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BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON: INSTITUTIONALIZING ENLIGHTENMENT

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It is not possible to gain a perspective of the British Museum during its first hundred years, either generally in terms of its philosophical outlook or more particularly in the development of its collection, without consideration of its primary begetter, the physician and antiquarian Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753). As Sloane's life spanned nearly one hundred years, the basis of the museum has to be traced back to the end of the seventeenth century, when he started to amass his collection.¹ It goes without saying that Sloane, and those who promoted the founding and concept of the British Museum after he died, bequeathing his collection to the nation, has then to be understood in terms of the particularities of the developing cultural life of eighteenth-century England. The museum, which opened to the public in 1759, was distinctive from both existing private museums and those that were established shortly afterward in England. One peculiarity was that very little material originating from the British Isles was acquired for the collection prior to the middle of the nineteenth century—the British Museum was a proto-world museum from the start, though with Britain largely excluded. One of the greatest of the British Museum's curators, Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–1897), was recruited in 1851 to deal with this rather startling lacuna. This essay deals with the institution from its foundation up to that time. Even today, the British Museum remains a singular institution and can best be understood in terms of its eighteenth-century, Enlightenment origins.

When the British Museum was being established as a state museum in the 1750s, there was no comparable museum that could act as a template for its founders. A few museums existed (including the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, of 1683), some with collections of significant size and richness, but those who had envisioned the new museum realized that their public museum would have a different character. The intellectual evolution in England since the Restoration of 1660 was to play a significant role in shaping the museum initiative. The year 1660 was marked by the foundation of the Royal Society of London, which provided a strong impetus to the development of experimental science and to the study of the natural world. The society's periodical, its *Philosophical Transactions*, made its first appearance in 1665 and was

FIGURE 2-1.

John Bluck (English, 1791–1832), after Thomas Rowlandson (English, 1757–1827) and Augustus Charles Pugin (French, 1769–1832), *The Hall and Stair Case, British Museum*, 1808. Etching, aquatint, and hand-coloring, 28.3 × 23.5 cm (11½ × 9¼ in.). From Rudolph Ackermann, *The Microcosm of London; or, London in Miniature* (London, 1808), vol. 1, pl. 14. London, British Museum

key to the diffusion of knowledge. The working out of classification systems helped the understanding of relationships within the animal and plant kingdoms, and the Royal Society set up its own museum of “Natural and Artificial Rarities.”²² The Society of Antiquaries of London, a body that provided a focus for the increasing interest in archaeological studies, was founded in 1707, and local organizations with similar antiquarian agendas soon emerged, such as the Spalding Gentlemen’s Society (in 1710) and the Peterborough Gentlemen’s Society (in 1730). The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, a body dedicated to the practical development of scientifically and technologically based inventions, came into being in 1754. Early in the eighteenth century peripatetic lecturers started to offer public demonstrations of scientific experiments; these pioneering educational initiatives were to be continued at newly founded institutions that were established to impart knowledge to developing middle-class audiences. Books were becoming cheaper and more readily available, including those that promoted taxonomic systems, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias (John Kersey’s *A New English Dictionary* appeared in 1702, and the first part of John Harris’s *Lexicon Technicum; or, An Universal English Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences* was published in 1704). Finally, travel and exploration fascinated many. Ships on long-distance voyages returned with newly discovered natural-history specimens and minerals, as well as the intriguing products of native peoples. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, young gentlemen, undertaking the Grand Tour, started to explore the Continent (Italy especially), an activity that became even more popular after Herculaneum was excavated in 1738 and Pompeii a decade later. Reports of the ancient Greek temples found at Paestum and in Sicily generated excitement. Dealers in antiquities were only too anxious to provide the wealthy British aristocracy with examples of classical antiquities (often with excessively heavy restoration) with which to decorate their stately homes.

These intellectual stimuli provided a fertile background for the founding of the British Museum. On June 7, 1753, the act of Parliament that established the museum came into force, though this had not been achieved without a struggle. Sloane had died earlier that year, on January 13. His will, which he had refined over a fourteen-year period, stated that his collection should be kept together and left to the state, but only on receipt of the sum of twenty thousand pounds, which was to be made available to his daughters. If Parliament did not agree to these terms, the collection should be offered to the royal academies of science of Saint Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, and Madrid, in that order. Only if no suitable arrangement could be made should the collection be sold. This led to some difficult debate; the House of Commons had first to be assured that the collection was worth more than the sum Sloane had specified for his daughters. An additional complication was that three significant collections of manuscripts and books—the Cottonian, the Harleian, and the Edwards

libraries—had previously been offered to the nation and had been left in limbo for many years. It was decided to combine these with Sloane's collection,³ but only if fifty thousand pounds to establish the new institution could be raised by means of a public lottery. This was agreed to and the lottery was held; in the nature of such things at the time, it was thoroughly corrupt. In spite of this, a profit in excess of ninety-five thousand pounds was raised, and after monies were made available to the executors of the will for Sloane's two daughters, for the Harleian manuscripts, and for a temporary repository for the collections, more than thirty thousand pounds remained to be invested. The British Museum thus became a going concern. A question never satisfactorily resolved is why it was called "British." No definitive answer has yet been provided. The 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland, which established the idea of "Great Britain," had been shaken by the invasion of Prince Charles Edward Stuart in 1745 and the Battle of Culloden in the following year, and it is likely that the opportunity was taken to reinforce the concept of Britishness with the naming of the new institution.

Sir Hans Sloane collected inclusively, though not indiscriminately. The discipline of greatest interest to him was botany. The diarist John Evelyn (1620–1706), who visited Sloane in April 1691, described the collection that Sloane had made personally in Jamaica (where he had served in the late 1680s as physician to the governor) in terms of its "natural productions," emphasizing particularly plant specimens ("several folios of Dried plants & one which had about 80: severall sorts of Fernes & another of Grasses:&c: The Jamaica pepper in branch, leaves and flowers, fruits &c:").⁴ The Sloane herbarium, which still survives at the Natural History Museum in London, comprises 337 *horti sicci*, or volumes in which dried plant specimens are mounted. It has been described in more recent times as "such a huge collection [as] could have been amassed only by a man with very substantial financial means, . . . both with regard to the acquisition of collections by purchase, and their subsequent accommodation and curation."⁵ Sloane's collecting activities diversified with time, however. If he had an overall collecting policy, it was to accumulate material that would fascinate and inform the curious and eclectic scholar rather than a connoisseur.

Having established himself as a fashionable London doctor, adding sinecures, amassing wealth, and gaining a reputation as an establishment figure (he was created a baronet in 1716), Sloane became ambitious and opportunistic in his collecting. As has always been the case, to create large accumulations of material it is necessary to acquire collections made by others rather than to collect individual items one by one. That is just what Sloane did. One of the first collections to be absorbed was that of William Courten (1642–1702), also known as Charleton, a naturalist and antiquarian, and a friend of Sloane's. On Courten's death, Sloane was the recipient of a collection consisting of "Minia- tures, Drawings, shells, insects, medals, and natural things, animals whereof

divers were collected in glasses of spirits of wine, I think an hundred; besides, minerals, precious stones, vessels and curiosities in Amber, Achat, crystal as I had never in all my travels abroad seen any of private Gent or Princes exceed it.”⁶ Other collections, largely of natural history, followed. That of Leonard Plukenet (1641–1706), gardener to Queen Mary II (r. 1689–94), was acquired in 1710, and that of the apothecary James Pettifer (1658–1718) came to Sloane on Pettifer’s death. Material particularly rich in specimens from the New World, assembled by Mark Catesby (1682–1749) with the encouragement and support of Sloane, entered Sloane’s collection. Catesby wrote, “Both in Carolina and on these Islands I made successive Collections of dry’d Plants and Seeds, and at these Islands more particularly I collected many Submarine productions, as Shells, Corallines, Fruitices Marini, Sponges, Astroites, &c. These I imparted to my curious Friends more particularly (as I had greatest Obligation) to that great Naturalist and promoter of Science Sir Hans Sloane, Bart To whose goodness I attribute much of the Success I had in this Undertaking.”⁷ Sloane’s interest in scientific matters, and his social and intellectual position in London life, led to his being appointed president of the Royal Society following the death of Sir Isaac Newton in 1727.

