

CHINA AND SCOTLAND

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Fig. 1. Installation view of the Strathallan Castle wallpaper at PEM.

IN SALEM

CREATING AN UNPERIOD ROOM AT THE PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

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He goes to a local artist and commissions an entire room of hand-painted wallpaper. No birds or flowers for him. He wants to be surrounded by the entire city of Guangzhou.

How do you evoke a place that you may never have been to? What if that place exists between memory and imagination? Even before entering the Sean M. Healey Family Gallery of Asian Export Art at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, visitors are transported elsewhere by a soundscape featuring the quiver of a Chinese erhu and the bleat of a Scottish bagpipe. When rounding the corner into the heart of the gallery, visitors find themselves in an immersive 1,000-square-foot room dedicated to the display of a single work of art – a 19-panel set of Chinese wallpaper depicting the port at Guangzhou ([fig. 1](#)). Over 10 feet high and running more than 70 feet in length, the set of paper was hand-painted in Guangzhou in about 1800.

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The installation of the Strathallan Castle wallpaper, as this object has come to be known, is a major component of PEM’s permanent display of Asian export art, an internationally significant collection of cross-cultural works of art from Asia. As part of the larger planning for the Healey Gallery, which opened to the public in September 2019, the exhibition team spent nearly two years brainstorming, prototyping, and designing a new approach to the installation and interpretation of this important work of art.

PEM is committed to creating innovative experiences and rich content for our visitors in both our changing exhibitions and collections galleries. This deeply collaborative and labor-intensive work involves staff across multiple departments, often working alongside external partners.¹ Together, this collegial team explored diverse ways to create an accessible and inspiring experience for as broad an audience as possible.

Museums have a long history of installing period rooms – spaces recreating historic interiors that sometimes include architectural elements, furniture, textiles, and decorative arts that replicate what would have originally furnished a room at a particular point in history. In addition to administering 12 historic houses, PEM holds the distinction of preserving the earliest surviving period rooms in an American museum. George Francis Dow, the secretary to the Essex Institute (one of PEM’s precursor institutions), recreated three domestic interiors in 1907 (fig. 2). Dow tried to “heighten the illusion of actual human occupancy,” by populating the rooms with personal objects like a newspaper, spectacles, and half-knitted stockings, a method that influenced the interpretation of period rooms in American museums at large.² As we began planning for the Strathallan Castle wallpaper installation, we considered how we could enhance Dow’s pioneering model for 21st-century audiences.

From the outset, the team wanted to create the antithesis of a quiet and staid period room where the wallpaper might simply serve as an elegant backdrop. Nor did we want to use traditional labels to provide content. Instead, we sought to tell the story of this wallpaper in an entirely new way, striving to create a moving, surprising, and delightful experience. We wanted to ensure that the wallpaper took center stage in an installation that conjured memory, sparked imagination, and conveyed a compelling narrative about this 200+ year old work of art. In our planning for the gallery, we often referred to this approach as an “unperiod” room. But precisely what form should it take?

The project’s interpretive planner led introductory brainstorming sessions in which the team established our goals for the installation. Together, we resolved to create a multisensory environment that would transport visitors from China to Scotland and back again, two key places in the long history of this work of art.



Fig. 2. A period room recreating a colonial American kitchen at the Essex Institute installed by George Francis Dow in 1907. Courtesy of the Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum.



Fig. 3. Five panels of the Strathallan Castle wallpaper featuring the foreign factories in Guangzhou. Artists in Guangzhou, China. A Complete Set of Chinese Wallpaper (detail), about 1800. Museum purchase in honor of William R. Sargent, made possible by the Lee and Juliet Folger Fund and an anonymous donor, 2006, AE86556.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STRATHALLAN CASTLE WALLPAPER

After many years living in China, James Drummond (1767–1851), 8th Lord Viscount of Strathallan, headed home to cold and rainy Scotland. During his time in Guangzhou, he’d made a fortune as a merchant in the British East India Company, and he likely wanted to bring home something to remind him of the vibrant port city in which he’d lived and worked for nearly two decades.

