The Universal Museum – a valid model for the 21st century?

Introduction

In October 2002, the International Group of Organisers of Large-scale Exhibitions, also known as the Bizot Group — a forum comprising directors of 40 of the world's major museums and galleries — gathered in Munich for their annual informal discussion.[1] The meeting was convened specifically to address the problem of how to confront the growing number of requests for repatriation of objects from 'universal' museums and in particular the increasingly political nature of the international movement to reunite the Parthenon Marbles.

The outcome of the Group's deliberations was the publication of a united 'declaration' promoting the "importance and value of universal museums." Significantly, although the British Museum was not among the original signatories, the declaration was circulated through the British Museum press office and the British Museum has subsequently become its most vocal proponent.[2] Despite the declaration's claims to principles of 'universality' and its insistence that "museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation", not a single museum outside North America or mainland Europe was included as a signatory.

The declaration condemned the illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects, but insisted that, "objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era." The declaration went on to outline what its signatories perceived to be "the threat to the integrity of universal collections posed by demands for the restitution of objects to their countries of origin."

Since the declaration was issued, the question of the 'universal museum' has been subjected to renewed scrutiny, widely debated at industry conferences and in the media.[3] As far as can be established, however, it is yet to receive a formal critical response from the International Council of Museums (ICOM), from the UK Museums Association (MA), or from any other national or international museum body.[4]

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[1] The Bizot Group — named after Irène Bizot, the former head of the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, who founded the group — convenes annually to discuss issues of concern to the museum profession.

[2] 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums' signed by the directors of 18 European and American art museums. See Appendix 1

[3] Whether the signatories to the declaration considered how their joint utterance might be received by the international cultural community, or the extent to which it might polarise museum professionals remains unclear. However, it is hard to see how a potentially divisive and provocative policy document could have been constructed with such scant disregard for the broader museum community, which was not consulted.

One notable aspect of the recent declaration was its implicit assumption that an idea born during the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment can be reconciled with more recent scholarship in fields such as postmodernism, post-colonial theory, and the so-called 'new museology' in order to function as a viable philosophical framework for the world's museums in the future. Whether the Enlightenment model of the universal museum currently being promoted by some museum professionals is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the competing semantic claims made on today's museums by diverse communities and interest groups remains a matter of conjecture. What seems certain is that the increasingly combative postures adopted by a number of European and North American museum directors can only exacerbate the problem, although this is how things are currently developing.

A recent book of essays edited by James Cuno, former director of London's Courtauld Institute of Art and now director of the Art Institute of Chicago, emphasises an ever-deepening rift within the international community.[5] Conscious of museums being pulled in a number of irreconcilable directions, Cuno invited a select group of colleagues to express their personal vision for the future of art museums and how they might honour the public trust. The consensus that emerged was above all a desire to revive the museum as a sanctuary of absorption and repose, a still point in a turning world.

For many of Cuno's colleagues, their institutions took on a healing role following the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. Hence the urgent need, according to some of the book's contributors, to protect museums from "theorists" disseminating malevolent doctrines of relativism and fundamentalism, which apparently threaten that therapeutic function. A consistent subtext throughout the book is that museums are imperiled by a creeping postmodern liberalism whose proponents are in thrall to nebulous notions of globalisation and social inclusion and actively hostile to traditional criteria of quality or value. As James N. Wood, former director of the Art Institute of Chicago, puts it, "These writers, many of them French, found particularly fertile ground in the United States, where the ideals of democracy are more freely applied to the artistic realm and aesthetic elitism grates against egalitarian convictions."[6]

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[4] In a statement issued shortly after the declaration was published, ICOM supported the declaration's general thrust against the illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic and ethnic objects, but quoted its own code of ethics with regard to repatriation to the effect that museums should: 'be prepared to initiate dialogues with an open-minded attitude based on scientific and professional principles.' See Flynn, T., 'Artefact traffic' in *Museums Journal*, February 2003, pp16-17. ICOM has subsequently published a discussion pamphlet addressing the issue (ICOM News, Vol 57, 2004 No.1)

[5] James Cuno (Ed.), *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, Princeton University Press, 2004.

Woods' comments – in harmony with the majority of contributors to Cuno's book – reveal an overriding concern to shore up and export American conservative cultural values rather than address the serious issues confronting the profession internationally. The fact that all but one of the contributors are directors of American institutions (save for Neil MacGregor of the British Museum) adds further weight to this reading. Meanwhile barely a reference is made in the book to museums elsewhere in the world, or to how European and American institutions might evolve in relation to museums in other countries.

There is no small irony in hearing that American museums became havens of spiritual nourishment following the attacks of September 11th 2001. By way of contrast, one of the most immediate consequences of the invasion of Iraq was the transformation of its national museum from peaceful oasis into desecrated battleground.

The universal museum as it is currently being revived is fundamental to a broader retardataire approach to museum management that is bent on building a false dichotomy between the custodianship of beautiful objects and a perceived impulse to disperse and destroy collections through repatriation. James N. Wood again: "While many of these theorists question the legitimacy of the museum's authority there is a simultaneous and often only slightly veiled desire to usurp that authority for their own social agendas." Woods might just as well have used the word "socialist", so barely disguised is his McCarthyite condemnation of anyone who dares challenge the museum's authority. In fact, those currently criticising the protectionist universal museum need no convincing of the fructifying and edifying power of art. Rather than pursuing narrow political aims, what many are arguing for is a loosening of the Western museum's proprietorial grasp on the world's material culture and the narratives that circulate around it. Instead they argue for the construction of a more internationalist, collaborative approach that restores the importance and value of context to an object's meaning and identity.

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[6] Cuno, 2004, p124

Few critics of the universal museum wish to see major collections dispersed or are seeking the return of all cultural objects to their countries of origin. Such aims would be unnecessary and damaging and this perhaps explains why conservative museum directors persist in falsely ascribing those aims to museum reformists. Certain cases do, however, demand more expansive consideration for the manifold cultural benefits that would ensue. The Parthenon Marbles remains the outstanding instance.

