The exhibition *In the Presence of Kings* was born as an experiment, to make a virtue out of necessity. The special exhibition originally scheduled for April had to be postponed, and in order to avoid the awkward situation of having ten empty galleries just at the taking over of office of our new director, an instant solution had to be found.

Setting up a thematic show was an obvious choice, and choosing “royalty” as a theme seemed to be an equally obvious way of gathering objects of highest artistic and historical importance. In contrast to this surefire idea, the other factors involved were hazardous. There were less than three months to assemble and mount the show. And then the understanding was that not only the installation, but the whole approach to the topic should be unusual. The very nature of the idea, too, though advantageous for selecting magnificent works of art, bore in itself the difficulty of covering practically the entire known history of mankind and every conceivable kind of artifact. When, only a few days after the alarum went out, the lists of objects suggested by the departments came pouring in, the prospect grew definitely appalling. Some departments, such as the Egyptian department or Ancient Near East, hold practically nothing but royal objects, and these in nearly limitless quantities, but even without them the sheer numbers became staggering. After listing about 2,500 possibilities we had to give up hounding more treasures out of galleries and storerooms, and settle down to the tedious task of putting things in some semblance of order.

From the very beginning it had been clear that the widely differing types of objects – from a set of ten huge tapestries to a signet ring, from a full suit of armor to a tiny reliquary locket – had to be organized into some intelligible groupings. Thus the pieces were tentatively gathered in categories that later took shape as “The Royal Gift,” “The Royal Table,” “The Royal Hunt,” and “The Royal Treasury,” and were then allotted sections of the exhibition galleries. Here we had to figure out how to handle such things as a set of furniture from the boudoir of Marie Antoinette and the kennel of her pet dog, or the tableware of three Egyptian princesses, in such a way that they might give a lifelike impression without being a period room or a department-store display.

**Things for Kings**
While all this accumulation and sorting was going on, the Exhibition Design Department had been grappling with the problem of breaking the monotony and unwieldy shape of the galleries. Their solution—erecting special structures, curved walls, niches, and pavilions—had to be undertaken before the objects had finally crystallized into groups, and, of course, there came some unpleasant surprises when whole groups had to be shifted around, because of a newly "discovered" bulky object that could not be fitted in the already prepared space. Occasionally, with a bleeding heart, we had to reject objects because there was simply no space for them any more—as happened to the jewel-inlaid leg of the Grand Mogul’s Peacock Throne, or to scores of pharaonic portrait heads.

We hope the final setting shows our visitors objects they have known for long in a new perspective. Other pieces, overlooked in cases filled with similar treasures, will perhaps be appreciated for the first time, and again others have been brought out of storerooms where they slumbered, known only to specialists among scholars.

We hope, too, that our new way of exhibition not only gives new life to these objects, but indicates to our visitors’ imagination something of the presence of kings.

**Helmut Nickel, Associate Curator of Arms and Armor**

Co-ordinator of the exhibition

An art museum is at once a historical document, an aesthetic sanctuary, and a problem in engineering. It is an unnatural human invention, in the sense that objects are shown largely unrelated to their original context, and works of artists of wildly varying nations and eras are often shown side by side. Unnatural; but it is the triumph of the museum: communicating to succeeding generations the cultural and technical heritage of man’s past.

The purposes of exhibitions vary according to their nature, but the purpose of their design should remain constant: to facilitate and enhance communication and enjoyment. *In the Presence of Kings*, more popularly known as “Things for Kings,” was one exhibit that put our theories, not to mention our endurance, to the test.

Several problems were inherent. Time, of course, was working against us—but then it always is. As a design problem, the extravagant diversity of the objects had somehow to be controlled and organized so that the end result would hang together as a single show, rather than merely a collection of unrelated rooms. The enormous task of simply constructing the exhibition paraphernalia meant we had to take the risky step of designing even before we knew what we were going to display. The location added to the difficulties: our special exhibition galleries differ widely in shape, size, and ceiling height.

After much experimentation, we decided to introduce a new architectural element
into each gallery—curved wall surfaces of identical height. These, we hoped, would help minimize the existing architecture, and in effect create new, uniform galleries. If properly done, this device would also efficiently and unobtrusively create a traffic flow.

The idea of curvilinear display furniture followed, as a natural extension of the wall theme. The circle, projected into cylinders and semicylinders, is a simple, flexible unit for display cases and platforms. Accordingly, we developed and manufactured four types of cases never previously used in the Metropolitan. A later addition was the tentlike cylindrical pavilion—a simple framework of bent aluminum tubing, covered with fabric and wired for spotlights.

*Messrs. Nickel, Hoving, and Silver ponder the concept model—the basis for the overall design of the exhibition. The curved surfaces will tie the random galleries together, but other problems—of schedules, of feasibility—are presented as a result. There are always problems, but this time we have less than three months to solve them. We decide to go with the curved walls.*

It was then possible to add spice to the pot. We had a field day with rich colors, fabrics, wallpaper, rugs—all the elements that support the feeling of immeasurable wealth and sumptuousness that this collection of objects suggested. We darkened the galleries and substituted the most dramatic kind of spotlighting for the vague and inconsistent natural light normal to those galleries. In short, we created a spectacular.

And it worked. With all the glitter and color and infinite variety, the basic design—and the marvelous lighting—held the show together as a coherent exhibition, rather than what might easily have turned out to be the world's most expensive thrift shop.

Stuart Silver, Associate Manager of Exhibition Design
Designer of the exhibition
Museum carpenters begin construction of the walls, the architectural basis of the exhibit, with all due speed.
Next problem: accommodate hundreds of disparate objects and unify them into a cohesive exhibit. Our solution: design completely new display furniture – units that tie into and reiterate the curves of the galleries. Many units are designed – niches, pavilions, drum cases, platforms. We manufacture full-size wood and paper mockups of each one and try them in various locations. The ones that work are drawn to scale and turned over to our shops for construction.

Hanging the aluminum tubing of the pavilions with fabric. Our object: create an intimate spot within each gallery for special groupings or small-scaled art.
Amid the incredible clutter, an exhibition is taking shape.
Enter the art: our design is about to get the acid test.

The tapestries look sensational – better than we had expected – against curved walls.

Director Hoving to Designer Silver: “It’ll never fly.”

Our team of riggers delicately jockeys a two-ton Egyptian queen into exact position.

Now, the all-important lighting, as designed by the Metropolitan’s own Prince of Darkness, LeMar Terry. This is the critical element. We have cut out all daylight by opaquing the glass ceiling; the show can fall together or fall apart depending on the lighting. We want to rivet attention on the individual objects while minimizing the general environment.
Emperor Constantine gets another coat of paint. The Dauphin looks critically on.
Things are beginning to jell. Our display units appear to be working out. But we're down to the short strokes, and the strain is evident as the deadline looms closer. Weekdays, weeknights, and weekends go by much too quickly. Each department contributes expert help in this concentrated, complex effort.
The Evolution of the Treasury
We want a shiny treasure trove to amaze and delight the eye. It hardly looks that way at the start, but then – cardboard columns with Plexiglas windows (heat-formed by our technicians); a coat of paint; spotlights; cover everything in sight with bright velvets; hang superb jewels from nylon thread; darken the room – behold! The Cave of Ali Baba!