Exhibition Critique

Fire! Fire!

Museum of London
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A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features a critique of a current or recent exhibition.

Theater and Sensation Engage Visitors in the Great Fire of London

Lucy Trench

The Great Fire is seared on the memory of Britain. In a roaring holocaust that raged for three days in September 1666, it reduced to ashes the heart of London and left 100,000 people without a home. Few were killed, but churches, shops, livelihoods, and possessions were all destroyed. Eyewitness testimony of this great trauma survives in the diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, and generations of children have experienced the fire through fictionalized accounts or visits to the much-loved Museum of London. Now, to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the fire, the museum has mounted an exhibition, a 5,400-square-foot show that unashamedly borrows techniques from theater, disaster movies, and illustrated children's books to bring this cataclysmic event to life.

It is a journey from darkness to light, from the dark and narrow streets of medieval London to the freshly painted brick houses—compliant with new building regulations—of the modern city that was constructed after the fire. On entering the exhibition, visitors find themselves in a dark alley (fig. 1). The title *Fire! Fire!* shouts out in block capitals of charred wood; a wary black cat watches from the top of a wall; shadowy figures pass to and fro behind casement windows. Distant noises are heard—bells, dogs barking, laughter, a gentle bustle. More ominously, a voice, that of John Evelyn, describes a city "full of stink and darkness" with buildings as "deformed as the minds and confusions of the people."

It is pure theater. Objects are few: hardly more than an iron lamp on a staff and original wooden brackets that support the upper story of the constructed "set." Emerging from the alley, visitors encounter a genuine bread oven, indicating that the fire started in a bakery in Pudding Lane. In a highly effective digital intervention, we see a shower of sparks from the oven setting light to bundles of wood and sending billowing

