



# Exhibits Newsline

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action? Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: [NAMENewsline@gmail.com](mailto:NAMENewsline@gmail.com).

INSTITUTION Oakland Museum of California

LOCATION Oakland, California

## (Not Just) A Designer's Exhibition

PHOTOS BY MARIA MORTATI



**Fig. 1.** Audience members having fun with the tops exhibit against the backdrop of the Eameses' film is an example of meshing engagement with design.

A long-time fan of the Eameses, I visited *The World of Charles and Ray Eames* at the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) in early 2019. Even though a few years have passed since then, the lessons of this exhibition have stayed with me and are well worth sharing.

This was a beautiful, engaging exhibition on the rich contributions of these 20th-century designers and innovators. The show consisted of over 380 works, which spanned the Eameses' practice of exhibition-making, furniture design, product design, architecture, experience design, and photography.



**Fig. 2.** Kaleidoscopes and kaleidoscope movies showcased the objects and films and allowed visitors to try their thinking on for size.

The OMCA manifested it at a scale and level of engagement that matched the couple's brilliance and diversity of output.

Originating at London's Barbican museum in 2015 in a more minimalist, cool style, OMCA made the decision to take the show and adapt it for their audiences in California, who expect a certain amount of sociality and fun. As OMCA's design director Scott Moulton said, "we worked to play up the joyous quality of their work." He also noted that they have in-house capacity to build and to print at large scales to provide environmental context for objects that were often small. They also have floor space for large installations.

To live the life of the idea through experience and making, the museum created participatory and hands-on ways to experience the content. Visitors could engage with small and large kaleidoscopes, to small spinning tops, to large, top-styled chairs in front of an Eames-made video about tops (figs. 1 & 2). Amongst all the installations and objects, the museum provided organic, shaped cutouts that could be twisted and placed near spotlights on the wall, turning them back into two dimensions via their shadows (fig. 3). Both the activity and its results were striking. In addition, the Eameses' short films, from the seminal *Powers of Ten* to *Glimpses of the U.S.A.*, were presented in theatrical formats true to the era and context.

Showcasing the elements of their work at a variety of scales and methods of engagement made for a lively audience experience. It was delightfully crowded and people were interacting in all manner of ways. The show was an example of how to merge aesthetics with participation and engagement, and how to mesh content with exhibition design, offering us a roadmap for future shows.

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**Maria Mortati, Experience Design Consultant**



**Fig. 3.** Hands-on paper bending with an elegant display showcased what participation can look like and allowed visitors to feel as if they were experimental designers.



INSTITUTION Naughton Gallery at Queen's University Belfast

LOCATION Belfast, Northern Ireland

## Depictions of Feminine Resilience in the Face of Abortion Stigma



PHOTOS BY MARGARET MIDDLETON

**Fig. 1.** A worn armchair greets visitors.

*One of Many* is a quietly powerful installation by Belfast-based artist Jennifer Trouton. This collection of exquisite paintings, embroidery, and found objects uses familiar feminine imagery to represent women's experiences with abortion in Northern Ireland.

Upon entering, visitors see a dowdy Parker Knoll armchair (fig 1). Draped across its back is a linen antimacassar embroidered with "*Mater Hibernia*" (Mother Ireland). Around the words, the shape of Ireland is formed by handstitched herbs traditionally taken to induce miscarriage. A vintage suitcase sits at the foot of the chair. The densely packed symbolism continues throughout the exhibition.

The domestic mundanity of the paintings belies the desperation of the stories behind them: dainty china cups of mugwort tea, Lifebuoy soap, and bloody knitting needles (fig. 2).

As curator Ben Crothers explains, "through the lens of Ireland's history of abortion legislation these objects take on a chilling significance." Abortion was only just legalized in Northern Ireland in 2020, and it remains largely inaccessible. Themes of travel emerge through recurring motifs of maps, suitcases, and toy planes and trains, signifying the journeys of those forced to seek abortions elsewhere.

The design of the exhibition was a collaboration between artist and curator. A network of lines painted on the walls connect the pieces, leaving empty squares suggesting placeholders for untold stories (fig. 3). Taking a cue from Trouton's gentle approach, Crothers placed the exhibition text at the far end of the gallery, letting visitors piece together embedded clues before discovering the exhibition's theme.

**Fig. 2.** Everyday objects steeped in symbolism.

My 2021 visit to this exhibition coincided with the Texas hearings challenging *Roe v. Wade*. An American living in Belfast, I was unsettled to see an installation meant to remind viewers of an Irish grandmother's sitting room and feel as though I was getting a glimpse of a possible future of the United States. Now that the Supreme Court has ruled that abortion care is no longer a constitutional right, I wonder if we will see a proliferation of exhibitions like *One of Many* in my home country.

**Margaret Middleton**, independent exhibit designer and museum consultant





INSTITUTION Museum of Fine Arts

LOCATION Boston, Massachusetts

## Innovative Interpretation at the MFA

“There’s only so many old Dutch dudes I can look at right now!” a young adult shouted into a phone as they sprinted past me during my May 2022 visit to the *New Galleries of Dutch and Flemish Art* at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (MFA). A pity. Because this exhibition is about anything but old Dutch dudes, as even a casual glance at the videos and labels demonstrates. It directly confronts issues of slavery and colonialism by encouraging visitors to consider how social and economic history inform the images and artifacts.