A group of objects Sloane was particularly keen to get his hands on had been assembled by the German traveler Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716), surgeon to the Dutch East India Company, who first reached Japan in 1690. This episode indicates the single-mindedness of Sloane. Kaempfer had died at Lemgo, forty miles southwest of Hanover. Sloane persuaded the physician-in-ordinary to King George I (r. 1714–27), Johan Georg Steigerheil (1666–1740), to assist him in procuring from Kaempfer’s nephew his uncle’s material, as he was traveling with the Hanoverian court abroad. At no small cost, Sloane acquired not only Kaempfer’s oriental natural-history collection but also many of his papers, including the unpublished manuscript of his history of Japan. This contained an account of Japan at a time when firsthand information was almost impossible to obtain, owing to the national-seclusion policy that had been imposed in 1638 to exclude foreigners from the country. Kaempfer had managed to smuggle out objects and natural-history specimens when he left Nagasaki in 1692. Maps of the country were at the top of the official prohibition lists, yet Kaempfer obtained and brought out ten with him, and he modeled his own manuscript map on these. The only official contact with mainland Japan was when Dutch traders formed an annual mission to pay tribute to the shogunal court at Edo (modern Tokyo). Kaempfer went on two of these expeditions and he produced a sketch of the retinue of the Dutch mission, which Sloane also acquired. Other Asian material in Sloane’s collection included Japanese ceramics and a group of seventeenth-century Chinese prints of flowers and insects made in Suzhou. It has been suggested that Sloane was not a connoisseur of fine art, even though he acquired some very great drawings.⁸ Among his col-

lection is to be found a remarkable group of watercolors by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) depicting landscapes, which he obtained in 1724 from Holland; it has been suggested that it was the natural-history content of these that might have attracted him. Also strongly pursued by Sloane was a series of watercolors of New World scenes drawn by the English artist John White (act. 1585–93). In 1584 Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) had issued a license for an expedition to explore the coast of North America. In August 1585 White had joined an expedition from Roanoke Island that reached Chesapeake Bay, and had made graphic records of Algonquian Indians, animals, and plants, later engraved by Theodor de Bry (1528–1598). Sloane yearned after the drawings and obtained copies for his collection.

During Sloane's lifetime, increasing interest in earlier periods of British history developed. Antiquarian and archaeological investigations led to the topographical description of sites and to the discovery and interpretation of antiquities; the Society of Antiquaries of London started to meet in 1707, and the Royal Society, too, promoted antiquarian study. Sloane himself did not take a deep interest in such matters, though many of the collections that he acquired were well stocked with flint and bronze axheads. The largest and most important group of this kind was a Bronze Age hoard discovered at Arretton Down, on the Isle of Wight, which was presented to him in 1735. Contemporary views were that this was probably a Roman hoard, or if not Roman, then of "Ancient Briton" origin, and contemporaneous with Roman occupation of Britain; in fact, the hoard is now known to be of considerably earlier date. Sloane's collection includes much else: it had notable groups of numismatic material, books and manuscripts, and what he referred to in his manuscript lists as "Miscellanies"—among them, objects that could illuminate the nation's history, such as an impression of the massive silver Great Seal of Elizabeth I, and a superb gold-and-enamel pendant with a silhouette bust of the queen, now known as the Phoenix Jewel (ca. 1570–80). Also in this category were scientific instruments, including the very large late-thirteenth-century Sloane Astrolabe, probably one of the earliest surviving such instruments of English origin, for which he paid two pounds, eleven shillings, and sixpence. Another astrolabe indicates the depth of Sloane's interests; this is an instrument constructed in 1712 (A.H. 1124) for the last Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Sultan Husain (r. 1694–1722). Objects that could be described as ethnographic, representing native peoples of North America, the Arctic, the Pacific, and other places where contacts of Sloane's had traveled, were among the miscellanies, too. Notably, in June 1725 Sloane purchased a purse directly from Benjamin Franklin, made from asbestos fibers by Native Americans. There were perhaps as many as a thousand such items. The collecting activities of Sloane were certainly well known and remarked on. A "poem occasion'd by the Viewing of Dr Sloans musaeum London Dec: 1712" comments,

Nor Natures works have filled thy draughts alone
 The arts & customs of the world are shewn
 Here full of lore ye Indian Heroine burns
 and Ends in flames ye mutuall Flame she morns.
 There Persian Caravan a goodly train
 A Dangerous War and hade at once maintain
 That Europe may Superfluous trifles gain
 The British Nymph bedeck'd in Asian Pride
 Nere dreads the fate her Merchants had defyd

 The Muse omits the Cabinet with dread
 Where all antiquity in Coyns are Layd
 And wondering venerats the Awfull Dead⁹

Initially, Sloane and his collection occupied two houses in Bloomsbury. In 1712 he purchased a large early-sixteenth-century house, the Manor House of Chelsea; he moved there permanently, with his collection, in 1742. He was visited by many who wished to view his material, including in 1736 the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), who referred to it as an “incomparable museum” —but also reported that he had found it to be “in complete disorder.”¹⁰ Frederic, Prince of Wales, and the Princess of Wales paid a visit in 1748, commenting, it was reported, “how much the learned world was obliged to [Sloane] for having collected such a vast Library of curious books and such immense treasures of the valuable and instructive productions of Nature and Art.”¹¹ It may have been they who encouraged Sloane to leave the collection to the nation. By Sloane’s death his museum had grown to very great proportions. It contained eighty-eight thousand books, including volumes of manuscripts and drawings; twenty-four thousand coins and medals; forty-three thousand natural-history specimens, in addition to the herbarium of more than three hundred volumes of plant specimens; and as many as five thousand miscellanies, including antiquities, ethnographical objects, and assorted curiosities. The parliamentary act of 1753 that established the British Museum required of the trustees that “the said Museum or collection . . . be preserved and maintained, not only for the Inspection and Entertainment of the learned and curious, but for the general use benefit of the Public” and stipulated that “a free Access to the said general Repository, and to the Collections therein contained, shall be given to all studious and curious persons.”¹² The act also required that the collection be preserved intact. These original conditions have been adhered to right up to the present day.

The board of trustees, led *ex officio* by the archbishop of Canterbury,¹³ then set about hiring staff and finding suitable accommodation for the new museum. Sloane had indicated that he wanted the collection to remain in his

Chelsea mansion. This was not a binding condition, and a large seventeenth-century house in Bloomsbury, originally designed in 1675 by the natural philosopher and architect Robert Hooke (1635–1703) but rebuilt after a serious fire, was purchased. It was called Montagu House. Sloane's own curator for fifteen years, James Empson (d. 1765), was kept on, as head of the Department of Natural and Artificial Productions in the grade of underlibrarian. The other appointments were from outside; there was to be a principal librarian in charge, two further underlibrarians, three assistant librarians, and a keeper of the Reading Room. A long, detailed, and demanding job description was drawn up for the senior post. The principal librarian had to be medically qualified, versed in mathematics, and competent in French and Latin. He needed to be of a polymathic frame of mind; he was required to be "Master of the Physical and Anatomical Articles and Natural Rarities" and to have a knowledge of medals and Greek and Roman antiquities. Moreover, the principal librarian had to be able to "call for any [manuscripts and books] readily on all Occasions and to converse with any persons of Learning & Curiosity on the matter of them."¹⁴ The appointee was Gowin Knight (1713–1772), a fellow of the Royal Society who was a physician and natural philosopher.¹⁵ His main area of research had been the development of marine compasses. The appointment of Knight was made in May 1756 and all staff were in place by mid-1758. By that time, arrangement of the collections in Montagu House was well under way. The principal librarian and the senior officers all lived on-site, in wings to either side of the main building. The tradition of curators' and librarians' living in museum apartments (and being constantly on hand) lasted until the Second World War, and the museum director was required to live in an on-site residence until very recent times.