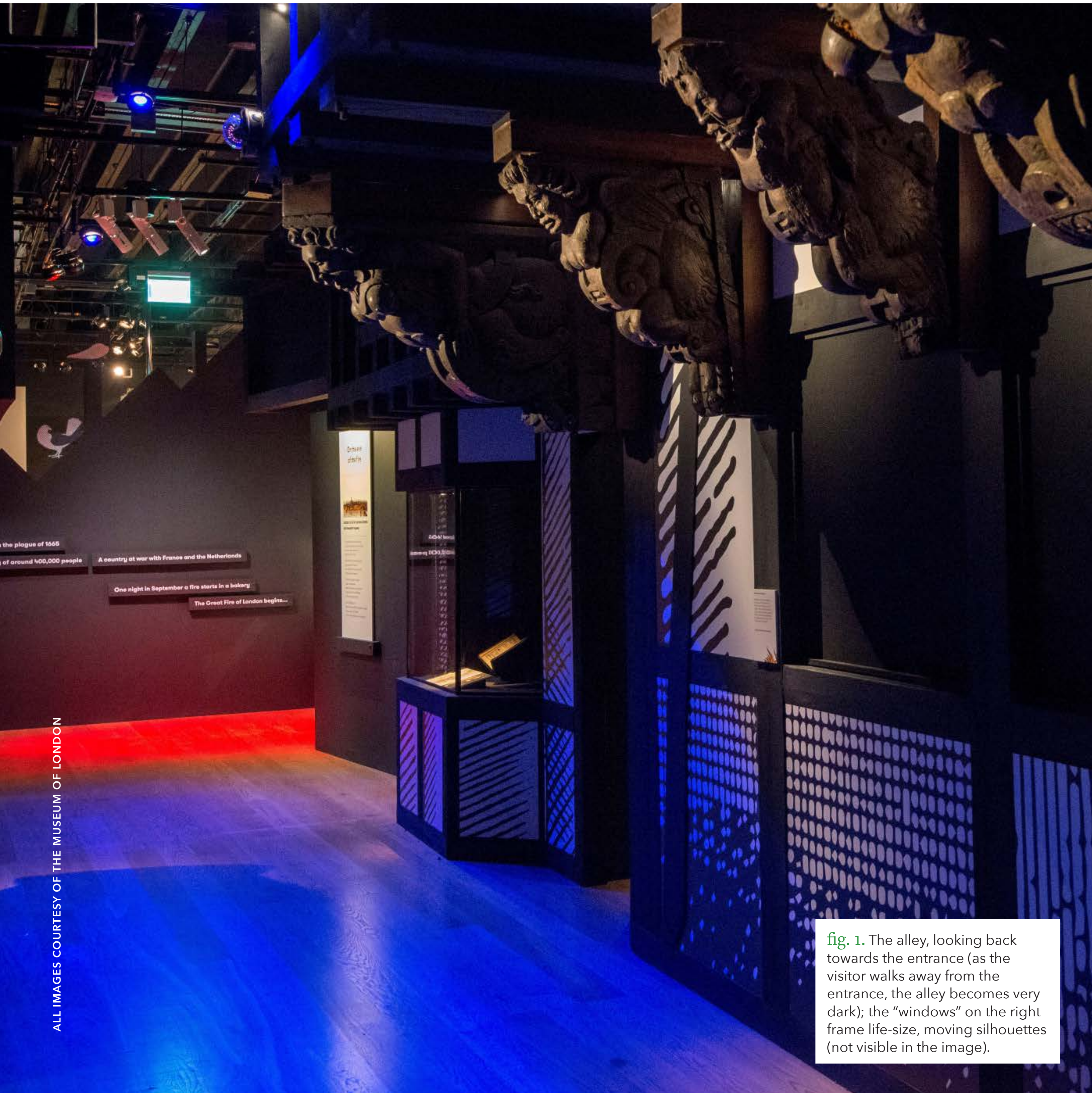

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fig. 1. The alley, looking back towards the entrance (as the visitor walks away from the entrance, the alley becomes very dark); the "windows" on the right frame life-size, moving silhouettes (not visible in the image).

clouds of smoke into the upper story (fig. 2). Silhouetted figures in nightgowns and nightcaps flee the burning house. This is brilliant. Reminiscent of drawings by children's book illustrator Jan Pienkowski, it is visual storytelling that requires little support from the panel text to explain how the fire started.

Better not to linger at the next installment of the story. Here, in an extraordinarily misjudged display, the center of the room is occupied by an enormous, flat "loaf" on which is projected a digital map showing the fire spreading through the city. Giant loaves of plastic "bread," like clouds in a bad painting, jostle across the ceiling, while around the walls wraps a timeline of the fire. As a didactic explanation of the spread of the fire, this does the job, but all the magic is lost.

The exhibition now shifts into a different gear. Visitors enter a large gallery in which the frames of burnt-out houses form a succession of wings, flames leap across the ceiling, and a moving, digital panorama of the fire engulfing the city spreads along the rear wall (fig. 3). Integrated into this dramatic scene are well-selected, highly eloquent objects: paintings showing the fire; a traveling trunk bound in gilded leather, in which people would have carried their treasured possessions to safety; broken crockery; an embroidered bed hanging said to have been rescued from a burning house.

fig. 2. The bakery in Pudding Lane, where the fire started. A dramatic digital animation shows sparks igniting a bundle of wood and smoke filling the building.

fig. 3. The digital panorama in the main gallery, with the fire expanding from a small glow to total combustion. The graphic style, including the depiction of the smoke, is taken directly from 17-century prints.

fig. 4. The main gallery, with touchable objects in front of the cases. This gallery offers visitors a rich sensory and emotional experience of the fire.

Visitors share in the predicament of Londoners fleeing the fire: what to take, what to leave, how to fight the fire with leather buckets, water squirts, and even gunpowder (to destroy the houses before they combust). To create this engagement, the interpretation pulls out all the stops. Handwritten letters and diaries with accompanying audio show the anguish and fear of the inhabitants, while quotations, placed high on the wall, describe how "the stones of St. Paul's flew like grenades." Touchable objects include burnt delftware plates and fragments of a tomb (fig. 4). A gamified digital interactive using the graphic style of 17th-century engravings takes visitors through the challenges of fire fighting. Hands-on activities include a lift-flap exploration of the city and a dress-up area in which children can try out coarse woolen gowns and replica firemen's hats made of hardened leather.