For over 100 years Guangzhou was the only port in China open to foreign trade. Merchants from around the world flocked to the city’s waterfront. The Chinese empire restricted foreigners’ access to a cluster of Western-style buildings called *hongs*, or factories, located along the Pearl River. By 1800 this small enclave was one of the most cosmopolitan places in the world. Here, Chinese merchants interacted with the foreign traders who made fortunes shipping tea, porcelain, and other goods to distant markets in Europe, South Asia, Africa, and the Americas.³

Artists in Guangzhou often painted views of the city as souvenirs for the foreign merchants residing there. These hybrid works of art – some on inexpensive pith paper, others in oil on canvas – were available to suit nearly any budget. James Drummond’s hand-painted wallpaper is one of the most expensive and elaborate examples known to us. Most Chinese export wallpaper features birds and flowers or scenes of tea, silk, and porcelain production. But Drummond’s unique set features a panorama of the Pearl River and the foreign factories where he had resided in Guangzhou (fig. 3).

The scenery on each panel is divided into several levels. In the lower level of the most distinctive five panels in the set, merchants fly their national flags in front of the foreign factories. The Pearl River is bustling with activity and crowded with boats of every kind. In the upper levels, we see idealized scenes of everyday life in Guangzhou. When installed on the walls of Strathallan Castle, Drummond’s home outside of Perth, Scotland, these scenes would have conjured evocative memories of China for Drummond, something we hoped to replicate for our visitors.

Fig. 5.

Data collection device used for observation during prototyping.

GOALS, PROTOTYPING, AND EVALUATION

The team developed three distinct goals for the interpretation of this object:

1. To explore the role of memory and souvenirs in evoking a place once visited.
2. To ensure that our visitors understood something about Guangzhou in 1800.
3. To invite visitors to understand the uniqueness of Drummond's wallpaper through both close looking and content delivery.

More than a year before the opening of the gallery, the team laid the groundwork to iteratively test interpretive and design strategies for the installation with target audiences. In an empty gallery, we erected a

full-scale prototype of the Strathallan Castle wallpaper installation (fig. 4). The test space approximated the exhibition as we envisioned it, with reproductions of the wallpaper panels and prototypes of the interpretive devices we proposed incorporating (text, soundscape, timed lighting, digital media, and prop furniture).⁴

The invitation to provide feedback on this behind-the-scenes glimpse at the museum's design process drew eager participants to the study...

Having set the physical stage, we turned our attention to capturing visitors' behaviors in, and reactions to, the space. Bridget Devlin, PEM's chief evaluation planner, worked with the team to develop key evaluation questions and a plan for data-collection methods.

Fig. 4.

Members of the team discuss interpretive approaches and future testing within the Strathallan prototype.



Recruitment in Atrium

[Sample script] Hello and welcome to the Peabody Essex Museum. My name is _____ and I'm talking with visitors today to test out a new exhibition experience we are developing for the future gallery. It will take about 10-15 minutes, depending on how long you want to explore and talk.

[Circle entrance participant begins at.]

Made in China

St: _____ End: 12

St: _____ End: _____

Points ☐

Talks ☐

Gobos 15:00 6:20

St: 15 End: 22

St: _____ End: _____

Points ☐

Talks ☐

FLAGS Wallpaper

St: 1:24 End: 3:02

St: _____ End: _____

Point ☒

Talks ☒ partner at counter

Annotation

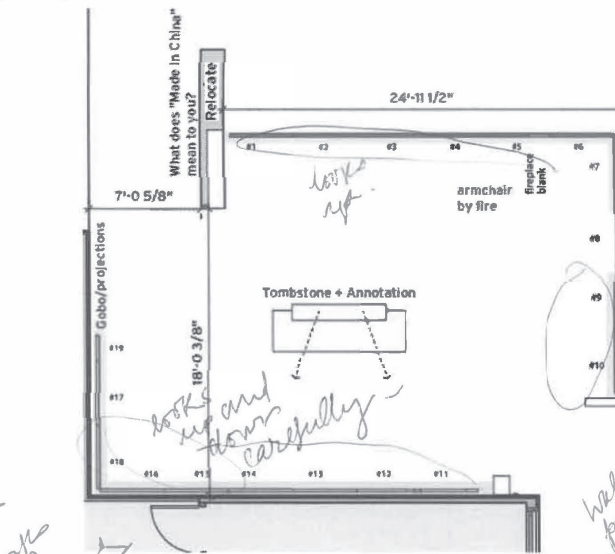
St: 2:4 End: 1:17

St: _____ End: _____

Point ☐

Talks ☐

Looks Wallpaper ☒



General notes/comments:

Date (mm/dd/yy): 10/17/18

Collector Initials_ID# ("BD01"): BD12

Clock in (hh:mm): 1:49 pm

Clock out (hh:mm): 1:55 pm

"How Far..."/MAP

St: _____ End: _____

St: _____ End: _____

Points ☐

Talks ☐

Map ☐

Armchair/Fireplace

St: _____ End: _____

St: _____ End: _____

Points ☐ Sits ☐

Talks ☐ Looks ☐

Props ☐ Wallpaper ☐

FIRE Wallpaper

St: 3:24 End: 5:54

St: _____ End: _____

Points ☒

Talks ☒

can't imagine having to do all of this

Over the course of four weeks, she and her team of three evaluators observed 61 visitors in the prototype.⁵ Data collectors first timed and tracked visitors within the space, capturing stops, specific behaviors, and overheard comments (fig. 5). Then, immediately following each prototype observation, data collectors conducted brief interviews, asking visitors to share their experience in the space, how they would describe the main idea, whether they noticed the soundscape, and whether anything about the space was unclear to them.

The invitation to provide feedback on this behind-the-scenes glimpse at the museum's design process drew eager participants to the study, and the evaluation team experienced only a handful of refusals to participate. Data from these individual observations and follow-up

interviews helped the team understand where there might be pain points or confusion in navigating the space as well as which exhibition elements were helping to deliver on experiential outcomes. For example, some visitors didn't know what to do, or rather what they were *allowed to do*, with the furniture props – an armchair and side table set with a teacup and book – situated by a video monitor of a fireplace. Midway through the prototype observations, the team added a small sign inviting visitors to sit in the armchair and touch the props on the side table. Prior to the sign being present, only 33 percent of visitors stopped, no one sat down, and 1 percent touched the props. During observations after the sign had been added to the space, 88 percent of visitors stopped, 35 percent sat down, and 60 percent touched the props.

Furthermore, the interviews following each observation helped the team gain a deeper understanding of what visitors took away from the multisensory experience. For example, when asked about the soundscape in the space, nine visitors specifically pointed to the dual nature of the experience – transporting them to both China and Scotland.

As one visitor described (emphasis added):

I hadn't realized that it was possible to create a mural in a room where you felt as if you really were in the center of a bustling city. I didn't see things move but I could feel...the activity. I could feel the boats...I could hear the people talking and walking and moving around...it came to life for me. *I felt mostly transported to that city.* I did, but my feeling was...*the person who bought that mural felt it was a way to be in two places at once.*

Another visitor spoke to the nostalgia the experience evoked:

I feel like I'm put into the creator's perspective of what this room was...I felt very emotional, like it makes you feel the nostalgia for this place. I felt very overwhelmed...in a beautiful way.... And just like, you don't miss it. *It's just...a beautiful thing that you're surrounded by your home even though your home is now thousands of miles away.*

In addition to collecting prototype observations and interviews, the evaluation team conducted three focus groups – one with a group of seven Asian American educators living and working in Greater Boston and two with groups of PEM guides.⁶ Participants were invited to explore the space as a group and then sit for an in-depth conversation about their experiences and reflections. Each educator received a \$100 stipend for their time and participation in these discussions.

During the focus-group conversation with the Asian American educators, who teach students from third grade through university, participants encouraged the exhibition-planning team to think about how we interpret both the Western perspective of Drummond's individual story, and the many stories of the lives of the Chinese people depicted in the wallpaper (emphasis added):

What I didn't like...it is very much from that one perspective actually. So, the perspective of a Western foreigner – *his* living room, *his* souvenir, *his* interpretation of Guangzhou for *his* pleasure. Even from the perspective of the panels from the outside in. It's like the perspective from the water looking into the land is very much a Western perspective.