James Empson was a key figure in the removal of Sloane's objects across London, from Chelsea to Bloomsbury, for he knew the collection and its manner of formation better than anyone else. He seems to have realized what a muddle it was in at his employer's death, because in August 1756 he wrote, "How much soever a private Person may be at Liberty arbitrarily to dispose & place his Curiosities; we are sensible, that the British Museum, being a public Institution subject to the visits of the Judicious & Intelligent, as well as Curious, Notice will be taken, whether or no the Collection has been arranged in a methodical Manner."¹⁶ Administratively, from 1758, the collections were divided among three departments: Printed Books; Natural and Artificial Productions; and Manuscripts, Coins and Medals. The trustees authorized money for adapting and repairing the building, which had not been well maintained, and a fire engine was supplied to deal with emergencies. Bookcases needed to be built and cabinets installed, and then the collections introduced. Although special visitors had been allowed privileged access to view the collections from the very first days of the museum's legal existence, the general public was not

admitted until January 15, 1759. Visits were highly controlled. Although the museum was free and open to all, tickets had to be applied for in advance, and collected before the day of the visit. Tours were guided by the assistant librarians and lasted approximately two hours. It was not long before there were complaints from some about how hurried these tours were, and how curt could be the explanations of the displays that were sometimes grudgingly offered by the guides. There were also some disdainful comments on how excessively democratic the museum was in its admission policy. One German wrote, “The visitors were of all classes and both sexes, including some of the lowest class; for, since the Museum is the property of the nation, everyone must be allowed the right of entry.”¹⁷ This was a clear requirement of the trustees, even though they had concerns from time to time about the security of the objects. They had further established the broad-minded rule in 1759, “tho’ it was chiefly designed for the use of learned and studious men, both natives and foreigners, in their researches into the several parts of knowledge; yet being a national establishment . . . it may be judged reasonable, that the advantages accruing from it should be rendered as general as possible,”¹⁸ and they stuck to it.

The public tour of the British Museum described below has been reconstructed from various sources, the most useful being an account in the second edition of Edmund Powlett’s *The General Contents of the British Museum, with Remarks Serving as a Directory in Viewing That Noble Cabinet*, of 1762.¹⁹ Montagu House had murals on the walls and on the ceilings in the major public spaces (fig. 2-1); part of the museum’s collection of oil paintings, largely portraits of British worthies, was also hung in the rooms. Visitors were impressed by the opulent appearance of the place, which resembled—indeed, was—a very grand town house, on the edge of London. The collections of printed books were housed on the ground floor (or “First State Story,” as it was called) of Montagu House; the antiquities, natural-history specimens, and manuscripts were kept in rooms on the first floor (the “Second State Story”). Visitors would ascend the main staircase and wait in the Grand Saloon on the upper floor until the tour was ready to depart. Through the windows here, they would be able to view the botanical garden at the back of the building, which was an integral part of the museum, and gaze at the hilly villages of Highgate and Hampstead, several miles away to the north. After being gathered up by their cicerone, the tour members would first pass eastward, through the four rooms that were allocated to manuscripts, containing the Cottonian, the Royal, the Harleian, and the Sloane collections (Magna Carta was in the Cottonian). Coins and medals came next, followed by the miscellaneous gathering of antiquities. Crossing over to the west side of the building, visitors then inspected the natural-history collection, starting with Sloane’s minerals (including gems) and fossils, and then moving, in the next room, to shells, and beyond that, to plants, corals, crustacea, and insects. Turning south, visitors next encountered

reptiles, birds, and mammals. The final room on the upper floor displayed a mixture of ethnographical items: Chinese and Japanese objects and “modern curiosities,” generally. Moving downstairs, oddly, visitors first traversed Gowin Knight’s magnet room, where the principal librarian conducted his natural-philosophical investigations, before they came to nine rooms packed with printed books. (Readers were accommodated in the basement and thereby insulated from the touring throngs.) After inspecting the books, visitors left by the main door.

Guided tours of this kind continued for fifty years; in 1810 the trustees succumbed to criticism and they came to an end. Visitors could then wander where they liked, though the printed-books rooms were now closed to them. It is difficult today to get a true feeling for the original visitor’s experience, but some clues to what it must have been like are provided in the first substantial volume published on the museum collections, John and Andrew van Rymdyk’s *Museum Britannicum: Being an Exhibition of a Great Variety of Antiquities and Natural Curiosities, Belonging to That Noble and Magnificent Cabinet, the British Museum* (1778). This lavish book includes descriptions of a wide variety of objects, together with large plates illustrating them. The title page includes a short, apt quotation from the seventeenth-century writer Aphra Behn, arguing that the study of objects leads to knowledge more readily than do texts. It runs:

No more you learned Fops, your Knowledge boast
 Pretending all to know, by reading most.
 True Wit, by Inspiration, we obtain,
 Nature, not Art, Apollo’s Wreath must gain.²⁰

New material started to be accrued by donation very shortly after the founding collections were installed in Montagu House. There were three main areas of acquisition: printed books and manuscripts, material from the ancient world, and natural-history specimens.

Because funds were so restricted following the museum’s foundation, adding to the holdings of printed books could not be pursued with great vigor. New material depended on donations and consequently there could be no carefully defined acquisition policy. An early worry was to identify the resources needed to be able to continue acquiring periodical runs. Binding the volumes was also a concern, and was accomplished with the employment of a binder on-site. That is not to say that things were static. In 1762 the prime minister, the Earl of Bute, informed the trustees that two thousand volumes of tracts from the period of the Civil War were being presented by King George III (r. 1760–1820), and in 1780 an important collection of thirteen hundred early English plays came from the bequest of the actor David

Garrick (1717–1779).²¹ Some trustees were generous in their donations, too; the outstanding donation was perhaps that of Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode (1730–1799), which comprised forty-five hundred volumes including important incunabula, as well as his coins and medals, prints and drawings, cameos and intaglios, and shells and minerals. His fellow trustees were so impressed with the collection that they housed the books, prints, and drawings in their committee room. To this day there is a gallery in the present museum building (on the site of Montagu House) known to some as the Cracherode Room, though it has long been emptied of its associated collection. Space as well as money was short, and from 1767 trustees were allowed to sell duplicates (coins not excluded), as long as any funds accruing were plowed back into buying other material. Acquisitions of books and manuscripts were not limited to those of Western origin. Three Chinese items were donated as early as 1757, and a collection of Hebrew manuscripts was presented two years later by Solomon da Costa (1690–1769). However, in 1781 twenty-four volumes of Chinese books were declined on the grounds that the museum already had enough specimens of this kind. Preparation of a catalogue of the collection was considered to be a high priority, and in 1782 the library was closed for a period to allow this to take precedence. There were periodic concerns about items being stolen, though in some cases this was because they had been mislaid—or never received in the first place. Estimates of the stock of the library of the British Museum have been made: in 1759 there were probably 51,000 items, which fell to 48,000 items by the end of the century because of the sale of duplicates. However, the number of manuscripts rose, from 15,700 to 17,500, over the same period. In spite of the museum library's being the first substantial public library that London had to offer, the number of readers was not particularly high. There were 160 readers' tickets issued or renewed in 1759. There was a sharp decline, to 60, in 1769, but by 1799 the number had risen, albeit only to 125. Less is known about the use to which the library was put than is known about its contents, though a letter of August 1759 by the poet Thomas Gray (1716–1771) may provide a flavor. He wrote: "[T]he Musaeum . . . is my favourite Domain, where I often pass four hours in the day in the stillness & solitude of the reading room, wch is uninterrupted by any thing but Dr Stukeley the Antiquary, who comes there to talk nonsense; & Coffee-house news; the rest of the Learned are (I suppose) in the country, at least none of them come there, except two Prussians & a man who writes for Ld. Royston."²²A significant rise in reader numbers was to occur during the first half of the nineteenth century, and the library's holdings of printed books were to increase dramatically when the Copyright Act, stipulating that every book published in Britain and Ireland be deposited in the British Museum, started to be applied more systematically by the principal librarian.

