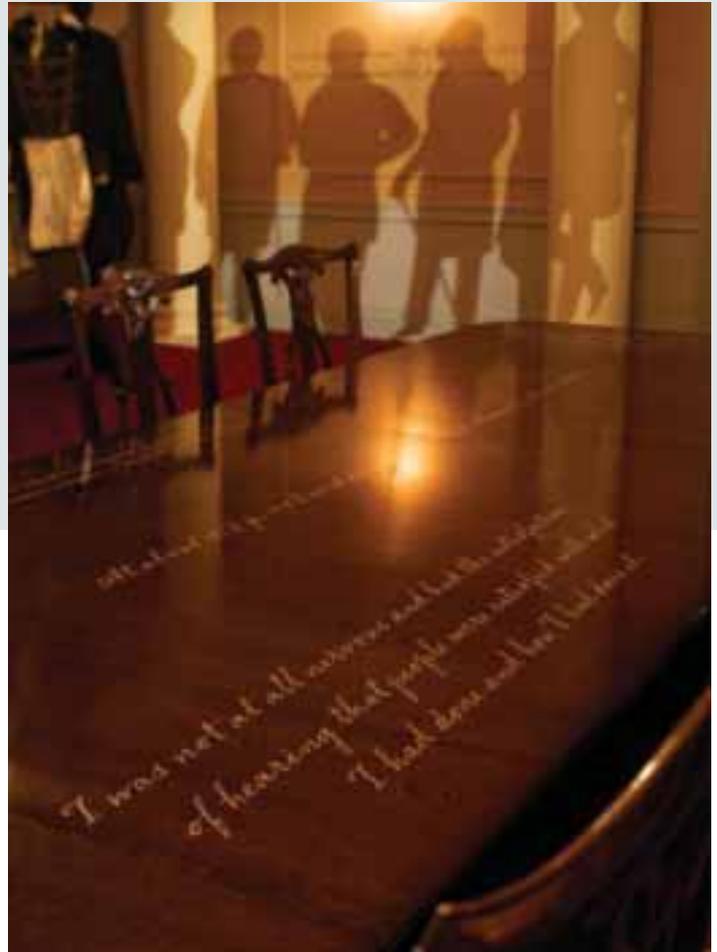
### Capturing a romance

Nowhere is the emotional impact more dramatic than in the room devoted to the love life of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Overlooking Kensington Park, the room is filled with natural light and a soft beige/peach and mint green color scheme that infuses the space with warmth. Musical compositions the couple wrote for each other play in the background. All surfaces come alive with the passionate words they exchanged: columns and mirrors are inscribed with text, the wallpaper is patterned with the initials of Victoria and Albert, the carpet features a graphic treatment of the word "love," and prisoners working with the charity Fine Cell Work embroidered cushions with words like "dream" and "bliss." Queen Victoria's actual wedding dress is on display, cased and backed by a delicately scrolled white paper sculpture, as is an interpretation of Albert's wedding suit, embroidered with Victoria's words and positioned in a forward motion, as if beckoning his queen. A painted screen made of laser-cut steel, and comprised of words of adoration between Victoria and Albert, bisects the room. Some of the words are accented in gold, highlighting the most intimate and endearing compliments.

"It was our challenge to present their letters to each other in an appropriate context," describes Pike. "Immediately, this room has a personal feel. The room is flooded with words of adoration and you feel the love they had for each other. It is overpowering."



Silhouette projections of the Privy Council members (by Spiral Productions), their names listed on the walls in cut-vinyl film, convey the intimidating scene of Victoria's first day as queen.



### Rooms with a view

Each of the 10 rooms captures a different facet of Victoria's life, and each conveys a distinct mood. One room is devoted to family life, both Princess Victoria's childhood and the experiences of Victoria and Albert's own nine children. A family tree dominates the back wall and a vine graphic scrolls into each of the children's names as it wraps around their portraits.

Another room on duty and work explores Victoria's official role as queen. It is dominated by a very large desk, which is covered with Victoria's quotes about the difficulties of leading her large empire. On top of the desk are replicas of her red leather despatch boxes, inscribed with quotes and filled with interactive games and puzzles that teach visitors about Victorian life.

Still another room examines Victoria's shock at Prince Albert's death and the beginning of her 40-year widowhood. With dark walls and carpet, the mood of this room is somber. On display are three black dresses set against specially commissioned paper sculptures, whose barren, white branches signify death and loss, an eternal winter. A well known quote of Victoria's extends across the glass case in her hand: "My life as a happy one is ended! The world is gone for me." Poignantly, a white bust of Albert is visible on the other side.