What follows is not about the Parthenon Marbles *per se*. It is, however, largely informed by the extent to which that particular issue has come to signify an epistemological rupture in museology — a profession seemingly oblivious to critical developments in postmodern thought.[7]

This paper traces the historical sources of the idea of the 'universal museum' and questions its appropriateness for the twenty-first century.[8] It goes on to address some of the anomalies and ideological contradictions at the heart of the recent museum directors' declaration and calls for an alternative philosophical model for museums of the future.

As the former Greek Minister of Culture, Evangelos Venizelos, recently phrased it, "It is time to rethink the role of the international museum at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which is absolutely different from the museum of two centuries ago which collected objects only to be concentrated in London or New York or Paris."[9]

It is now a commonplace to treat museums as contested cultural territory, as sites of ideological struggle between opposing interest groups. Although what follows is an attempt to define the nature of a developing controversy in museum culture, its argument has been couched in such a way as to make it accessible to as wide an audience as possible, chiefly in deference to the popularity of the Parthenon Marbles.[10]

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[7] With a handful of notable exceptions, one of the most notable characteristics of museology in recent years has been the gulf between advanced scholarly publishing and a still largely conservative professional practice.

[8] For a history of the museum as a cultural institution, see, for example, Impey, O., & MacGregor, A., *The Origins of Museums*, 1985; Altick, Richard, D., *The Shows of London*, Harvard & London, Belknap Press, 1978; Bazin, G., *The Museum Age*, Universe Books, New York, 1967. Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics,* Routledge, 1995.

[9] Quoted in Peter Aspden, 'Sharp end of civilisation', *Financial Times*, June 13, 2003.

[10] A recent ICM poll revealed that 73% of the general public agreed that the British Museum should allow the Parthenon Marbles to be reunited and displayed again in Athens.

The universal museum

The museological aspiration towards universality – the encyclopedic embrace of the material world in its entirety, "'neath one roof", has been fundamental to the collecting impulse since the first private scholarly collections began to be assembled during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[11] These collections were the product of an earlier Renaissance culture of inquiry that in turn drew on ancient classical precedents. Pliny the Elder's 37-volume encyclopedia of the material world — the *Historia naturalis* written in the first century AD — provided a taxonomic template for the classification of nature in all its bewildering diversity. Renaissance scholars and collectors developed this ancient tradition into a new humanism relevant to their own time.[12]

The earliest examples of what might be termed museological treatises, compiled during the sixteenth century, contain specific references to the virtues of encyclopedic classification and how knowledge is generated through the disciplined and systematic arrangement of objects. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Eva Schultz have shown, one of the earliest such treatises, compiled in the 1560s by the Flemish physician Samuel Quiccheberg (1529-67), made abundant reference to the encyclopedic framework within which scholarly collecting should be conducted.[13]

Collecting at this period was almost exclusively a private as opposed to a state-initiated activity and as such was largely confined to princely or noble privilege. Quiccheberg seems also to have been one of the first scholars to employ the terms *Kunstkammer* and *Wunderkammer*, or what later became familiar as the famous European 'cabinets of curiosities' containing, respectively, works of art and of nature in its most wondrous and bizarre manifestations.[14] "And so you may have in small compass," wrote the philosopher Francis Bacon of these earliest private collections, "a model of the universal nature made private."[15]

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[11] As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has noted, many scholars have explored the origins of universal collections during the late Renaissance without questioning what the concept of 'universality' might have comprised. Hooper-Greenhill, E., *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge 1992, pp80-81.

[12] Following Foucault, Hooper-Greenhill and others have sought to take account of the different '*epistemes*', or structures of knowledge, that underpinned the formation of Renaissance and later 'cabinets'. Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, pp78-104.

[13] Ibid; Schulz, E., 'Notes on the history of collecting and of museums' in Susan M. Pearce, (Ed.) *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Routledge, 1994, pp175-187. (First published in *Journal of History of Collections* 2(2) (1990), pp205-18.

[14] Schultz, 1994, p178.

[15] Quoted in Impey & MacGregor, 1985, p1.

Quiccheberg's 'Rich theatre of objects of the whole universe' recommended not only the meticulous classification of diverse nature, but a parallel encyclopedic catalogue providing textual evidence of the transcendent value of intellectual inquiry.[16] Later, this aspect of the collecting discipline provided the foundation for the numerous printed encyclopedias and 'musées' published in Europe throughout the eighteenth century.

It is in the early theoretical meditations on museums that we detect some of the first intimations of collecting as a form of religious devotion. The connection between museums and religious institutions dates back to the late Middle Ages, for some of the earliest museums grew out of treasuries attached to ecclesiastical establishments.[17] The collection, methodical arrangement and cataloguing of artificial and natural specimens, allowed princely collectors of the late sixteenth century such as Grand Duke Francesco I (1541-87) to claim dominion over a world represented in microcosm with himself located at its symbolic centre.[18] Moreover, the accumulation and representation of knowledge in this way within the *studiolo*, a room devoted to the storage and display of the collection, was seen as a means of glorifying God.[19]

This quasi-religious element to encyclopedic collecting survived into the modern period. The universal survey museum that emerged during the eighteenth century made use of traditional religious language and iconography to establish itself as an instrument of the bourgeois nation state.[20]

As Carol Duncan has shown, the public art museums we know today grew directly out of princely collections formed between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries.[21] These collections displayed objects in lavish surroundings designed to communicate to privileged visitors the potency of royal status. During the eighteenth century, some of these collections were transferred from private into public ownership and thereafter the strategies of display they employed were marshalled towards communicating the power of the state.

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[16] Schultz, 1994, pp178-9.

[17] Impey & MacGregor, 1985.

[18] Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, pp105-6.

[19] Schultz, 1994, pp185-6.

[20] Carol Duncan & Alan Wallach, 'The Universal Survey Museum' in *Art History*, 1980, 3:4, pp448-469.

[21] Duncan, Carol, 'From the Princely Gallery to the Public Art Museum' in Boswell, David and Evans, Jessica (eds.) *Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritage and Museums*, Routledge, 1999.