Further groups of antiquities from the ancient world started to be donated

soon after the establishment of the museum. A collection of Egyptian material was given by the Lethieullier family of City merchants between 1756 and 1770. This included two Egyptian mummies, the first in the museum and a type of object that was to be strongly associated with the British Museum in later centuries. The museum was also acquiring contemporary material. One of the underlibrarians, Matthew Maty (1718–1776)—he was later to become the principal librarian—attended the sale of Louis-François Roubiliac (1702–1762) after the sculptor's death in London. He bought a significant group of material personally, and presented a collection of plaster and terracotta portrait busts, including one of Sir Isaac Newton, to the museum. (The celebrated 1758 marble statue of Shakespeare by Roubiliac, now to be seen in the British Library, was received in 1779 from Garrick's bequest.) This was not out of line with policy, then or now: the British Museum has always made efforts to represent contemporary items in its collections and galleries. Perhaps more typical types of acquisition, though, were those that resulted from the activities of the envoy extraordinary to the court of Naples, Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803). The post, to which he was appointed in 1764, was not a lucrative one, and Hamilton put his collecting instincts to use as an art dealer. More than that, he was fascinated by Vesuvius, the volcano on his doorstep, and became a credible volcanologist during his time as envoy. His enthusiasms resulted in collections of antiquities and mineral specimens, both of which were to be of interest to the British Museum,²³ and his polymathic inclination perhaps best represents the spirit of the Enlightenment that imbued the museum during its first decades. Hamilton formed a collection of Greek vases that were associated with the colonies that had once existed in the southern part of Italy, and this collection was purchased by the museum in 1772, for £8,410. The trustees had had to apply to the Treasury for this sum. Hamilton created a second collection, but this was not purchased by the museum, and in any case part of it sank off the Scilly Isles on its way back to England. The most famous object that passed through Hamilton's hands was the Roman cameo-glass Barberini Vase (ca. 1–25 A.D.); classical scenes are carved in the opaque white glass that coats the vessel's translucent cobalt-blue body. This Hamilton could hardly afford, and when on leave in 1783 he sold it to the Duchess of Portland (and it became known as the Portland Vase). It was subsequently loaned to the British Museum, and in 1845 was famously smashed by a visitor; successfully reassembled, it was purchased by the museum a century later.²⁴ Hamilton's cultural interests were not confined to classical art. He gave particular attention to a fertility cult in the region of Naples that he believed to be derived from an ancient cult of Priapus. The cult's practices involved the worship of wax phalluses, and in 1784 five of these made their way to the British Museum.²⁵

The third collecting stream that was actively pursued in the first half-century of the museum was in natural history. An important connection with

Carl Linnaeus, who proposed a classification of the plant world, was made through the museum's employment of his one-time pupil Daniel Solander (1733–1782). It was Solander who described the collection of “fossils” from Hampshire that was presented by a trustee, Gustavus Brander (1720–1787). The resulting volume, *Fossilia Hantoniensia Collecta, et in Musaeo Britannica Deposita* (1766), is perhaps the earliest of the museum's publications to offer a scholarly description of a natural-history collection. The most important boost to the natural-history collection of the British Museum, however, was the museum's association with the voyages of discovery undertaken by Captain James Cook (1728–1779). With respect to both Solander and Cook, Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) played a crucial role.²⁶ Banks was the son of a wealthy Lincolnshire landowner who, while in his twenties, came into contact with Solander and corresponded with Linnaeus. At the age of only twenty-three he had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society and he had undertaken a journey to Labrador and Newfoundland to collect specimens. Between 1768 and 1771 Banks and Solander accompanied Cook as scientists on the first of Cook's circumnavigations of the world (Banks helped to fund the voyage), making significant collections of hitherto-unknown material, especially in Australia. Banks brought back with him the first kangaroo and platypus skins seen in Europe (the latter is still in the Natural History Museum in London).²⁷ On his return Banks became something of a celebrity. His house in Soho Square was turned into an informal annex of the British Museum, and he used Solander as his curator. He was appointed president of the Royal Society in 1778 (a post he held for an unprecedented forty-one years), and as such he became an ex-officio trustee of the British Museum. It was difficult to know where his public responsibilities ended and his private life began; specimens moved back and forth between the museum, on Great Russell Street, and Soho Square. Although there had been a few objects associated with native peoples in Sloane's collection, Banks's activities were the first great impetus to building up the ethnography collection. In particular, material from Polynesia entered the collection as a result of his participation in Cook's first voyage; the principal librarian Matthew Maty wrote: “The Museum is going to be enriched with a complete and most superb Collection of all the natural as well as artificial curiosities which have been found in the expedition to the South Seas.”²⁸ The artifacts were displayed separately, from 1775, in the “Otaheite or South Sea Room” and were immediately popular with visitors. One of them, Sophie von La Roche, waxed lyrical: “South Sea islanders apparel and portraits of English royal personages . . . all prove that vanity and imperiousness led people at all times and in all places to ornament and [to] instruments of destruction, just as sounds of joy produced song, tripping merriment led to dance, passionate gesture to groping after language.”²⁹

Late in the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth, some substan-

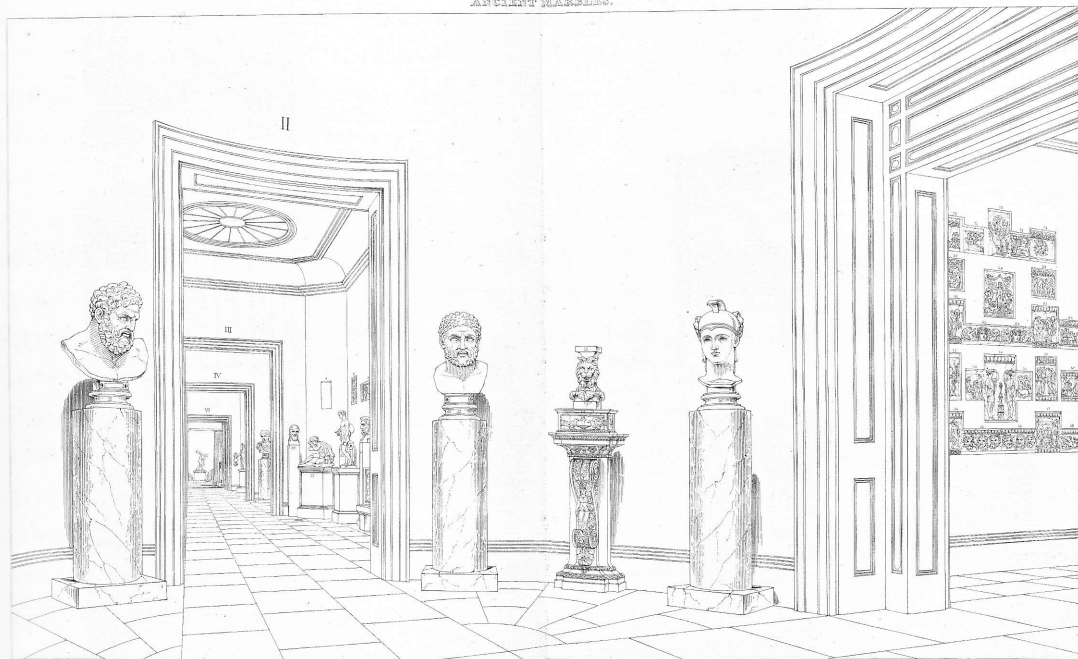
tial collections of minerals were purchased by the museum.³⁰ At the time the search for ores for the purpose of metal extraction was being energetically pursued, and the market in fine crystalline mineral samples was an offshoot of that activity. Most European cabinets possessed impressive specimens, either in their native form or carved into objects. One of the most prized collections was that of the Right Honourable Charles Greville (1749–1809), a nephew of Sir William Hamilton, who built up his mineral collection of twenty thousand specimens over thirty-six years; some were purchased from aristocratic collectors on the Continent. On Greville's death in 1809, the British Museum arranged to purchase the collection for the large sum of £13,727. The comment was made that "possession [of Greville's collection] . . . would without doubt, at once, render the Cabinet of Minerals in the British Museum the first in the World."³¹ This reputation was reinforced in 1815, when part of the Alpine collection of Karl Ehrenbart, Baron von Moll (1760–1838), was acquired following a dash by staff to Munich with the trustees' instructions to inspect the collection and, if it was deemed desirable, to buy it on the spot. There can be no doubt that at this period minerals were regarded as a key attraction of the museum's collection. Indeed, the Grand Saloon of Montagu House was considered to be the appropriate place for their display, even if it was necessary to go to the expense of strengthening the floor with cast-iron pillars to bear the weight of the stones.

Meanwhile, the holdings of Greek and Roman art were being greatly enhanced by the acquisition of connoisseurs' collections. Charles Townley (1737–1805; whose family name was Towneley) was a modest, wealthy gentleman from Burnley, in the northwest of England. As a Catholic, he was excluded from the great public schools and from going up to Oxford or Cambridge; he attended Douai College and was also educated by a tutor who was a Roman Catholic priest and natural philosopher. His appreciation of the classical world was deepened by the three Grand Tours to Italy that he undertook in his early middle age. In Rome he met various dealers, Gavin Hamilton (1723–1798) among them, and he built up a substantial collection of marbles.³² Although he published only one paper, he was known to be a scholarly man, whose "learning and sagacity in explaining the works of antient [*sic*] art were equal to his taste and judgement in selecting them."³³ Townley set up his marbles in 1778 in his London town house in Park Street, Westminster, which he had had built for the purpose. He continued to collect, and in 1791 he was appointed a trustee of the British Museum, expressing his intention that the collection be bequeathed to the museum on his death if a new gallery were built to house it. Strangely, Townley changed his mind about this only twelve days before his death. The trustees were able to make an arrangement with the beneficiaries of Townley's will, and Parliament granted twenty thousand pounds, the sum agreed upon with the Townley family. The extremely important collection,

which includes the Townley Discobolus (2nd century A.D.), a Roman marble copy of a lost Greek bronze original, is shown, with many other items, in the well-known painting by Johann Zoffany (1733–1810) depicting Townley with fellow antiquarians in his Park Street house (1781, with additions to 1798; Burnley, Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum). Townley's collection is still displayed in its entirety, and largely together, in the museum, though the gallery that was specially built for it has long since been demolished.