### A non-traditional approach

This carefully orchestrated play between environmental graphics and objects transforms the visitor experience. Deirdre Murphy, curator of Historic Royal Palaces, is used to unconventional methods of display and storytelling. Because of the historic nature of Kensington Palace, she is limited in the types of interventions she can make. The interiors preclude the desirability of text panels and object labels because they present a series of rooms instead of formal gallery spaces.

"We tend toward more creative and unexpected styles of displaying historic materials," says Murphy. "We take an approach to interpretation that encourages our visitors to make discoveries and

to explore the stories of how monarchs and people shape society."

Queen Victoria lived at a time when there was an incredible volume of written word, and much of the correspondence between her and family, friends, and colleagues survives along with her personal journals and diaries. While some of her writings have been accessible to the public, a great deal of what appears in the exhibition has never been published, and certainly it has never been contextualized like this.

"We wanted to tell a very personal story," says Murphy. "At a point in the conceptual process, we realized the best way to do this was to reduce the curatorial voice as much as possible." Graphics, and how words are displayed, became all the more important, as they served as vehicles to understand the material. From a curatorial point of view, this made for a time-consuming research process. Murphy had to find just the right journal entries to correspond with the objects on view.

Although this is the most text-oriented exhibition ever produced by Historic Royal Palaces, very little of it consists of conventional didactics. The font hierarchy helps solve the question of voice. Pike specified two typefaces: Dear Sarah for the words of Victoria and Perpetua (including small capitals, italics, and regular) for all other text, including the brass "history happened here"

**“The use of typography is imaginative and cohesive and beautiful. It has a delicate beauty and elegance that doesn’t limit itself. It uses the spoken and written word, providing a whole new immersive experience. Very few exhibits address an emotion like love in such a sensitive and imaginative way.”—Jury comment**

▼  
Mourning costumes of Victoria and her children are displayed against the backdrop of expressive paper-cut art by Andy Singelton.



plates on doors that identify where specific events in Victoria’s life took place, the occasional third-person quote, and object labels.

“It was important that we didn’t put a name and date at the end of every quote. It would have looked awful and boring,” explains Murphy. “It was very tempting to veer off course because of the needs of the situation, but we stuck rigidly to those rules.”

### Disengaging the wall

Whereas the design team developed text-based rules as a means to impose a certain rigor to the environmental design process, the palace itself presented other obstacles. The Hub Limited served as the main contractor for the project and fabricated all joinery and metalwork items, casework, AV hardware, and graphics and electrical packages. Project Director Philip Wooderson explained how his team had to be wary of applying for consent for any fixing required to the fabric of the building and the lead-time associated with these.

As a result, the freestanding elements serve as main focal points in the exhibition. In a room dedicated to Albert’s career and personal pursuits, a three-dimensional representation of the Crystal Palace (signifying the prince’s involvement in the Great Exhibition of 1851) is a dominant feature. Layers of printed Plexiglas are cut in the shape of the building, creating a sort of life-size peep box. This element, in particular, required a lot of detailing. The Hub produced metal work legs and support posts and accurately engineered acrylic panels to ensure the intended effect, reminiscent of a Victorian-era perspective, was delivered.

Such experiential environments are commonplace throughout the entire exhibition, its culmination notwithstanding. As visitors exit down the staircase, they encounter a final personal expression of Queen Victoria: a drawing she made of Prince Albert is projected and animated on the wall, as if happening in real time.

### Keeping it real

The mandate of Historic Royal Palaces to illuminate the history of Kensington Palace and the lives of the characters who lived there was well achieved in *Victoria Revealed*. The design team was able to reach a wide audience—young and old, male and female, those with special needs—by offering an emotional journey reliant on the interplay between graphics and objects.

“That is sometimes a real battle. You want people to know the whole story but there is often too much information,” Pike says. “You need to bring it back to something people can process. You need to leave room for people to imagine. With *Victoria Revealed*, you feel like you are in her shoes and you can hear her talking to you at all times.” ■

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Jennifer M. Volland is an independent writer and curator based in Southern California. She co-curated *Grand Hotel: Redesigning Modern Life*, presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2013. She is also the co-author of *Edward A. Killingsworth: An Architect’s Life* (Hennessey + Ingalls, 2013).