As Andrew McClellan has shown, the opening of princely art collections to public access throughout Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century is evidence of the dissemination of Enlightenment culture.[22]

Although not the first, arguably the most significant and dramatic transformation of a princely collection into public ownership occurred in France in 1793 when the Musée du Louvre — hitherto officially the property of the Crown — was seized by the Republican Guard.[23] Following its effective 'nationalisation', the Louvre Museum – or the Museum of the Republic, as the Convention renamed it – began to function as an expression of the self-image of the state.[24]

The earliest displays of the Louvre's holdings followed the haphazard arrangements of earlier baroque collections, but they were eventually subsumed into the prevailing trend towards didactic classification. Here the bourgeois citizen could partake of a narrative vision of civilisation expressed through the carefully arranged collections and locate himself and his country at the apex of that historical development.[25] Today, the Louvre survives as an archetypal instance of the museum as an embodiment of the state, but it is by no means the only national museum carrying that particular political charge.[26]

The first public museum in England was the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which comprised the collections assembled by the explorer and naturalist John Tradescant the Elder (1570-1638). Tradescant's first museum, the Museum Tradescantianum, otherwise known as 'Tradescant's Ark', opened to the public in Lambeth, South London in 1626, displaying such curiosities as a piece of the True Cross, a mermaid's hand, and blood said to have rained on the Isle of Wight. Tradescant's son, John Tradescant the Younger, eventually bequeathed the collection to the antiquarian, Elias Ashmole, who in turn left it to Oxford University in 1677. It opened to the public in May 1683.

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[22] McClellan, A., *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, p7.

[23] Duncan, 1999, p305.

[24] Paradoxically, prior to the Revolution, during the 1780s, progressive plans were already under way to establish a French national museum open to the public, Count d'Angiviller having been appointed Directeur Général des Bâtiments by Louis XVI for this express purpose. See Bazin, 1967, pp153-156.

[25] An exemplary instance of this approach was the Musée des monuments français under the directorship of the painter Alexandre Lenoir who proclaimed it "the only place where one can study the birth, evolution and eventual florescence of the arts within a context…The advances in art follow those of civilization." Quoted in Bazin, 1967, p173.

[26] The recent declaration by the directors of a number of universal museums could be interpreted as nothing less than an attempt to confront a growing challenge to one of the most important institutions expressive of state power. See Appendix 1.

Although the Ashmolean was the earliest public museum in England, the British Museum, founded exactly sixty years later in 1753, became the first national museum whose origins were not rooted in a royal collection.[27] The British Museum was also one of the first institutions to claim the status of a universal museum.

The history of the British Museum has been narrated at length elsewhere, but it is worth pausing over certain aspects of its early development.[28] Its emergence from within a typical seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities — that of the physician Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), acquired by the nation in 1753 — set the tenor for the British Museum's later ambitions towards universality.

As a physician of some social standing, Sloane moved in elevated circles, being friendly with the scientist Robert Boyle and the naturalist John Ray.[29] His sojourn in Jamaica in the late 1680s as the personal physician to the Duke of Albemarle allowed him to indulge his interest in natural history and as a consequence his collections contained the kind of natural curiosities that captured the imagination of cultured European intellectuals. During the early eighteenth century, Sloane added significantly to his own core holdings, buying or inheriting other famous collections such as that of William Charleton and those of Pettiver and Merrett. By the time of his death in 1753, Sloane's collection was impressively expansive, comprising plants, fruits, corals, minerals, stones, shells, animals, insects, anatomical and pathological specimens, lamps, urns, gems, inscriptions, gold and silver medals, diamonds, jewels and precious stones, Roman, Etruscan, Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities, some 32,000 coins and 42,000 books.[30]

Such a haphazard accumulation of diverse objects can only be properly understood within the context of the princely collecting tradition described above. What Sloane must have realised, however, like Quiccheberg before him, was that true universality was but a chimera. Quiccheberg ultimately drew his inspiration from the Bible, seeing the collection as following from Old Testament example — the Temple of Solomon as a prototype for the Wunderkammer. In this respect, as Eva Schultz has observed, the

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[27] Bazin, 1967, p145.

[28] See, for example, Wilson, David, M., *The British Museum: A History*, British Museum Press, 2002; Miller, Edward, *That Noble Cabinet: A History of the British Museum*, Andre Deutsch, 1973.

[29] For a thorough account of Sloane's early career and the establishment of the British Museum from his core collections, see Miller, 1973.

[30] Miller, 1973, pp37-40.

Quicchebergian ‘theatrum’ could function as a kind of vanitas symbol — “In spite of the praise of scholars, a reference was embedded here to the transitoriness of everything that is wrought by man in the face of the infinity and order of God’s omnipotence.”[31]

The earliest theorists of collecting acknowledged that true universality was unattainable as a governing principle. The seventeenth-century German physician and collector Johann Daniel Major (1636-93) strove towards a completeness in his scholarly catalogue that he knew to be impossible in a real collection.[32] Similarly, the universal collections assembled during the eighteenth century partook of traditional theories of classification, refracted through rational skepticism. As Michel Foucault and others have noted, within the seemingly unitary nature of Enlightenment thought was a dialectical tension between a belief in nature’s susceptibility to accommodation through comprehensive classification and an equally profound insistence on its resistance to such measures.[33]

Here one might invoke that old museum adage about how identifying and filling a single gap in a collection does not in fact erase the gap but rather creates two new gaps, each adjacent to the object inserted. This self-sustaining pleasure/pain principle drives the collector forward, condemning him, like Tantalus, to a perpetual double-bind of desire and its denial.

The British Museum’s decisions to fragment into a series of discreet collections – moving the museum’s natural history collections to South Kensington in the 1880s and the British Library to St. Pancras in 1997, for example – might be read as a more than tacit acknowledgement of the unsustainability of the universal museum as inherited from the Enlightenment.[34]

The founders of the great universal museums subscribed to the notion that the more comprehensive a collection, the more coherent it became. Furthermore, coherence and legibility were of paramount importance when the collection was required to communicate a historical progression, invariably one moving from a notional barbarism towards civilisation.[35] As Eugenio Donato has observed, "The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe...Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world."[36]

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[31] Schultz, 1994, p179.