It has to be admitted that in earlier days major portions of the collection were the yield of military conflicts, and this was the case with a group of Egyptian material that includes the Rosetta Stone. In 1798 the French army under Napoléon invaded Egypt. The occupying force included 167 archaeologists and antiquaries to help create a collection of antiquities that would be removed to France for a museum to be called the Musée Napoléon (the Musée du Louvre bore this name from 1803 to 1815). One year later, in July 1799, a French officer, Lieutenant Pierre-François Bouchard, discovered in the western Nile Delta the inscribed piece of basalt, of 196 B.C., that is now known as the Rosetta Stone. Its significance as a key to the understanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs was immediately understood, for the text was written on the stone in three parallel scripts: hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek. The British, who with the Ottoman Turks invaded Egypt and defeated the French in 1801, were handed the Rosetta Stone, the fourth-century B.C. sarcophagus of the pharaoh Nectanebo II, and other sculptures under the terms of the Treaty of Alexandria. The captions "Captured in Egypt by the British Army in Egypt in 1801" and "Presented by King George III" were painted down the side of the Rosetta Stone when it entered the museum. The Society of Antiquaries, which had first received the stone in London, published the three inscribed texts so that scholars could work on deciphering the hieroglyphic script. The British natural philosopher Thomas Young (1773–1829) made a start, though it was not till 1822 that the French philologist and Orientalist Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832) solved the problem. Although hieroglyphs were not deciphered by a British Museum curator, many other ancient Egyptian texts were transcribed and translated for the first time by scholars who worked there. An early example, *Papyri in Hieroglyphic and Hieratic Characters from the Collection of the Earl of Belmore, Now Deposited in the British Museum*, edited by Edward Hawkins and Samuel Birch of the Department of Antiquities, was published in 1843; many more texts were to follow.³⁴ The British Museum had got down to publishing its collections in a serious way even earlier in the nineteenth century. The first volume in a series of scholarly books treated the classical terracottas (in 1810); eleven generous volumes on the ancient marbles followed. The series was started by the underlibrarian of antiquities Taylor Combe (1774–1826), a numismatist, and after Combe's death in 1826 it was continued by his successor, Edward Hawkins (1780–1867). Large numbers of series got under way subse-

ANTIENT MARBLES.



GALLERY OF ANTIQUITIES, BRITISH MUSEUM.

Viewed from the Second Room.

quently. (It is a shame that no comprehensive bibliography of books published by the British Museum concerning its collections has ever been forthcoming.) It was Combe who was initially responsible for the first guidebook, *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, which appeared in 1808 (the sixty-third and final edition was published in 1856). This was meant to be of a different nature from the lavish published catalogues; an introductory note explained: "The public are apprised that this synopsis is merely intended for the use of Persons who take a cursory view of the Museum."³⁵

Useful clues to the layout of the antiquities in the Townley Gallery, which was designed by George Saunders (ca. 1762–1839) and which opened in 1808 in an addition built onto Montagu House's northwest corner, are provided in a double-spread engraving in part 1 of Combe's *Description of the Collection of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum*, of 1812 (fig. 2-2). The rooms leading from Montagu House are numbered, with terracottas and Roman antiquities on display. From a rotunda there is a clear, long-distance view of the Discobolus. Through the door at the right of the engraving, some of the museum's Egyptian material is visible, on the adjoining upper floor of Montagu House. This juxtaposition was not universally well received; a critic complained that "stone coffins, and massive uncouth figures, ought never to have been placed on an upper story and among the elegant Greek and Roman sculptures."³⁶ In fact, the antiquities in the Townley Gallery were laid out with outside advice

FIGURE 2-2.

W. A. (William Alexander? [English, 1767–1816]) and Henry Moses (English, 1782–1870), *Gallery of Antiquities, British Museum. Viewed from the Second Room*, 1812. Engraving, 24.4 × 40.4 cm (9⁵/₈ × 16 in.). From Taylor Combe, *A Description of the Collection of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum, with Engravings* (London, 1812), pt. 1, plate following introduction. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 92-B24479

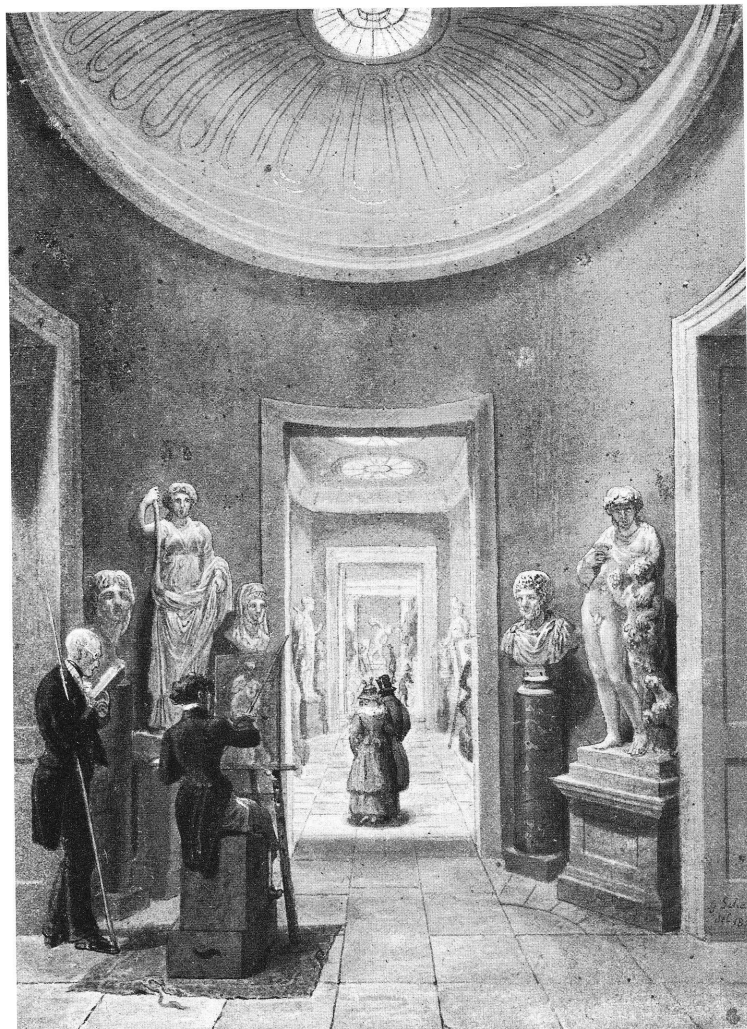


FIGURE 2-3.

George Scharf (German, 1788–1860), *The Townley Gallery*, 1827. Watercolor, heightened with white, on gray board, 30.6 × 22 cm (12 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.). London, The British Museum

from sculptors and artists including Joseph Nollekens (1737–1823), Henry Tresham (1751–1814), and Sir Richard Westmacott (1775–1856). Artists wishing to make drawings in the galleries were allowed to do so, except on the weekends (fig. 2-3).