In the next gallery, the fire has died away. The fiery palette of the previous room is replaced by a cool, ashy grey. The drama has subsided, and instead, this is a time for reflection and inquiry. Text panels challenge rumors and myths about the fire. Who caused it? Was it foreigners or Catholics? (Neither, of course.) The content becomes more adult-oriented. Here, the emphasis is on the rebuilding of London, conveyed through maps, plans, and surveying tools. Despite the change of tempo, there is still sensory enhancement. Alongside a hefty, 18th-century fire engine is a wall-mounted digital animation that generates a rhythmic squeaking sound as two men operate the pump handles (fig. 5). And in a display of burnt metalwork and ceramics, visitors can press a button to light up an X-ray that reveals hidden parts beneath the encrustations.

The gradual move from an immersive, built environment to a more conventional display suggests that the museum is setting out to appeal to disparate audiences: independent adults, families, and school groups. With fire on the National Curriculum for five to seven year olds, many of the children will be within that age range. Few exhibitions are so courageous in embracing the challenge of providing content that genuinely appeals to young children and also to adults with dedicated interests. Yet it works in *Fire! Fire!*—probably because it has been done with imagination and commitment.
Even in the final room, there are moments for young visitors. A generous plinth, its surface a map of London, holds dozens of wooden bricks for the "rebuilding" of London. On a Saturday afternoon, a baby was happily playing with the bricks while her mother constructed houses and walls.

Another audience that appears to be on the agenda is adult literacy groups. The introductory panels have been written in the Ekarv format, a system that was developed in Sweden for use with adult literacy classes. Ekarv follows specific guidelines, with line breaks at natural pauses in a sentence and only one idea per line. It takes great skill to write Ekarv successfully, and often the text looks disconcertingly like a bad poem:

> For around 60 years kings have tried
> to make people build new houses in
> brick to create a more attractive city
> that is less of a fire risk.

Fortunately, in the secondary panels and in the labels, the text is exemplary. Vivid

fig. 5. The gallery that explores the aftermath of the fire. Here the palette is cool, and the rhythmic squeaking of the water pump creates a sense of calm control.

and evocative, full of action and empathy, it makes a significant contribution to the multi-sensory, multi-audience experience of this show. Take an example of a quotation from an eyewitness:

> ...owners shove as much of their goods as they can towards the gates. Everyone now becomes a porter...it was very sad to see such throngs of poor citizens... heavy loaden with weighty grief and sorrow of heart.

Elsewhere, questions encourage readers to look closely at objects, or encourage them to think of how they would act in such a crisis:

> Money, musical instruments, pets and Parmesan cheese were just some of the things that were rescued. Reports are full of tales of exhausted people moving belongings from one friend's house to another as the fire spread.... What would you save today?

Family labels, on a dark brown background and illustrated by a cartoon, have a storybook quality. The skeleton of bishop that fell out of a coffin is described as having "flesh on but all tough and dry like a spongy dry leather." Not unexpectedly, children tended to ignore these family labels in favor of more interactive experiences. But adults clearly found all the text enjoyable, and were reading it out loud to younger members of their group—a sign of success.

Observing the many visitors, I felt the exhibition was indeed a rich sensory and cognitive learning experience—one that brings families together and is likely to stamp the imagination of a new generation of Londoners. As a museum professional, I felt the interpretation was sound, the messages clear, and the appeal to different audiences successful. Design purists might say that the concept was cheesy and overblown. Certainly, the exhibition felt like a sum of parts. The many interpretation devices that had been used to stimulate visitor engagement were admirable, but there was something clunking about the way they came together. The exhibition never quite lifted off into a truly exhilarating immersive experience. But perhaps I am being over critical: on a gray winter afternoon, visitors young and old were having a good time. ■

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