

Exhibitions at the V&A and Serpentine juxtaposing the traditional and the contemporary are unexpectedly beautiful, says **Richard Dormant**

Museums of moving images

For a national museum to allow the German conceptual artist Hans Haacke to work with its collections is a little like hiring Typhoid Mary to take charge of the catering arrangements. Born in 1937, Haacke has gained worldwide notoriety for his ferociously critical analyses of the museum establishment. His career has been marked at different times by cancelled shows, embarrassed directors, fired curators, and threatened lawsuits — as well as by international acclaim culminating in the highest award at the 1993 Venice Biennale.

Haacke looks at museums not simply as buildings that house works of art, but as embodiments of the social systems that formed them. For him, an art museum necessarily reveals the hidden values and secret agendas of those who founded it and added to its collections. Deeply aware of the interconnections between wealth, art, popular culture and politics, Haacke is as likely to focus on the business activities of the museum's trustees or on its exhibition policies and advertising campaigns as he is on the objects displayed in it.

So when I heard that the Serpentine Gallery had invited him to choose any works he wished from the Victoria and Albert Museum

— as part of *Give & Take*, the joint exhibition being held at both locations — and display them in its beautiful gallery in Kensington Gardens, I sat up and paid attention. In my mind's eye, I saw the encounter in terms of the museum's most popular exhibit, the clockwork toy Tippoos's Tiger, with the V&A in the role of the prostrate Englishman and Haacke as the ravaging beast tearing him to pieces.

But, no matter how long I do this job, I never seem to learn that artists rarely do what you expect them to do. From the moment you step into the exhibition at the Serpentine, it is clear that Haacke was utterly enchanted by the opportunity to work with the most spectacular collection of decorative art in the world. His show, *Mixed Messages*, is more of a pussycat's purr than a tiger's growl, at different times charming, humorous, beautiful and moving.

On the four walls of the central rotunda, for example, Haacke has chosen objects to represent four of the world's great religions. A 13th-century carved and polychromed crucifix hangs opposite an 18th-century gilded Buddha, and a 17th-century embroidered Torah mantle is placed opposite two 19th-century silk prayer carpets. Haacke then animates the austere installation by placing a giant

plaster cast of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* in the centre of the gallery. Within the context he has created for it, the bound, twisting, tormented figure seems to yearn for faith — or rather for contact with something outside himself, whether that something is visualised as the human embodiment of compassion or peace (as in Christianity or Buddhism) or whether it is unseen, mysterious, and all-pervasive (as in Judaism and Islam).

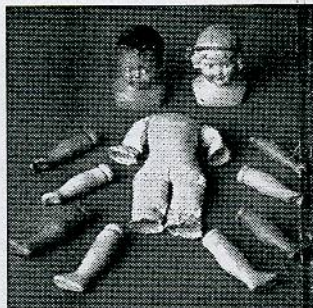
Elsewhere, Haacke illustrates the way the V&A's collection inevitably reflects past and present attitudes towards race, sex, class and nationhood — but, because he all but omits the customary outrage or moral superiority, the effect is more matter-of-fact than piercingly critical. He is particularly interested in the V&A's origins in Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's sponsorship of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Using HC Selous's panoramic depiction of the opening ceremony as a focal point, he assembles a wealth of rarely seen photos, prints, posters and objects that subvert or contradict Selous's image of benevolence, prosperity and tolerance.

For example, he has borrowed a selection of black dolls and statues from the V&A's Museum of Childhood, rightly judging that such artefacts tell you a lot about the cultural and social values of the time and place in which they were made. So you get the whole spectrum of attitudes towards race, from the cliché of the golliwog and the contradiction of a negro head carved in white marble to the surprise of a doll made in England during the first quarter of the 20th century in which the heads and limbs of a black boy and a white girl are interchangeable.

The most visually successful gallery is dominated by Canova's life-sized marble of a sleeping nymph, surrounded by a surrealistic display of objects that look as though they have floated up out of her dreams. Mounted above an 18th-century French balcony on the end wall, is an embroidered silk ceremonial robe from China, its empty sleeves outspread as though

to embrace Canova's vulnerable sleeper. A life-sized photograph of a former warder at the V&A stands in a corner, appearing to leer at the nude nymph.

She, in turn, could be dreaming of a Versace evening dress, which looks a lot like the suit of Saracen chain mail armour across the room. Haacke loves to set up chain reactions of visual similarities. To take just one example, the sinuous torso of the Canova nymph is echoed in a bronze nude by Rodin, and picked up by a *femme fatale* in a woodcut by Edvard Munch. It goes without saying that the show reminds us that the V&A is a cornucopia of half-hidden treasures, but it tells us something important about Haacke himself: that he is still a consummate aesthete who responds to



Surprising: the V&A's black-and-white doll

works of art in a visceral, passionate and sensuous way.

The exhibition is in two parts. In the second half of the show, 14 contemporary artists are showing work at the V&A alongside objects from the permanent collection. This is exactly the sort of stunt I usually hate. So often, these modern interventions are gimmicky, insensitive, and finally tell us nothing either about the art permanently on display or the modern works. But I must admit that the selection has been thoughtful, and that the placement of the contemporary work as often as not enhances the art in the galleries in which it is shown. If you are going to do shows such as this, I can't imagine one being done better.

To take one example, using a contemporary artist whose work I don't normally rate

highly, lush colour photos by the American Andres Serrano hang in the Renaissance sculpture galleries. A close-up of an incision in the leg of a corpse placed next to a German 15th-century carving of *Christ Showing His Wounds* makes sense both visually and thematically. I hadn't taken in the German statue before; now I have. The juxtaposition has worked.

I don't have space to discuss all the artists in this show, and anyway most of the work is self-explanatory. But I want to draw your attention to the one artist who beat Mr Haacke at his own game of subverting pretty much everything that the V&A stands for. To make Q&A, V&A 2000, the American Ken Aptekar invited visitors — Barbadian women, people with learning difficulties or Down's syndrome — to the picture galleries on the fourth floor of the museum. He then told them to imagine that they could choose any painting in the collection to take home with them, on the condition that they justified their choice by articulating their reason for liking it. From these conversations he compiled short texts, which he then engraved on glass panels superimposed over his own freely painted copies of the works of art being discussed.

This could so easily have been sentimental and awful. I can only tell you that it is anything but. The only way to convey the poetic resonance of these works is to quote one text in full. Superimposed over a copy of Thomas Gainsborough's double portrait of his two daughters, we read:

"The hand holding the hair? It's a gentle, almost loving touch," Christina Shaw tells me, "an encouragement. You can see the suffering in the girl looking out, maybe from a long-term illness or from something much deeper than that. There's a hollow emptiness, like she's given up. The other one is trying to tell her that all is not lost, that she is loved."

Christina doesn't know that the sisters suffered from mental illness as adults, nor that after Mary divorced following a brief marriage, she and Margaret lived together for the rest of their lives and are buried in a churchyard in Hanwell, in the same tomb.

Aptekar's point is that people respond deeply to paintings as long as they are allowed to. It is the label-writing art historians, curators and critics who come between the viewer and the work of art. Even if you make allow-

ances for Aptekar's sophisticated interviewing technique, the depth of feeling and understanding he has elicited calls into question the whole way in which art is taught, written about and presented. His work couldn't be more appropriate in the light of the recent controversies over how art should be shown in our museums.

'Give & Take' is at the Serpentine Gallery and the V&A until April 1.