[32] “The only collections whose arrangements are complete, according to Major, were those of King Solomon and King Hezeki’ah, as described in the Bible. […] Major recommends these as models for all other collections as they are, according to him, the most complete that can be created by the hand of man.” Schultz, 1994, p181.

[33] Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, 1994 (1970), p126.

[34] Although the natural history collections moved to South Kensington in the 1880s, the British Museum was only statutorily separated from the Natural History Museum in 1963. The British Library Act of 1972 had already turned the British Library into an autonomous entity, separate from the British Museum, although the two institutions remained under one roof until 1997.

Such strategies were clearly deemed essential, however, if the museum's exponentially expanding collections were not to appear as disorderly bric-a-brac, or as Donato has phrased it, "a heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects which are incapable of substituting themselves either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representations."[37]

Belief in the judicious juxtaposition of fragments derives in large part from the early theoretical approaches to the history of art formulated by the German art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-68). Winckelmann's attempt to formulate a theory of art historical evolution, based on what he believed to be surviving fragments of ancient Greek sculpture, was published in 1764 as *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, (History of the Art of the Ancients). This work provided the foundations for the neoclassical movement that was to dominate European aesthetics throughout the next century. So persuasive was this theory, that it remained the canonical point of reference long after it was established that the objects upon which Winckelmann had based his ideas were not in fact Greek originals, but Roman copies.

Winckelmann's aesthetic theory was grounded in a belief in the classical ideal as a product of Greek genius and the elevated standard to which all art should aspire. The monolithic legacy of neoclassical thought continues to underpin modern museology. In the 1930s, it caused the British Museum to scrape the Parthenon Marbles in a misguided effort to restore them to what was believed to be their original state, thereby forcing them to comply with the aesthetic of white marble purity that is the *idée fixe* of neoclassicism.[38]

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[35] Salter, Mark, B., *Barbarians and Civilisation in International Relations*, Pluto, London, 2002.

[36] Eugenio Donato, 'The museum's furnace: Notes toward a contextual reading of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*', in J. Harari (ed.) *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism*, Ithaca: N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979, p223.

[37] Donato, 1979, p223.

These misconceptions are as much a product of the process of decontextualisation so central to the museum tradition as they are of museological mismanagement. The imperial museum of the nineteenth century, which succeeded the universal museum of the Enlightenment, completed that process of decontextualisation which the Wunderkammer had originated in small compass. This in turn fostered a mode of art historical classification and display that bolstered the museum's raison d'être, often at the expense of a proper understanding of individual objects which, to use Phillip Fisher's phrase, "the museum itself has profoundly hidden in history."[39]

The Louvre provided the first great instance of wilful decontextualisation during the Revolutionary Wars, and later during the Napoleonic campaigns, with the large-scale displacement of works of art from Italy and elsewhere to Paris.[40] During the Revolution, the Louvre received substantial amounts of property confiscated from the royal households and from the displaced aristocracy.[41] However, during the Revolutionary Wars in Belgium in 1794-1795 and in Italy and Egypt later in the decade, an even more significant tranche of cultural heritage was seized and moved to the French capital. Despite claims to the contrary, these were no acts of 'cultural rescue', (that euphemism so often used to justify Elgin's depredation of the Parthenon), but part of a systematic programme to glorify the new Republic.

In the two years following the armistice signed with the Duke of Parma in 1796, Napoleon expropriated some 200 works of art from Italy and transported them to Paris. These seizures included a prestigious collection of antique statues from the Capitoline and Vatican museums which entered Paris in a triumphal procession in 1798. Possession of these treasures would, it was hoped, provide a means of "furthering the principles of philosophy, the creations of science, the discoveries of genius and for accelerating the development of reason and happiness among men."[42] Here was one of the earliest instances in which the philosophical tenets of the European Enlightenment were invoked as justification for the looting of another country's cultural heritage. Such sophistry subsequently became a not uncommon trope of modern museological discourse.[43]

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[38] For a full account of that episode, see St Clair, William, 'The Elgin Marbles: Questions of Stewardship and Accountability' in *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 8 (1999), No2, pp397-549.

[39] Fisher, Phillip, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*, New York, OUP, 1991, p9, quoted in Bennett, 1995, p45.

[40] Expropriation of works of art did not originate with Napoleon but had been conducted by the Convention in 1794 during the French campaign in Belgium. See Gould, Cecil, *Trophy of Conquest: The Musée Napoléon and the Creation of the Louvre,* Faber, 1965.

[41] Bazin, 1967, p171.

Napoleon's ambition was to establish a universal museum that would manifest the unassailable cultural superiority of Republican France while testifying to French military prowess. Furthermore, the museum would serve to educate the French people in the virtues of citizenship and encourage them to identify with the aspirations of the state.

Henceforth works of art, and the museum housing them, were transformed into instruments of state power. Furthermore, as Sylvia Lavin has pointed out, "Severing these objects from their context and stripping them of some of their historical value was critical to their politicization."[44]

Among the fiercest critics of this act of spoliation was the French antiquarian Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849) who, together with the architects Pierre Fontaine and Charles Percier and the painters Jacques-Louis David and Pierre-Henry de Valenciennes, signed a petition of protest and delivered it to the Directory.

Although trained as a sculptor, Quatremère soon turned his attention to architectural theory and to promoting the rights of artists. A friend of the sculptor Antonio Canova, with whom he corresponded over Elgin's removal of the Parthenon Marbles to London – an act of which he approved – he later wrote a scholarly thesis on the Temple of Jupiter at Olympia and prepared an important reconstruction of the ancient art of chryselephantine, or gold and ivory sculpture. In 1816 he became permanent secretary (*secrétaire perpétuel*) of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, a position he occupied until 1839.

Although originally sympathetic to the Revolution, holding a number of important official posts, Quatremère eventually found himself out of step with its increasingly radical aims. Following a brief period of exile from 1797-1799, he spent the next decade in relative privacy away from public office, researching and writing scholarly treatises on art and architecture.

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[42] Bazin, 1967, p174.