And another participant noted:

So, what this conversation really has brought to me is *the ability of the wallpaper to introduce a multiplicity of perspectives about not just the wallpaper but all the exhibits in Asian export arts...* Who were the people who made these objects? What were their lives like? What were the economic circumstances that they lived in? You know, were they poor or did they make a decent living from the art?

Based on the educators' feedback, we opted not to include a reproduction of James Drummond's portrait in the interpretive labeling for the wallpaper, centering the text on his experience in China, rather than his biography. Self-reflexive questions at the entrances to the gallery similarly help to shift the focus of the interpretation toward each visitor's impressions and experience. We also added specific elements to the soundscape to represent the diverse community in Guangzhou. Throughout the gallery, we enhanced content on the skills of the Asian artists who created these remarkable works of art.

The full-scale prototyping conducted for Strathallan was the most extensive exercise of this kind that PEM had ever attempted. The time we spent speaking with and listening to our various communities allowed us to move forward with final decisions about interpretation and display, confident that:

1. Visitors were elated by the invitation to get up close to the paper itself.
2. Some contextualizing wall text was critical to setting up the narrative.
3. Our interpretive approach needed to balance the diverse perspectives of Drummond, those depicted in the wallpaper, and our visitors.
4. Sound was the key to transporting and immersing visitors in the story and experience.

FINAL INSTALLATION

When the Sean M. Healey Family Gallery of Asian Export Art opened in 2019, it marked the first time that the entire set of wallpaper was on display since it was removed from the walls of Strathallan Castle. We installed the wallpaper in roughly its original configuration to give visitors a sense of the room's scale and to replicate how the narrative elements would have enveloped viewers in Scotland. Based on visitors' desire to get close to the paper during prototyping, we encased the panels behind 8mm-thick Glas Trösch Luxar® safety laminated anti-reflective glass, which – while protecting the paper – makes it appear as though there is virtually no glazing at all.⁷

We incorporated written content into the space in four areas, each delivered in a different way. Even before visitors enter the gallery, they are confronted with questions that are designed to prepare them to think critically and imaginatively about the works of art they are about to see:

*How far would you go to get what you want?
If your walls could talk, what stories would they tell?*

Within the Strathallan exhibit itself, a brief narrative projected on the wall quickly sets the tone, introducing visitors to the main characters (Drummond, the city of Guangzhou, and the wallpaper), and evoking the importance this memento held for Drummond. The projected narrative, broken up into short sentences, is timed to coincide with shifts in the sound and light display. In front of the five panels featuring the foreign factories, an angled text panel includes object information, some specific details about the paper itself, and a pocket holding takeaway scavenger hunt activity guides. Geared primarily for young or family audiences, these pamphlets invite visitors to look closely at the wallpaper as they move through the room to discover more about the people, buildings, and activities depicted. Lastly, a wall panel entitled “Meet James Drummond” offers brief biographical information about the original owner.

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For the multimedia components of the space, Jim Olson, Director of Integrated Media, partnered with the nationally renowned sound designer Earprint Immersive and its principal, Jason Reinier, to build a first-of-its-kind 24-channel directional sound system.⁸ We also worked with local firms Available Light and 4Wall Entertainment on lighting solutions and technology integration. The result is an immersive, 90-second object-theater experience that uses directional sound and coordinated lighting effects to evoke the idea that visitors are with Drummond as he reminisces about his time working in and around



the foreign settlement in Guangzhou, his thoughts and memories jumping from China to Scotland and back again.

In creating the soundscape, we tried to source authentic sounds that would evoke the physical space of Strathallan Castle and Drummond's memories of Guangzhou. We commissioned bagpiper and local Salem resident Nate Silva to research and perform the tunes that are played in the space. At the same time, we commissioned Brookline resident Tao He to play the erhu for us, performing songs that a Chinese street musician might have played in the early 19th century. We also recorded conversations in Cantonese, Portuguese, Malay, Gujarathi, and Swedish, five of the myriad languages that were spoken in the hongs to conduct business.

