

Why size matters in Torquay Museum

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Torquay Museum

As part of the Secret Museum exhibition, Torquay Museum is endeavouring to display items that are rarely seen.

Perhaps the biggest challenge lies in the oversize objects that have found their way into the museum stores.

Getting some of these items on display may even be beyond this project.

There are some items that are held in the stores that museum staff would simply love the public to see, at least occasionally.

But the difficulty in moving them at all and finding some way of displaying them temporarily that is both safe for the public and the object prevents them from doing this.

Often it's only with the investment available through a permanent gallery redisplay can we find the resources to move these objects.

An obvious example of this is a beautiful 1,300-year old basalt rock carving of Surya, a Hindu sun god, that can be seen in the Explorers Gallery.

This exceptional object was in storage for many years, rarely seen due to its immense weight.

It was a truly forgotten object having even lost its donor information, staff are still not sure when or how it made its way to the museum.

It took the investment of the then Heritage Lottery Fund, to allow the museum to develop this gallery, which also provided the specialist expertise of a mount maker who could not only move this item but secure it on display.

Surya was eventually winched into place from a pulley system rigged from the roof beams, a nerve-racking experience.

This is not something to be attempted often and out of the means of a temporary exhibition.

In many ways displaying some of the museum's largest stored items has defeated staff.

They have an enormous trophy head of a buffalo in the natural history store, a full-size cased antelope is housed nearby and a very

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large brain coral which is both large and fragile. Their size has defied our ability to move them.

The museum has had to settle for some of the smaller trophy heads that were removed from display over 50 years ago and even these will be a struggle to hang.

Then there are the huge flat objects which include maps and cloth hangings. Again, these have defeated museum staff although with a little creativity, they will be able to show some of these as images on graphics and screens.

Many of these items are too large for framing and have often not been unrolled in years.

One huge piece of Tongan

bark cloth has only been unfolded once in the last 25 years and has never been displayed to the public. It won't be on display in this exhibition!

Museum staff are currently working on a smaller challenge: the Surya god has a smaller companion in a basalt rocking carving of a dwarf follower of Shiva. Although much lighter in weight, staff have the challenge of getting this carving down a staircase before they can get it to the exhibition space.

At the moment they don't know how they will do this, but they do have a plan. You will have to visit the exhibition when it opens in June to find out if it worked!



Trophy head of a buffalo in storage



Rock carving of Surya, a Hindu sun god, on display in the museum's Explorers Gallery



Cleaning the eland trophy head

Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

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