[43] Similar elevated Enlightenment doctrine is regularly used by the British Museum to justify retrospectively the seizure and retention of the Parthenon Marbles, the Benin brasses and much else besides.

[44] Lavin, Sylvia, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture*, MIT Press, 1992, p152

Quatremère's opposition to Napoleon's removal of works of art from Italy was articulated in a series of letters to the Spanish-American soldier and adventurer General Miranda, published in 1796.[45] Quatremère's objection may at first seem to contradict his approval of Elgin's appropriation of the Parthenon Marbles, expressed in correspondence with his friend the sculptor Antonio Canova published in 1818.[46] However, for Quatremère, the two acts were fundamentally different in terms of "the political circumstances that motivated and authorized the spoliage" and had quite different implications in terms of the "conservation of the works of art themselves".[47] As Sylvia Lavin has shown, the decontextualisation of works of art under the Convention was justified by supporters of the Republic as an intrinsic part of the process of universalizing the Revolution. Conversely, that process ran entirely counter to Quatremère's professed belief in the universality of art:

> I would feel it…injurious to the eighteenth century to suspect it capable of resurrecting the Roman right of conquest that made men and things the property of the strongest. Who is unaware that this absurd and monstrous right was included in the legal code of Rome on the same basis as slavery?[48]

One might argue that today a similar tension exists in the case of the Parthenon Marbles. The Marbles continue to function as evidence of an assumed right of conquest, with London promoting itself on behalf of Britain as somehow culturally superior to other nations, as Paris sought to do on behalf of France in the late 18th century. With the end of empire and the concomitant decline of British influence abroad, looted artefacts now bear much of the burden of sustaining that fiction. Meanwhile, like Quatremère, today's opponents of this conservative position continue to argue for a more socially relevant universality, one that privileges the integrity of objects by recontextualising and depoliticising them.

Quatremère was writing, of course, at the very dawn of the age of imperial conquest and how prescient his words now seem. We may accuse of him of a certain sophistry in his support of Elgin and his condemnation of Napoleon (which to a modern artistic sensibility may seem to be comparable acts of philistinism). However, it is important to understand that Elgin's actions were widely perceived by his contemporaries, including Quatremère, as being in the best interests of the Parthenon Marbles and therefore quite in keeping with Quatremère's avowed belief in the membership of objects in the Republic of the Arts.[49] Moreover, Quatremère was not to know that the marbles would subsequently become, when juxtaposed with manifold other spoils, more a symbol of British imperial might than a signifier of Greek artistic achievement.

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[45] Reprinted as Quatremère de Quincy, A. C., *Lettres à Miranda sur le déplacement des monuments de l'art de l'Italie.* Paris, 1989.

[46] Quatremère de Quincy, A. C., *Lettres écrites de Londres à Rome, et adressées à M. Canova sur les Marbres d'Elgin, ou les sculptures du temple de Minerve à Athènes*. Rome, 1818.

[47] Quatremère de Quincy, quoted in Lavin, 1992, p152

[48] Quatremère de Quincy, quoted in Lavin, 1992, p153

More importantly, Quatremère's career offers ample evidence for us to conclude that were he alive today he would likely have been in favour of the repatriation of the Parthenon sculptures to their place of origin. His textual and graphical reconstructions of the chryselephantine Zeus at Olympia and the Athena Parthenos in Athens are evidence of his determination to understand those aspects of ancient art and architecture that had been marginalized by the prevailing academic view of antique sculpture bequeathed by Winckelmann.

Quatremère's elaborate reconstruction of Pheidias's great chryselephantine figures of Athena Parthenos and Olympian Zeus, published in 1815, remains one of the most compelling meditations on the lost objects of antiquity ever produced. The *Jupiter Olympien*, as his publication was titled, threw light onto an ancient technique of polychrome sculpture that was to haunt the neoclassical imagination throughout the ensuing century.

It was not until the early decades of the nineteenth century that there appeared clear and irrefutable archaeological evidence of the coloured nature of ancient architecture – and of architectural sculpture.[50] However, Quatremère's description of the widespread use in Periclean Athens of natural polychromy – that is colour deriving from the materials themselves as opposed to artificial or applied – was an altogether more radical revelation.[51]

For modern-day Athenians, as for their nineteenth-century ancestors, the Athena Parthenos now exists merely in the imagination, all physical evidence of the great colossal statue having long ago been consigned to oblivion, largely on account of the precious nature of the material from which she was constructed. For many Greeks, the other principal surviving works by Pheidias, the Parthenon Marbles, have now also assumed the quality of an imagined presence, separated from their place of origin and hence to all intents and purposes, lost.

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[49] Lavin, 1992, pp148-157

[50] Middleton, Robin, (Ed.), *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth Century French Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, 1984.

[51] Flynn, T., *The Nineteenth-century Revival of Interest in the Chryselephantine Sculpture of Antiquity*, Unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 1995.

Quatremère's pronouncements on the need to preserve and reconstruct the historical record leave little doubt as to his view on the relationship between antique part and whole and the need to reunite them, where possible, *in situ* – "What is antiquity in Rome, if not a great book whose pages have been dispersed or destroyed by time and whose voids are filled and whose lacunae are repaired every day by modern research?" he asked.[52]

In appropriating hundreds of antiquities and works of art, Napoleon not only severed them from their cultural context, but also effectively took control of their historical narratives in order to glorify the Republic.

The development of the British Museum collections is occasionally portrayed as having followed an altogether more modest and dignified trajectory than the imperial conquests that furnished the Musée Napoléon. Nevertheless, the fact that both the Louvre and the British Museum came to perceive themselves as universal museums testifies to their success in accumulating significant quantities of the world's most important material culture, whether through serendipity, military conquest, or via the productively combined efforts of archaeologists and diplomats skilled in the bribery of satraps.

