MAGNIFICENT MAPS AT THE BRITISH

The British Library's Magnificent Maps exhibition (30th April–19th September 2010) offered a unique opportunity for some of the world's greatest cartographic treasures to be shown in public, many for the first time. The exhibition's subject was the display map; maps made for the wall as opposed to the pages of a book, the pocket, or computer screen. These maps have qualified as cartographic greats due to their large size, exquisite artistry, and technical accomplishment, yet, they have not been sufficiently studied as a type, nor have their functions in their original settings been comprehensively analysed.

The purpose of the exhibition and accompanying book was therefore to highlight the levels of visual magnificence to which maps have previously aspired, to examine their original contexts and messages, and to look at the reasons for their creation in light of their often limited practical utility.

The history of display maps stretches back at least two thousand years. In the *Forma Urbis Romae*, a 27-foot-wide marble plan of Rome dating from 200 AD (of which five of the surviving fragments were loaned by the Capitoline Museums in Rome), we find the germ of cartographic wall decoration.

This Roman precedent was of great importance to the concept of European Renaissance cartographic displays, such as that most famous of map spaces, the Vatican's Galleria della carte geographiche of 1580-1585. The maps there are frescoes, painted onto walls, but display maps in manuscript and printed form were produced for rulers and the wealthy from at least

the mid fifteenth century. They acted as symbols of power, reflecting their owners' world views. Examples of these comprise the bulk of the exhibition's 100 exhibits, and they were selected almost exclusively from the British Library's collection of some 4.5 million, a number of which were formally in the possession of Kings of England.

The artistic quality of these maps was appropriate to the wealthy, cultured clientele for whom they were produced. For example, Diogo Homem's sea chart of 1570 was probably produced for a Venetian nobleman, and it is so covered in gold-leaf that it cannot have been intended for use on board a ship. In the same way,

Captain Mark Wood's manuscript map of the area south of Kolkata in India from 1784, a practical map made for General Sloper of the British Army, has been attractively rendered for the appreciation of its influential recipient. Captain Wood was promoted to surveyor general the following year, and perhaps the artistry of his map aided the progression of his career.

Similarly, the vast dimensions of many display maps reflected the stature of their owners, as well as the size of their dwellings. But they pose the question of why one would produce a map which was so big as to be virtually unreadable.

Johann Christoph Müller's landmark map of Bohemia of 1722 measures approximately seven by eight feet, and even though it was often issued as 25 separate sheets, when fully assembled, the top of it would have been virtually unreadable from the ground. The Klencke atlas of 1660, presented to Charles II of England, and the largest atlas in the world, was similarly inconvenient, to the point that two people were needed to turn its pages.

—by Tom Harper

The purpose of these colossal cartographic creations was not so much to do with their practical utility as their overall effect. And, just as their size compromised their practical possibilities, so it played havoc with their chances of survival.

The first large-scale printed map of Pennsylvania, produced by Thomas Holme in 1687-8, and Jan Janssonius's eight-sheet 1617 copperplate map of Europe are unique survivors of print runs numbering possibly in the high hundreds.

The simple explanation for such scarcity is that maps were made for display on walls—and there they perished. They were printed, coloured by hand, the sheets were joined and laid on canvas, mounted on rollers and varnished where, on the walls of the palace or the study, they would have been susceptible to heat, sunlight, soot from fires, moisture in wet climates, carelessness or even vandalism, and would eventually have fallen apart.

Although the heyday of display maps – and thus the focus of the exhibition – was the period from 1450 to 1700, we wanted to demonstrate the presence of display maps in the twentieth century. Cartographic posters such as the Russian artist Dmitri Moor's "Be on your Guard" of 1921, which portrays a vastly out-of-scale soldier defending Russia's borders, emphasises the suitability of maps as tools of visual propaganda.

Elsewhere, as in Cable and Wireless Ltd's 1930 poster showing the British Empire, the purpose is advertising. These posters emphasise the often close relationship between art and cartography, but they also underline the problems inherent in categorising visual material too strictly. The point was followed through in two other maps/works of art included in the exhibition—Stephen Walter's 2008 map of London entitled "The Island," and Grayson Perry's "Map of Nowhere," a modern interpretation of the medieval *mappaemundi*, are maps which are sold by art agents to art collectors.

It was the arrangement of exhibits that allowed us to examine how the understanding of a map is dependant upon understanding the context in which it was originally deployed. The exhibition was organised as a series of rooms or spaces in which maps are known to have existed, such as the school room, the domestic setting, the palace and the street.

We were conscious that as far as we were able to "recreate" these settings, they would nevertheless remain within the context of the museum or library exhibition space, which has its own identity and associated symbolism. But whether the spaces themselves have since changed, as with Renaissance palaces that have become museums, or whether they have stayed remarkably constant, as with the boardrooms of international companies or the homes of wealthy businessmen, the messages contained in their resident maps remain ones of power and propaganda

"Magnificent Maps" [exhibit] was not about how people view their worlds through maps, but how people portray these worlds for others to see.