

SLOAN T. HOWARD PHOTOGRAPHY

Exhibition
Power of Making
 Victoria and
 Albert Museum

★★★★★



Main pic: Alphabet
 by Dalton Ghetti
Above: Urban Picnic
 Table by Gareth Neal

Glitz, glamour and gorgeousness — that's probably what you think of when you think of a V&A show. From the bling of the maharajahs to the glittering tat that adorns our pop stars, they know how to lay on a fabulous exhibition. This one, however, is different. It's easy to forget when faced with a jewel-encrusted elephant or a particularly sumptuous chair where the impetus for displaying this comes from. This show is a reminder, and it is one of the most absorbing, educational and inspiring exhibitions I've seen.

The founding principle of the Museum of Manufactures (the V&A's original name) was "to make works of art available to all, to educate working

people and to inspire British designers and manufacturers". This exhibition, put together by the curator Daniel Charny in association with the Crafts Council, returns to that principle and reminds us of our integral relationship with skills — doing and making shape how we learn and develop. In an increasingly digitised world, it's ever more important to acknowledge this.

Once you've passed the gorilla made of coat hangers (by the artist David Mack), which stands at the entrance, there is no fixed route by which you navigate around this room of amazing things. Every visitor will have different highlights — cyclists might be struck by the very different bikes on display, from a hand-made, polished mahogany beauty made by a master boatbuilder to

the world's first workable nylon bicycle, "grown" on a 3-D printer, or one made entirely of wood (including a broom handle), without bolts or metal chains. None uses the traditional triangle shape — innovation building on an old technology. The carpenter Dalton Ghetti's line of graphite pencil nibs carved into a teeny-tiny alphabet will enchant all writers and draughtsmen, while knitters might be stunned by Peter Butcher's hand-embroidered surgical implant.

It looks like a doily, but placed under the skin this pretty snowflake provides a basis for a surgeon to replace lost tissue. Like the handmade saddle and the dry stone wall with which it shares a display, it's an example of an ancient skill, perfected by patient practice, that

remains utterly contemporary.

There is nothing here that is not firmly rooted in the present, however old the methods used to make it (these range from milling to etching, pattern-cutting to warm glassworking and are listed wherever used; a helpful glossary handout is provided).

This isn't an historical show, but a snapshot of making now, in the 21st century. Hence the "tinker space" at the back, where not only can you explore the ingenious possibilities of digital making with 3-D printers but view films and take part in a programme of workshops to learn more about the skills on display. I have a feeling it might be worth booking ahead.

Nancy Durrant
Exhibition runs to Jan 2