While many of the antiquities seized by the French were eventually restituted to their countries of origin following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, England had earlier seen fit to exercise a right of conquest in its retention of the Rosetta Stone and other Egyptian antiquities.[53]

The Rosetta Stone was among an important group of Egyptian works of art ceded to the English in 1801 following the defeat of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. They arrived in England in 1802 and at the end of the year were presented to the British Museum by King George III. Thus the first and most significant tranche of ancient sculpture to enter the British Museum's collections was marked as imperial plunder, setting a pattern for museum acquisitions throughout the nineteenth century. Instead of representing French military prowess, the Rosetta Stone and other looted Egyptian artefacts came to signify English cultural supremacy and subsequently helped cement the British Museum's much-vaunted claim to universality. This is all the more ironic in the light of the prejudice expressed towards Egyptian cultural heritage by the British Museum's trustees in the early decades of the nineteenth century. At that time, Greek art was perceived as the pinnacle of human creativity; to be seen to be spending large sums of money on the more carnivalesque attractions of Egyptian material heritage simply would not do.[54] However, it also appears that the trustees often stretched the patience of those expatriate collectors buying on the museum's behalf by vacillating over payment, seemingly aware that they would eventually secure the material for a fraction of what was being asked.[55]

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[52] Quatremère de Quincy, quoted in Lavin, 1992, p157

[53] T. G. H. James, 'Napoleon and Egyptology: Britain's debt to French enterprise' in R.G.W. Anderson, M. L. Caygill, A. G. MacGregor and L. Syson (Eds.) *Enlightening the British: Knowledge, discovery and the museum in the eighteenth century*, British Museum Press, 2003.

Once it became clear that Egyptian and other antiquities could be acquired at little or no cost through diplomatic persuasion and other means, the British Museum collections began to swell**.** The processes of displacement from source and subsequent pedagogical display at home continued throughout the most fertile period of acquisition in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their effects can still be felt today. The Parthenon Marbles and a host of other alienated works of art remain locked not only in inappropriate surroundings, but also within a conservative art historical model that deprives them of much of their signifying richness. The universal museum positions its objects almost exclusively within a normative stylistic canon that foregrounds their status as important possessions at the expense of a proper understanding of their original cultural context or ownership history.

The universal museum revived

During the summer of 2003, the campaign for the return of the Parthenon Marbles assumed a new intensity as Greece launched a fresh round of lobbying ahead of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Building had already begun on the new Acropolis Museum designed by award-winning French-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, which includes a specially designed gallery to house the Parthenon sculptures. Either the marbles would be returned in time for the Games, it was suggested, or the lacuna at the heart of the new museum would stand as an emblem of British cultural intransigence.[56]

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[54] France, P. *The Rape of Egypt: How the Europeans Stripped Egypt of its Heritage*, London, Barrie & Jenkins, 1991, pp58-80.

[55] Ibid.

[56] During the process of writing in February 2004, it was announced that the museum's construction would not meet the planned schedule.

Coincidentally, 2003 also marked the 250th anniversary of the founding of the British Museum. Hence, while architect Bernard Tschumi and the then director of the Acropolis Museum Dimitrios Pandermalis embarked upon an international roadshow to present their new museum to the world and to appeal once again for the return of the Parthenon Marbles as its centrepiece, British Museum director Neil MacGregor began disseminating an alternative vision which emphasised the British Museum as the rightful home of the Marbles.

Throughout 2003, in a series of well-orchestrated anniversary celebrations, exhibitions, and media events, the British Museum sought subtly to reinforce its original eighteenth-century Enlightenment identity as a 'universal museum' – a panoptic chamber within which the finest achievements of world civilisation might be surveyed as a grand historical narrative. Neil MacGregor's centralising vision involved gathering those parts of the museum's collections then dispersed around London in order to reunite them with the main collection, much of which, as the New York Times helpfully pointed out, had been collected during the glory days of the British Empire. "We'll be back to 1753," said MacGregor, "with the whole world under one roof."[57]

The British Museum's recent energetic revival of its Enlightenment origins as a universal museum can be interpreted not only as an elaborate act of birthday self-congratulation, but also as a coordinated attempt to counter increasingly frequent claims for the repatriation of key objects in its collections.

The Enlightenment carries a particularly persuasive cultural charge for it is to this historical reference point that we ascribe the source of our modern day ideals of free citizenship, social justice and rational inquiry, all perceived as central to the museum's purpose as a didactic institution. During the nineteenth century, those same imperatives came to underpin the scientific and industrial aspirations of the European colonial powers, who believed themselves to be embarking upon a 'civilising mission'.[58]

It was at this point that European and North American museums availed themselves of the acquisitive apparatus of imperial expansion and assumed their modern identity as the gatherers and custodians of the world's material culture. History has recorded that the means by which many of those collections were accumulated were often less than honourable and certainly not in harmony with the ideas of the rights of man espoused by Voltaire and other Enlightenment philosophers.[59] The universal museum nevertheless stands as an emblem of that long tradition of exploration and encounter, of the laudable pursuit of knowledge and of brute colonial conquest. It is from the tension between those seemingly conflicting historical drives that the idea of the universal museum derives its particular power and mystique.

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[57] Quoted by New York Times journalist Alan Riding in 'British Museum sorts things out', *New York Times*, Saturday, June 28, 2003.

[58] Flynn, T. & Barringer, T., (Eds.) *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, Routledge, 1998. p190.

Many of the repatriation requests made to the British Museum and other universal institutions in recent years center upon the circumstances of acquisition and what are perceived by source communities to be a series of historical injustices concomitant with nineteenth-century imperialism and colonial conquest.

Modern museology has on the one hand responded to post-colonialist thought by objectifying, and distancing itself from, the specific power relations that brought many of the great museum collections into being, seeing those relations as a historical accident and an inappropriate model for future development.[60] Meanwhile, many museums continue to utilize and communicate their collections in such a way that those power relations are subtly reinforced, thereby effectively justifying the historical record.

The British Museum is not alone in this respect, for in recent years a number of European and North American museums have faced similar demands for the restitution of cultural objects acquired during the height of the colonial period. At the top of the steadily expanding list are many of the 'star' attractions of national museums – the Parthenon Marbles, the Rosetta Stone, the Ethiopian Maqdala treasures and the Benin brasses at the British Museum; two Parthenon fragments and the statue of Ramses II in the Louvre and the Obelisk of Luxor in the Place de la Concorde in Paris; the Pergamon Altar and the bust of Queen Nefertiti in Berlin; the statues of Hatshepsut in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to name but a few – all of which are attracting growing media attention as the issues surrounding cultural property intensify.