This unique sound and light experience encourages visitors to lean in and listen to the details found in

the wallpaper, like flapping flags, water softly lapping up against docked boats, the sounds of a busy port, and even a call to prayer above the panel featuring the minaret of the oldest mosque in China. When the lights are centered on the foreign factories, visitors are transported to China through these sounds. Halfway through the experience, as the sound shifts from the erhu to the bagpipes and we hear the patter of rain on the window and a clattering tea cup, the lights move to the opposite wall, an area of the room meant to evoke Scotland through the tableau of a crackling fire and cozy armchairs (fig. 6). Our Manager of Media Production painstakingly recorded hours of a burning fire in a period-appropriate hearth, creating a looping video that plays on an embedded monitor within the recreation of a fireplace surround. Visitors are invited to sit in armchairs beside the fire to be enveloped by and admire scenes on the paper in unexpected ways. A wool throw in Drummond's own tartan adds a final touch of place.

Fig. 6. Visitors take in the soundscape by the fire in the Sean M. Healey Family Gallery of Asian Export Art.

CONCLUSION

There are several key takeaways from our journey:

1. Prototyping is key but requires time. Start early!
2. Spending a little money up front can prevent costly mistakes in the final product.
3. Gathering perspectives from different audiences will help guide interpretation.
4. Just because you did a lot of research, doesn't mean you need to share all of it. Center visitor experience over content delivery.
5. When engaging with community partners, compensate them for their time, work to integrate their feedback, and acknowledge their contributions.

Due to staff changes and the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not yet conducted formal summative studies of the installation. What is clear from our informal observation of visitors and on guided tours of the space is that the room creates a memorable, empathy-inducing, and thought-provoking moment for our visitors that elevates their experiences in new and engaging ways. We sought to bring the room to life and help visitors experience the wallpaper as Drummond had when it was first installed in Scotland. As the soundscape grabs visitors' attention and transports them to a different time and place, the subtle theatrical lighting guides their eyes around the wallpaper to reveal a narrative about the past. We hope it also inspires visitors to consider the power of memory and place to shape who we are. ■

1 The team for the Strathallan wallpaper exhibit included the authors of this article and Andrea D'Amato, Lead Exhibition Designer; Jeanne Goswami, Interpretation Planner; Betsy Hopkins, Graphic Designer; Caitlin Lowrie, Exhibitions Project Manager; J. David O'Ryan, Lead Preparator; Dave Seibert, Senior Exhibition Designer; Corbett Sparks, Manager of Audio Visual Services; and Chip van Dyke, Manager of Media Production, working closely with Jason Reinier, Principal at Ear Print Immersive and now a Sound Designer at Art Processors.

2 Dianne H. Pilgrim, "Inherited from the Past: The American Period Room," *American Art Journal* 10, no. 1 (1978): 8–11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1594106>.

3 Throughout the gallery, we sought to share new perspectives on this complicated history, particularly exploring the uncomfortable truth that many of the profits from this trade were derived from illegal opium smuggling. For more on this approach, see Jeanne Goswami, "Every Eleven Minutes," blog post, *Connected*, October 9, 2019. <https://www.pem.org/blog/every-eleven-minutes>.

4 At this early stage in the exhibition's development, PEM's Manager of Audio Visual Services created a prototype audiotrack that transported visitors from China to Scotland and back again through the use of specific sounds and musical instruments.

5 Working with Bridget Devlin were Cristy Hebert, Evaluation Associate, and Rebecca Helgeson and Amy Freesun, Fall 2018 Evaluation Fellows.

6 The educators we worked with were individuals who, at the time, were not bringing their students to the museum. We engaged them to understand how to make the gallery more relevant to them, their students, and their curricula. The guides we spoke with were actively giving tours in the museum and were already familiar with the wallpaper. Together, these groups provided us with a broad range of perspectives.

7 We are grateful for support from the Lee and Juliet Folger Fund, which made it possible to use this high-grade glass in the installation.

8 For more on the development of the soundscape, see Jim Olson, "If These Walls Could Speak," blog post, *Connected*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.pem.org/blog/if-these-walls-could-speak>.