Serving envoys and ambassadors, and their activities, were an important conduit by which the British Museum continued to expand its collection. Sir William Hamilton has already been mentioned. Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin (1766–1841), was appointed ambassador to the Sublime Porte of Selim III, the Ottoman sultan (r. 1789–1807), in 1798. He was concerned to document the state of the Parthenon, in Athens, even before he left to take up his appointment. Because Greece was part of the Ottoman Empire (and had been for nearly 350 years), permission to inspect the ancient building had to be obtained in Constantinople. It was not Elgin's initial wish to collect the marble sculptures from the monument and bring them to London. And when he did decide to undertake this operation, it was not his intention that the sculptures

end up in the British Museum—though that, famously, is what happened. The Parthenon, built in the mid-fifth century B.C., had been seriously damaged in 1687 when shells from a Venetian fleet were lobbed into a gunpowder store inside the structure. Elgin arranged for draftsmen and casters to record its state of preservation. He was distressed when he realized how many of the sculpted stones were missing, and in what a poor state of repair much of the carving was. The Acropolis, on which the Parthenon stands, was a shantytown, and its occupants were said to rob stone for building, and even to burn the marble to produce lime for the same purpose. Elgin got permission to remove some of the stones, and they were conveyed, not without difficulty, to London, arriving from 1802 onward. They were first displayed, from 1807, at Elgin's residence in Park Lane and later at Burlington House, to the excitement of connoisseurs and the artistic community, who were admitted to make drawings of the remarkable antiquities. Elgin's fortunes were not secure, however, and his financial position led him to approach the British government with a view to making a sale. He wished to be reimbursed for the cost of removing the marbles and bringing them to London, and for interest on this sum, but this proposal was rejected and he was offered less than half his estimate. It was agreed that a select committee of the House of Commons should investigate the matter, and the committee started sitting in 1816. A great deal of evidence was heard, including opinions on the sculptures' ownership, quality, value, and origin (one eminent antiquarian, Richard Payne Knight [1751–1824], was convinced that they were Hadrianic, that is, Roman of the second century A.D.).³⁷ Eventually Elgin was offered thirty-five thousand pounds, which he was forced to accept, on account of his precarious financial situation. The sculptures were vested by the government in the British Museum, and they were transferred to a temporary gallery on the Bloomsbury site in 1816. In the following year this gallery was opened to the public. The artist Benjamin Haydon (1786–1846) wrote in his diary (for May 28): "On Monday last there were one thousand and two people visited the Elgin Marbles! A greater number than ever visited the British Museum since it was established. It is quite interesting to listen to the remarks of the people. . . . We overheard two common looking decent men say to each other, 'How broken they are, a'ant they?' 'Yes,' said the other, 'but how like life.'"³⁸ An impression of their appearance can be gained from the painting *The Trustees in the Temporary Elgin Room, 1819* (British Museum), by Archibald Archer.

The British Museum had further ambitions in Egypt, achieved with the assistance of another diplomat, Henry Salt (1780–1827), the consul general in Cairo. He knew the trustee Joseph Banks, and it was Banks who encouraged him to create a collection. Salt used the services of an Italian adventurer and archaeologist, Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778–1823), to remove from Luxor (ancient Thebes) a massive head, of the thirteenth century B.C., now known

to depict the pharaoh Ramesses II. The team of Salt and Belzoni made many additional acquisitions, and the collection was purchased by the museum, for two thousand pounds, in 1819. This was done without much grace; the trustees were often unwilling to pay up, and the diplomatic corps were by no means all wealthy men. Salt had written a hurt letter to Banks: "I now take the liberty of offering, through you, my *whole* collection to the British Museum . . . without any condition whatever. . . . The expenses incurred in forming this Collection have been considerable, and have somewhat seriously intrinched on my small private property; which, should the Trustees be pleased to reimburse me, in whole or in part, I shall receive as an obligation, or shall rest otherwise perfectly satisfied in the idea that my services in this respect may not be ultimately overlooked by the Government."³⁹ The trustees' attitude may have reflected a lack of enthusiasm for Egyptian antiquities, which some may have felt to be inferior to those from Greece and Rome.⁴⁰ In any case, they refused to buy the magnificent fourteenth-century B.C. sarcophagus of the pharaoh Sethos I (found by Belzoni), which was snatched up by the architect Sir John Soane (1753–1837) and installed in the basement of his house (now Sir John Soane's Museum) in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, where it remains to this day.

The museum's ambitions to collect from the ancient Near East were achieved through the agency of Sir Henry Austen Layard (1817–1894). As a young man, traveling overland to Sri Lanka in 1839, he came across mounds in Mesopotamia and Persia that he surmised were associated with the ancient civilizations of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Later he came into contact with a British diplomat at Constantinople, Sir Stratford Canning (1786–1880), who in 1845 sent him to Nimrud (in modern Iraq), the site of the Assyrian capital Kalhu. Here he discovered rooms with masonry walls inscribed in cuneiform script—this turned out to be the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.). Layard was commissioned by the British Museum to continue his excavations and shortly afterward found the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 B.C.), which later had a role in the decipherment of cuneiform script. He was lauded for his achievements, appointed attaché at Constantinople, and seconded to the British Museum. The museum turned parsimonious, as it often seemed to, and relationships soured. Nevertheless, large quantities of friezes and numbers of massive carved bulls and lions found their way to Bloomsbury, with the help of the Royal Navy. The finds were installed for public viewing in 1854.

By midcentury, the British Museum had impressive quantities of antiquities from Greece, Italy, Egypt, and the Near East. Archaeologists were growing concerned, however, about the museum's lack of attention to national archaeology; Sloane had made a small start in this area, but not much had happened in the intervening years. This had been the complaint of a royal commission on the British Museum that had been set up in 1847 and that reported in 1850. One of its many conclusions was, "We cannot deny force to the observation . . . upon

the absence or quasi-absence of a collection of national antiquities from a British Museum, nor can we doubt that great accessions would flow in if such were invited for the avowed purpose of forming a connected series of relics to illustrate the arts and manners of the various races which have occupied our soil.²⁴¹ One of the actions taken by the museum was to appoint, in 1851, a curator responsible for national archaeology. The choice was a Cambridge graduate, Augustus Wollaston Franks, who in 1850 had organized the Ancient and Mediaeval Exhibition at the Society of Arts. He was young, enthusiastic, and personally wealthy, and during his forty-five years in his post, he improved the balance of the antiquities collection and was instrumental in establishing the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography. Not infrequently, he purchased objects from his own pocket and presented them to the museum. Perhaps the most spectacular acquisition, on this occasion with help from a number of other sources, was the fourteenth-century Royal Gold Cup, which was likely presented in 1391 by Jean, duc de Berry (1340–1416), to Charles VI of France (r. 1380–1422).

The relationship between the British Museum and its public changed considerably in the first part of the nineteenth century. The regime of needing to apply for admission tickets was abandoned in 1805; from then onward, visitors needed only to sign the visitors' book, which was kept in the entrance hall. Although there was gradual liberalization of opening days and hours, they remained very restricted and were not helpful for working folk. In 1805 the museum opened on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and groups of up to fifteen were allowed around the museum at hourly intervals from ten o'clock till two o'clock. If this was insufficient to meet demand, the museum could be opened on Tuesdays and Thursdays, though trustees preferred that these days be kept free of visitors for the benefit of the staff. This meant that 360 visitors could usually be accommodated each week. In 1810 "persons of decent appearance" were allowed to wander around the galleries unescorted, though not on every day of the week. The museum remained closed on weekends and at particular times of the year, without exception. From an outsider's point of view, the principal librarian was seen to be dragging his feet about increasing the public's access to the museum. Pressures grew; in 1835 a parliamentary select committee interrogated Sir Henry Ellis (1777–1869):

Do you think there is sufficient objection to opening the Museum at nine o'clock?—I think so.

Do you think there would be any difficulty in the Summer months in opening the Museum from nine o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock in the evening?—Yes, I should think insurmountable difficulty.

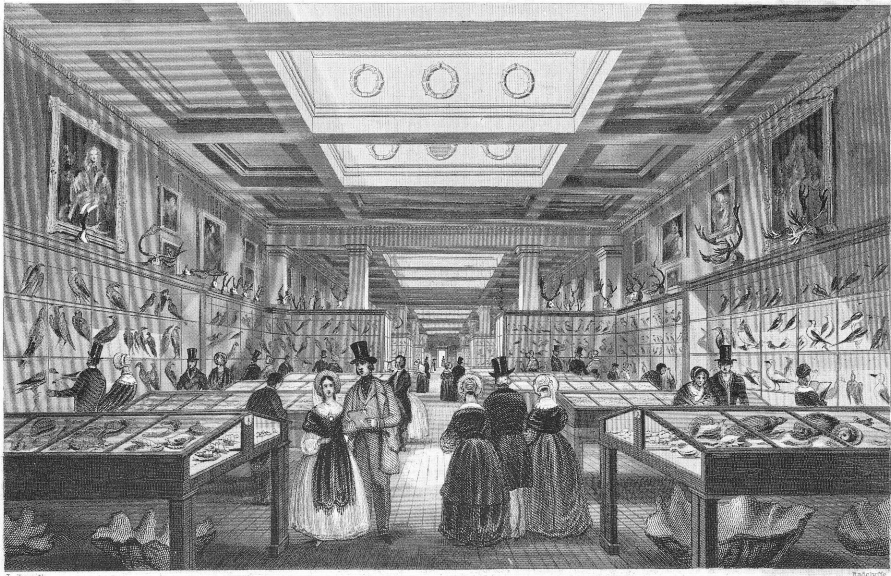
What objection is there to opening the Museum during the Easter holidays?—It gives us an opportunity of cleansing the place and making a variety of arrangements.