However, it is not only the major visitor attractions that are fuelling the debate, for the repatriation request-list contains literally thousands of more minor objects, many languishing in storage, that have become the subject of no less passionate claims by smaller nations and ethnic groups for restitution to their places of origin.[61]

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[59] Ibid, pp 188-204.

[60] The Declaration by the Bizot Group is perhaps the most notable recent instance of this. See appendix.

Over the last decade, some British and North American museums have undertaken to repatriate human remains and other sacred material found in their collections.[62] This issue has given rise to impassioned debate between those museum professionals seeking to make amends for historical injustices and the scientific community, whose members emphasise the research value of human material and the folly of repatriation. However, in some instances the human remains discovered in self-designated 'universal' museums had never been studied or handled by scientists since acquisition, thereby undermining claims to scientific value while strengthening the case for restitution.[63]

This issue is rightly treated as highly specific in its implications and as such is often seen as not connected in any meaningful way to the debate about the 'universal' museum. However, it has nevertheless served to magnify a growing attitudinal divide within the profession, which has repercussions beyond its immediate parameters.

Museum directors and curators who have gained hands-on experience of restituting human remains speak of a new collaborative framework in which museums have an opportunity to forge creative relationships with the source communities to whom sacred material is returned. Seen in this way, restitution emerges not as a material loss, but as a significant cultural gain, evincing some of the more positive aspects of the European Enlightenment tradition seemingly neglected by the universal museum revivalists.[64]

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[61] A recent study estimated that as much as 80 per cent of UK museum collections are in storage. See Lord, B., Lord, G., Nicks, J., *The Cost of Collecting*, HMSO, London, 1989, quoted in Macdonald, S. & Silverstone, R., 'Rewriting the museum's fictions: Taxonomies, stories and readers' in Boswell, D. & Evans, J. *Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, heritage and museums*, Routledge, 1999, p425.

[62] While human remains have been treated as a separate category for the purpose of formulating museum policy on repatriation, not all museum professionals assign exclusive, 'sacred' value to human remains. Ethnographers point out that in certain cultures grave goods are deemed to be as sacred as the human remains they accompany.

[63] Manchester Museum repatriated skulls and other human bones to an Australian Aboriginal community in the summer of 2003. As far as can be established, the museum had never received a single request from scientists to inspect the remains and this was brought into consideration when deciding to repatriate.

[64] "Voltaire, one of the leading figures of the 18th century Enlightenment, was a great champion of human rights and to represent the Enlightenment purely as seeking after objective truth — which was a very important part of it — to the exclusion of the rights of man, is, I think, to misrepresent the Enlightenment. I would like to think that were some of the great leaders of the Enlightenment, both in England and in France, around today, they would have been looking on approvingly when I returned that Australian material because of the terrible

In this way we can see how the revival of the universal museum exposes a widening gulf between a backward-glancing museology with its roots in nineteenth-century imperialism and an accelerating trend towards greater cross-cultural awareness in a pluralist society.

As a number of writers have shown, the emergence of the universal museum was coterminous with the establishment of the modern nation-state. Here we take our lead from the work of Carol Duncan and Tony Bennett, both of whom have shown how the birth of the universal museum reflects a transition of property from private to public ownership.[65] More recently, Donald Preziosi has also outlined correspondences between the universal museum as it evolved towards the end of the eighteenth century and the emergence of international exhibitions in the mid-nineteenth century, tracing the parallel evolution of art history and museology through that period. For Preziosi, the "exhibitionary order" of the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition can be understood as "the unconscious of every museum in the world; every museum's imaginary lost origin and the image of ideal plenitude, containing all things no less than all peoples."[66]

The determination of today's museum directors to once again have "the whole world under one roof" could almost be taken as an ironic comment on Enlightenment aspirations were it not grounded in a steadfast belief in universality as somehow an achievable museological aim. As Tony Bennett has pointed out, the ambition towards "a specular dominance over a totality" was a notable characteristic of international expositions during the nineteenth century. In their heyday, these expositions "sought to make the whole world, past and present, metonymically available in the assemblages of objects and peoples they brought together and, from their towers, to lay it before a controlling vision."[67]

Those processes of control – through classification, display, the generation and manipulation of narratives – have been central to

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violence we did to the spiritual rights of those indigenous people. We behaved like colonial bullies and that was not something the Enlightenment was about. To pretend that it is, or was, is a very partial reading of that whole spirit of taking us out from the Dark Ages." – Tristram Besterman, Director of the Manchester Museum, in conversation with the author, following restitution of Australian Aboriginal human remains from Manchester Museum in the summer of 2003.

[65] Duncan, 1999; Bennett, 1995.

[66] Preziosi, D., *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p98.

[67] Bennett, 1995, p66

what has been described as the 'exhibitionary complex' of museums since the early nineteenth century, and they survive today.[68]

"The life of these objects [the Parthenon Marbles] as part of the story of the Parthenon is over," British Museum Director Neil MacGregor recently remarked. "They can't go back to the Parthenon. They are now part of another story."[69] That a leading museum director could be forced into uttering such a statement illustrates the epistemological crisis confronting museums in the twenty-first century. The core function of the universal museum as the purveyor of authoritative historical narratives, once thought unassailable and beyond criticism, is now being challenged on a range of different fronts. As Sharon MacDonald and Roger Silverstone have observed, "[The] museums are engaged in a struggle for a new legitimacy: for the high ground of public display, and for the rights of representation of objects, ideas and narratives."[70]

The authority, claimed by the British Museum, to write the 'other story' of the Parthenon Marbles, whatever that may be – and more pointedly, by extension, to comprehensively negate or deny their place within the story of the building to which they properly belong – is part of an evolutionary process of instruction and education that began in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century but whose claims to legitimacy have been destabilised by postmodernist criticism. The art historical regimes through which such normative educational narratives were originally generated were in turn part of a more complex institutional strategy of public instruction and regulation that extended into the architecture of the museum itself.[71]

As late as 1928, three leading classical archaeologists, John Beazley, Donald Robertson and Bernard Ashmole, had pronounced the Parthenon Marbles as primarily works of art rather than as architectural elements – "Their former decorative function as architectural ornaments, and their present educational use as illustrations of mythical and historical events in ancient Greece, are by comparison accidental and trivial interests."[72] That this statement seems designed to foreclose any future requests for restitution is perhaps too obvious to require emphasising, but it illustrates the lengths to which even some archaeologists and curators have been prepared to go in order to consolidate their proprietorial claim over objects in their care.

