
ENVIRONMENTAL
CARTLIDGE LEVENE
—
V&A CERAMICS GALLERIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH
IAN CARTLIDGE & BEN TIBBS

Personnel **Four**

Location **London, United Kingdom**

Established **1987**

Founders **Ian Cartlidge & Adam Levene**

Online **www.cartlidgelevene.co.uk**



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CARTLIDGE LEVENE

A studio of just four people, London-based Cartlidge Levene emanates talent through its inspiring longevity in the design world. Established in 1987, the studio has been in operation for almost 23 years.

Cartlidge Levene's history is that of considered and functional design, and despite the studio's age, its work remains apt, fresh and streamline. Cartlidge Levene prides itself on pragmatism and an exceptional eye for detail, ideals that are echoed in recent signage and wayfinding projects for *Guardian News & Media* and the *Barbican Arts Centre*. Similarly, its emphasis on creative thought, client familiarity and brilliant simplicity is seen in solutions for the *Tate Modern*, *Hewlett-Packard* and the *City of London*.

With incomparable experience, a concise dedication to excellence and an undeniable flare for trend, Cartlidge Levene promise to be a force within the industry for the foreseeable future.

When was Cartlidge Levene first approached by the V&A, and what were the initial brief and requirements?

We were first approached in December 2006. We were invited to take part in a pitch and we put together an initial creative response to the brief. The existing ceramic galleries had opened in 1909—the objective of the [current] project was to restore clarity, both intellectually and visually, which had been lost during the preceding 100 years. One of the biggest challenges was perceived to be the density of display—how could we ensure clarity and easily navigable information in such a display?

With over 3,000 objects on display across six galleries, how did you initially approach the overall style and concept?

Although our creative pitch contained several concepts for introducing identity and narrative into the galleries (such as the large relief lettering displaying ceramics processes which survived right through to the finished galleries) we started by looking at the labels. This was at the heart of the display and by focusing on these initially, we created the identity effectively inside out, starting with the micro and working out to the macro. We then developed the visual language and added large-scale graphic interventions where appropriate to add richness and to act as navigational aids.

You worked closely with both the V&A curatorial team and architects *Stanton Williams*. In what ways did working collaboratively alter the design process?

It was imperative that we engaged with both the V&A curatorial team and with the architects *Stanton Williams*. The display tells the story of world ceramics from the earliest Chinese pottery to contemporary ceramic art. We had to understand this story and the curators' object display concept in order to design the graphic interpretation. In terms of the architecture, this permanent gallery with a life span of 20-plus years could only work if the graphics were fully integrated with the architectural display. This meant many hours of coordination meetings and an extremely close working relationship with *Stanton Williams*.

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From magnetic substrate to 3D letters in the cornice, the system takes on many different forms. Generally speaking, what process do you use to determine the best choice of material and application?

Knowledge of the appropriateness of materials in certain conditions and the durability of materials is essential. But the only way of knowing for sure is to test concepts and materials in the galleries. Many mock-ups were made and carefully considered in the context of the gallery. Flexibility was a big issue when it came to the labels and the magnetic substrate provided the perfect solution to a system that looks permanent but is in fact easily changeable. We quickly decided that in terms of the labels the best way to achieve a sense of permanence was to create complete strips of labels spanning an entire showcase. If one object within a case changes then the V&A have to run out an entire label strip. This preserves the integrity of the label system.

A gallery is traditionally a space that separates the people from the objects, but components such as the opening and closing draws encourage interaction. How important is this, and how does it change the gallery experience?

You are referring to the 'Basic Making' piece in the 'Making Ceramics' gallery which was a real first for the V&A and the result of a close collaborative process between curators, architects and graphic designers. It is very unusual for the V&A as it is very hands-on, but the result is a powerful educational piece in the centre of the galleries. The key was to design it in such a way that it is fun and educational without being patronising or childlike. The objective was to appeal to a family audience, but adults should also be able to engage without feeling that they are being talked down to. These types of low-tech interactive displays can work well in galleries because, if done well, they don't date. If the same messages were achieved through using technology, in five years time the technology would look very out of date and need replacing. By keeping the interactivity 'low-tech' this is not an issue. The visitor also engages with the piece in an entirely different way to a screen-based interface—it is more physical and the experience more tactile. Of course, the durability of such a piece is an important consideration, so the large graphic lettering on the front of the furniture is produced in vitreous enamel which is highly durable and has a ceramic-like quality.





A project of this scope typically requires extensive detailing and scheduling. What are some of the challenges you face when dealing with such a high volume of components?

It is a challenge to deal with so many components using different materials and fabrication processes. A lot of administration is involved to keep track, but this is part and parcel of the design process in a project such as this. The key is that when everything comes together it looks continuous and seamless and part of a greater whole.

Given the nature of a signage system, how important is it to not only communicate clearly and efficiently, but to incorporate a visual identity?

The two go hand-in-hand. Both are absolutely vital in ensuring that the visitors' experience is fulfilled.



Throughout the project, Helvetica has been used exclusively. What was the reason for this choice? Were other typefaces considered?

Yes, we considered other typefaces very carefully. Initially we steered away from Helvetica because of its ubiquitous nature, however, the client kept coming back to Helvetica, especially in gallery user tests, as it is supremely legible at all text sizes and very forgiving across a range of light levels. For us, ultimately, it became a way of creating a suitably neutral backdrop but also a font which enabled us to bring modernity and timelessness to a display that spans 5,000 years.