Even before the murder of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, museums of all stripes were

struggling to reassess the content, presentation, and interpretation of their collections so as not to inadvertently condone elitism, racism, and colonialism. That can be a tall order for art museums with questionably acquired riches. Too often their efforts, while well meaning, can seem episodic and more perplexing than enlightening. In an installation at the Guggenheim, for example, a Paul Gauguin Tahitian “idyll” is blasted as espousing colonialism. All of the other paintings in the same gallery get a pass even though they were generated by, and for, the same society.

The MFA exhibition stands out by tackling difficult topics directly and consistently through the exhibition narrative. In an introductory media piece (fig. 1), visitors learn that “the success of Dutch trade hinged in part on the labor of enslaved people,” and that approximately 550,000 enslaved Africans were forcibly taken to the Americas. One of seven galleries is dedicated to examining the collection through the lens of *Global Commerce* (fig. 2). Sugar is a major focus explored in a video and label copy. Visitors learn that the candies, cakes, and cookies featured in still life paintings, such as the 1610 painting on display by Osias Beert (fig. 3), were made possible by sugar produced on Dutch plantations in Brazil, where enslaved laborers survived an average of seven years. It is adjacent to a bucolic 1663

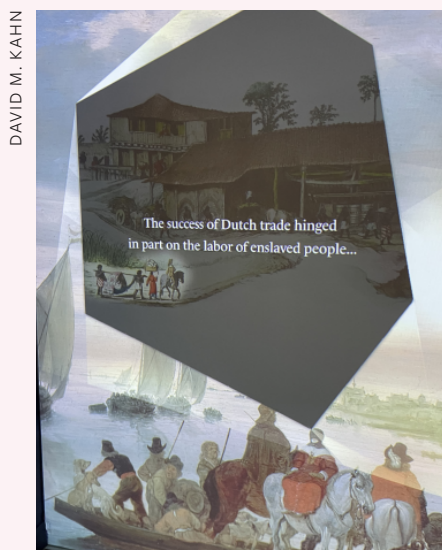


DAVID M. KAHN

**Fig. 2.** The *Global Commerce* gallery reveals connections between Dutch wealth and enslaved labor, inviting visitors to look at art from the Dutch Golden Age in new ways.

painting of a sugar plantation by Frans Post that is exposed as a colonialist fantasy. Elsewhere in the gallery, visitors encounter a 1680–83 portrait by Nicolaes Maes of Helena van Heuvel, who “wears silks, pearls, and jewelry” that were made possible by “coerced labor in mines and plantations.”

*Global Commerce* is one of two entire galleries the MFA has set aside in the exhibition to serve as a “laboratory” for exploring critical ideas – a much more effective approach than shoehorning slavery and colonialism into a label or two. The second experimental gallery explores the market forces that drove the art trade in the



DAVID M. KAHN

**Fig. 1.** Projected images and text fill the exhibition entrance introducing the difficult ideas explored throughout the MFA exhibition.



**Fig. 3.** Visitors learn that sweets depicted in still lifes (like this 1610 painting by Osias Bert) were made with sugar produced by enslaved laborers. (Promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art.)

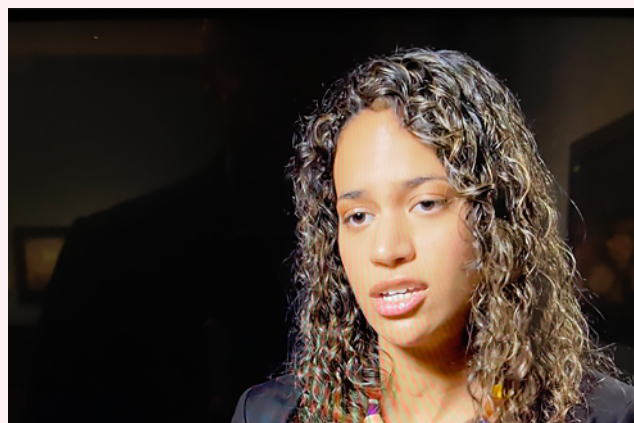
Netherlands (fig. 4). In addition to committing space, the MFA changed process. Diverse scholars from a variety of disciplines helped shape the content of the *New Galleries of Dutch and Flemish Art* and appear in videos (fig. 5). Label copy includes multiple perspectives from individuals ranging from a musician, to a chaplain, to a grief counselor.

I hope the MFA's commitment to setting aside space for experimentation and innovative interpretative approaches will be emulated by other art museums. It will be interesting to see what the Museum of Fine Arts and its Center for Netherlandish Art come up with next.

**David M. Kahn, Executive Director,**  
The Adirondack Experience



**Fig. 4.** A range of interpretive media, including data visualizations, videos, and label copy are used to provide visitors with new perspectives on Dutch art. (William A. Coolidge Gallery)



**Fig. 5.** Videos bring in current, authoritative, and representative voices, like that of Dr. Mary Ellen Hicks, who discusses sugar and slavery's connection to Dutch history and art.