Do you think that is a sufficient reason for excluding the public at a time when so large a portion of people are at leisure?—I think the most mischievous portion of the population is abroad and about at such a time.

Do you not think that one object of the Museum is to improve the vulgar class?—I think the mere gazing of our curiosities is not one of the greatest objects of the Museum.⁴²

In 1837 the British Museum opened, for the first time, on a public holiday. This was Easter Monday, and crowds poured in; the attendance was quoted as 23,895 persons. The natural-history galleries were particularly popular (fig. 2-4). Sabbatarian groups made bold efforts to have museums and libraries (and indeed all public facilities of these kinds) closed on Sundays, and for a long while they were successful in keeping the Sabbath holy (as they saw it). From time to time there were debates in Parliament on the matter and a new group, the National Sunday League, did its best to change the law, so as to allow the admission of the public to the museum on Sunday afternoons,⁴³ but this was not permitted by Parliament until 1896. By that time, other restrictions on access had also been dropped; the banning of babies in arms had been repealed in 1879.

FIGURE 2-4.
Edward Radcliffe
(English, 1809–1863)
and Llewellynn Jewitt
(English, 1816–1886),
*British Museum—
Zoological Gallery*,
1844. Engraving, 13.2 ×
20.6 cm (5 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.).
Published by Joseph
Mead, 1844



British Museum. — Zoological Gallery
Le Musée Britannique. La Galerie Zoologique. *Das Britisches Museum. Das Zoologische Cabinet.*

By the early nineteenth century Montagu House had become significantly decrepit, even if from time to time the trustees spent sizable sums to patch it up.⁴⁴ With the burgeoning of the collections, the increasing public popularity of the museum, and the museum's declining state of repair, it was clear that drastic action would have to be taken. The problem of space brought things to a head. In January 1823, King George IV (r. 1820–30) wrote to the prime minister to say that he was resolved to present his father's library to the nation. There were 65,250 volumes and 19,000 tracts in the collection. The museum trustees agreed that they should accept the library; although there was nowhere to put the books at the time, a new building could be made ready in two years. The architect Sir Robert Smirke (1781–1867) was consulted. He had been involved in the museum since 1814 (and it was he who had designed the temporary Elgin Room). His solution was the gradual demolition of Montagu House over an extended period, while a new museum was built on the same site.⁴⁵ This would be in the form of Neoclassical galleries surrounding a large quadrangle. The first part of the concept, the King's Library, would occupy the whole of the ground floor on the east side; it was ready by 1827. The upper floor, originally intended as a picture gallery, came to house natural-history collections. Gradually the rest of Smirke's scheme came into being. Rooms to the south of the King's Library were used first as reading rooms but later to house manuscripts. The western range was for antiquities; the ground floor became the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery and a room to its west became the Elgin Room, for the Parthenon sculptures. Last of all, the northern rooms were built; they became the reading rooms for the library, ready by 1838. By 1845 Montagu House had disappeared. This left the great portico and pediment of the new museum to be constructed; the former was largely complete by 1848. The sculpture in the pediment was the work of Sir Richard Westmacott; its rough program is the Progress of Civilization. Scholars have considered the influences that may have resulted in Smirke's design. An early museum building in Great Britain with a modulated temple format was William Stark's Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, of 1804. Stark's design incorporated a portico in the Tuscan style, though the frontage was modest in scale. In fact, Smirke's amplitudinous entrance front to the British Museum was not finalized until as late as 1836, and as J. Mordaunt Crook has pointed out, it bears relatively little resemblance to Leo von Klenze's Glyptothek (1816–30) in Munich (see chap. 12, fig. 12-1) or Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum (1823–30) in Berlin (see chap. 11, figs. 11-1, 11-4).⁴⁶

A problem that had not been foreseen in 1823 was in need of a solution by midcentury. With the stricter application by the keeper of printed books Sir Antonio Panizzi (1797–1879) of the Copyright Act, requiring every book published in Britain and Ireland to be deposited in the museum, space was running out, both for book storage and also for readers. Of the various solutions considered, the favored one was the construction of a round reading room

in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by four book-storage units in the quadrants. The architect proposing this in 1854 was Sydney Smirke (1798–1877), Robert's younger brother, who by now was serving as the museum's architect. The construction—cast-iron ribs, a papier-mâché ceiling, and a copper roof—was completed rapidly, and the room opened for readers in May 1857. (Karl Marx, who had a reader's ticket from 1852, would have moved into the new library at this time.) The domed room, with its weblike arrangement of desks (based on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, it enabled the monitoring of readers from the center), soon became recognized as an iconic part of the museum.

The British Museum was distinctive from other national museums that were being established in Europe in the eighteenth century. It was not based on a royal or aristocratic collection, as was the Royal Museum (predecessor of the Nationalmuseum) in Stockholm, the Louvre in Paris, or the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg (even if for convenience and economy, British sovereigns' libraries were packed off to Bloomsbury from time to time). Its origins lay in the *Wunderkammer*, rather than in the *Kunstkammer*. The integration of national museum and library (with the senior officer termed principal librarian rather than director) was another difference from institutions elsewhere. This Enlightenment attitude, encouraging the extraction of knowledge from objects, books, and works on paper, all part of a single body, prevailed until 1973, when the British Library was established as a separate body, and it was not until the late 1990s that the library moved into its own building at St. Pancras. Another important departure was the eventual absence from the British Museum of paintings on canvas or wood. There had been a few relatively undistinguished oil paintings in the collection from the beginning, though in 1823, with the donation to the nation of the collection of Sir George Beaumont (1753–1827), it had seemed possible that the national collection of fine art would be developed in the British Museum.⁴⁷ A year later the National Gallery was established, which in its early days functioned effectively as part of the museum and to which the most important royal pictures (though not the portraits) were transferred.⁴⁸ The National Gallery was to develop independently thereafter, however. The British Museum engendered yet another important national museum in the nineteenth century, the Natural History Museum. As has been made clear in this essay, the natural-history collections were a key part of the original idea of the museum. The progenitor of the institution, Sir Hans Sloane, was recognized as a botanist as well as a physician, and the natural-history collections were championed by the powerful Sir Joseph Banks until his death in 1820. By 1838 botany, mineralogy, and zoology were each an independent department. The status of the collections was further strengthened in 1856 with the appointment of the conservator of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, Richard Owen (1804–1892), to the new post of superintendent of all the natural-history departments. Owen developed an agenda: his

natural-history collections should leave Bloomsbury to be housed in a separate building. In this he was encouraged by the attitude of the (by now) principal librarian, Antonio Panizzi, who if he disliked any part of his empire more than ethnography, it was natural history.⁴⁹ With the space problem's seeming insoluble at Bloomsbury, and with Owen's constant campaigning for the removal of the natural-history collections, any opposition to their moving melted away.⁵⁰ This they did in 1880, taking up occupancy in Alfred Waterhouse's new museum building in South Kensington, which had appropriately been designed to reflect the taxonomy of the natural world. The British Museum (Natural History), though essentially independent, was governed by the same board of trustees as the museum in Bloomsbury until 1963.

The major change of direction for the British Museum in the mid-nineteenth century came with the appreciation that material culture representing times and places other than the classical world, Egypt, and the Near East had a part to play. The appointment of Augustus Wollaston Franks was a key decision by the trustees, and it could be argued that he transformed the museum as no one had done before, or has done since.⁵¹ Prehistoric, British, medieval, later European, and oriental antiquities flooded into Bloomsbury, and for the first time since its foundation the British Museum became a museum of world cultures, something that would have satisfied Sloane, had he known about it.

NOTES

- 1 On Sloane's collecting activities, see Arthur MacGregor, ed., *Sir Hans Sloane: Collector, Scientist, Antiquary, Founding Father of the British Museum* (London, 1994).
- 2 On the Royal Society's museum, see Nehemiah Grew, *Museum Regalis Societatis; or, A Catalogue and Description of the Natural and Artificial Rarities Belonging to the Royal Society, and Preserved at Gresham College* (London, 1681).
- 3 A fourth library, the Old Royal Library of the Sovereigns of England, was donated by King George II (r. 1727–60) in 1757. See Marjorie L. Caygill, "From Private Collection to Public Museum: The Sloane Collection at Chelsea and the British Museum in Montagu House," in *Enlightening the British: Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by R. G. W. Anderson et al. (London, 2003), p. 19.
- 4 Quoted in David M. Wilson, *The British Museum: A History* (London, 2002), p. 15.
- 5 John F. M. Cannon, "Botanical Collections," in MacGregor, *Sir Hans Sloane* (note 1), p. 137.
- 6 *The Diary of John Evelyn*, edited by E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1955), vol. 5, pp. 531–32.
- 7 Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (London, 1731), p. x.
- 8 See Wilson, *British Museum* (note 4), p. 17.
- 9 British Library, London, Sloane MS 1968, fol. 192.
- 10 Richard Yeo, "Encyclopaedic Collectors: Ephraim Chambers and Sir Hans Sloane," in Anderson et al., *Enlightening the British* (note 3), p. 33.
- 11 Marjorie Caygill, *The Story of the British Museum*, 2nd ed. (London, 1992), p. 6.
- 12 The British Museum Act of 1753 (26 Geo. II cap. 22). The act received royal assent on June 7, 1753.
- 13 The archbishop of Canterbury was, ex officio, chairman of the board of trustees of the British Museum from 1753 to 1963, when a new British Museum Act required the board to appoint its own chairman.
- 14 See Wilson, *British Museum* (note 4), pp. 27, 28.
- 15 It was quite possible that the British Museum might have evolved into a much more scientific body. The first three principal librarians were all physicians and fellows of the Royal Society. The 1753 act includes the statement: "[A]ll Arts and Sciences have a Connexion with each other, and Discoveries in natural Philosophy and other branches of speculative Knowledge, for the Advancement and Improvement whereof the said Museum or Collection was intended, do and may in many Instances, give Help and Success to the most useful Experiments and Inventions." Quoted in Robert [R. G. W.] Anderson, "The Status of Instruments in Eighteenth-Century Cabinets," in Anderson et al., *Enlightening the British* (note 3), p. 55.
- 16 Quoted in Caygill, "From Private Collection to Public Museum" (note 3), p. 20.
- 17 Carl Philip Moritz, *Journeys of a German in England in 1782: A Walking Tour of England* (London, 1965), p. 59.
- 18 *Statutes and Rules Relating to the Inspection and Use of the British Museum* (London, 1759), pp. 5, 6.
- 19 A typical tour has been described in detail in Caygill, "From Private Collection to Public Museum" (note 3), pp. 18–28. Caygill has also assessed evidence of the earlier arrangement by Sloane in the Manor House of Chelsea.
- 20 This quotation originally comes from lines of verse under one of the thirty-one prints added by Francis Barlow to his second edition of *Aesop's Fables, with His Life: In English, French and Latin* (London, 1687), n.p. Barlow introduces his work with the comment, "The ingenious Mrs. A. Behn has been so obliging as to perform the English Poetry."
- 21 For further details of acquisitions in the latter part of the eighteenth century (and many aspects of the development of the British Museum's library), see P. R. Harris, *A History of the British Museum Library, 1753–1973* (London, 1998), pp. 14–27.
- 22 Quoted in Edward Miller, *That Noble Cabinet: A History of the British Museum* (London, 1973), pp. 66, 67.
- 23 On Hamilton's collecting, see Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection* (London, 1996).
- 24 On the vase and its history, see Susan Walker, *The Portland Vase* (London, 2004).
- 25 The phalluses are illustrated as the frontispiece of Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus, Lately Existing... in the Kingdom of Naples...* (London, 1786). A letter from William Hamilton describing evidence for the cult is reproduced on pp. 3–12.
- 26 On Banks, see Neil Chambers, *Joseph Banks and the British Museum: The World of Collecting, 1770–1830* (London, 2007).
- 27 See Des Cowley and Brian Hubber, "Distinct Creation: Early European Images of Australian Animals," *La Trobe Journal* 66 (2000), pp. 3–32.
- 28 Quoted in Miller, *Noble Cabinet* (note 22), p. 75. See also Alwyne Wheeler, "Daniel Solander and the Zoology of Cook's Voyage," *Archives of Natural History* 11 (1984), pp. 505–15.
- 29 Quoted in John Mack, "'Ethnography' in the Enlightenment," in Anderson et al., *Enlightening the British* (note 3), pp. 114–18.
- 30 See W. Campbell Smith, "A History of the First Hundred Years of the Mineral Collection in the British Museum," *Bulletin of the British Museum (Natural History) Historical Series* 3 (1969), pp. 237–59.
- 31 Quoted in Miller, *Noble Cabinet* (note 22), p. 113.
- 32 On Townley's collection, see B. F. Cook, *The Townley Marbles* (London, 1985).
- 33 Society of Dilettanti, *Specimens of Ancient Sculpture...* (London, 1809), vol. 1, commentary to plate 61. The commentary to plate 29 is equally effusive, speaking of Townley's "judgment in art as nearly infallible as human judgment can be."
- 34 See Richard Parkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment* (London, 1999).
- 35 The statement varies slightly from edition to edition. This

- version is taken from the front matter of the thirty-fifth edition, of 1838.
- 36 Quoted in Wilson, *British Museum* (note 4), p. 68.
- 37 *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles* (London, 1816).
- 38 Quoted in Wilson, *British Museum* (note 4), p. 74.
- 39 John James Halls, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*... (London, 1834), vol. 2, p. 306.
- 40 A clear hierarchy of sculpture from different cultures is indicated in an 1845 watercolor in the British Museum by James Stephanoff (1788–1874), *An Assemblage of Works of Art, from the Earliest Period to the Time of Phydias*. Stratifying objects in the British Museum's collection, Stephanoff places ancient Egyptian sculpture several evolutionary levels below the Elgin Marbles. See Ian Jenkins, *Archaeologists and Aesthetes: In the Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum, 1800–1939* (London, 1992), pp. 61–65 and pl. 6.
- 41 *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Constitution and Government of the British Museum* (London, 1850), p. 39.
- 42 *Report from the Select Committee on the Condition, Management and Affairs of the British Museum, together with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index* (London, 1835), paras. 1317–21.
- 43 On the league's efforts, see *The National Sunday League: To Obtain the Opening of the British Museum and Other National Institutions on Sunday Afternoon*... (London, 1856).
- 44 See Miller, *Noble Cabinet* (note 22), p. 116. In 1779 a storm damaged tiles and chimneys, and in 1800 extensive dry rot was discovered. Responsibility for maintenance of Montagu House passed from the trustees to the government's Office of Works in 1815.
- 45 See Marjorie Caygill and Christopher Date, *Building the British Museum* (London, 1999).
- 46 J. Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum* (London, 1972), p. 107.
- 47 On Beaumont, see Felicity Owen and David Blayney Brown, *Collector of Genius: A Life of Sir George Beaumont* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 209–17.
- 48 Jonathan Conlin, *The Nation's Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery* (London, 2006), pp. 53–56; see also Wilson, *British Museum* (note 4), p. 353, n. 149.
- 49 Panizzi objected to allocating galleries to artifacts that had not originated in the classical world. He wrote in a report to the trustees, of November 10, 1857, "All that space which is now occupied by medieval antiquities, by what are called British or Irish antiquities, and by the ethnological collection, might thus be turned to better use. It does not seem right that such valuable space should be taken up by Esquimaux dresses, canoes and hideous feather idols, broken flints, called rude knives, and so on." See *Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons), vol. 33 (December 3, 1857–August 2, 1858), p. 415, "Papers Relating to the Enlargement of the British Museum." Panizzi was also offended by the behavior of the crowds in the natural-history galleries, especially children who scattered orange peel.
- 50 Richard Owen, *On the Extent and Aims of a National Museum of Natural History, Including the Substances of a Discourse on That Subject, Delivered at the Royal Institution*... April 26, 1861 (London, 1862).
- 51 On Franks, see Marjorie Caygill and John Cherry, eds., *A. W. Franks: Nineteenth-Century Collecting and the British Museum* (London, 1997).