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[68] Bennett, 1995, pp59-88.

[69] Quoted in Peter Aspden, 'Sharp end of civilisation', *Financial Times*, June 13, 2003.

[70] MacDonald & Silverstone, (1999), op cit, p422.

[71] "In Britain, France and Germany, the late and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a spate of state-sponsored architectural competitions for the design of museums in which the emphasis shifted progressively away from organising spaces of display for the private pleasure of the prince or aristocrat and towards an organization of space and vision that would enable museums to function as organs of public instruction." Bennett, 1995, p68.

For much of their time at the British Museum the Parthenon Marbles have been located in the Duveen Galleries, a suite of rooms purpose-built in the 1930s with £150,000 donated by the art dealer Joseph Duveen. Controversial from the start, the Duveen Galleries seem to have been designed specifically to reinforce the attempts made by Beazley, Ashmole and Robertson exactly ten years before to divest the Marbles of any remaining connection to the building from which they originate.

Recently, the British Museum has once again embarked upon a programmatic scheme to sever the Parthenon Marbles, both historically and conceptually, from their origins. Their new identity, the 'other story' now assigned to them, juxtaposes the Marbles with other objects in the British Museum's collections in order to relocate them within an arbitrary stylistic progression, the significance of which is entirely predicated upon their remaining in Bloomsbury, as though they would cease to be comprehensible if located anywhere else.

"In the British Museum the visitor can see how the achievement of fifth-century Athens could not have been created without the civilizations of Egypt and Assyria, and indeed the great enemy, Persia," wrote British Museum Director Neil MacGregor recently. "But it is perhaps only in the British Museum that the full measure of the Greek achievement can be grasped. Walking through the galleries you can see how the Greek reinvention of the human form changed sculpture from Turkey to India, as well as providing the visual vocabulary for the entire Roman Empire."[73]

This ideal visitor, endowed with a sufficiently sophisticated visual awareness to grasp the finer nuances of formal stylistic development across cultures, is a myth propagated by museum curators out of touch with their audience. In fact, the evidence would suggest that such art historical subtleties are beyond the average visitor. As Louvre Director Henri Loyrette recently told a conference at the British Museum, "Most of our displays mean nothing to people."[74] Indeed, a survey of Louvre visitors revealed that 67% of those questioned in the Archaic Greece room could not identify a personality or event connected with the period.[75]

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[72] Quoted in Jenkins, Ian, *Archaeologists and Aesthetes*, British Museum Press, 1992, p225.

[73] MacGregor, Neil, 'Oi! Hands off our marbles!' in *The Sunday Times,* January 18th, 2004.

Today's average museumgoer is a modern day flâneur, strolling rather aimlessly through the corridors, partaking of the visual pleasures in a random way, looking at objects, looking at other people, looking at other people looking at other objects, perhaps pausing occasionally to marvel at something that asserts its individuality from within the panoply arrayed before him. To state it in this way is not to patronise the visitor, but to acknowledge the nature of the modern museum experience. Moreover, while the majority of today's museum visitors may not have grasped the dramatic changes in the representation of the human body that marked the transition from the Archaic to the Classical in Greek sculpture, the majority has nevertheless registered the equally dramatic shift from a colonial to a post-colonial world. Hence the unequivocal majority vote for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece every time a poll is undertaken.[76] Museum visitors, if not museum directors, seem to have benefited from the true legacy of the Enlightenment although clearly on this issue the opinion of what James N. Wood describes as the "unindoctrinated public" matters little to the museum.

Conclusion

As this paper has endeavoured to demonstrate, Enlightenment collectors such as Sir Hans Sloane were driven chiefly by the prevailing rational culture of the age, their model emerging from the earlier tradition of the Italian *studiolo*. The collection that formed the nucleus of the British Museum allows us to contemplate the significance of what Tony Bennett, following Kryzsztof Pomian's study of the phenomenology of collecting, has described as a kind of 'double-levelled vision' mediating between the visible and the invisible.[77] Sloane's collection, diverse and impressively miscellaneous though it clearly was for its time, nevertheless serves to reference, through its very incompleteness, the magnitude of what it does *not* contain. That a lack could so eloquently signify plenitude, that the visible could so vividly communicate the invisible, to use Bennett's gloss, lay at the heart of the nascent universal museum in the mid-eighteenth century.

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[74] Quoted in 'Behind the Scenes at the Museum', The Guardian, 27th November 2003.

[75] Ibid.

[76] See note 8 above.

[77] Bennett, 1995, p35

But to what extent, if at all, can that double-levelled vision — that ‘socially-coded way of seeing’ — explain the tendency of today’s museums in a postmodern, post-Enlightenment world, to continue striving towards universality, particularly a universality now conceived not as a metaphor for a sublimely unknowable world, but as a template for claiming ownership of, and dominion over, the world’s ever-expanding material culture? More to the point, how appropriate and relevant are such acquisitive instincts in a post-colonial 21st century?

We have seen, and continue to see, evidence of new visionary thinking among more progressive museum professionals. Many of them do nurture a vision of a more enlightened museology, grounded not in further encyclopedic accumulation, ownership and confrontation, but in collaboration, co-operation and exchange. This may require replacing the outdated model of the temple with that of the forum in order to account for the museum’s changing social function in a rapidly changing world. However, that need not represent a dissolution of its primary responsibility to engage and educate. Instead it could endow the museum with a new function: to use the exchange of material culture to help build social cohesion. If the dispersal of parts of British national collections to the regions can be identified as beneficial in building local communities, then it logically follows that the repatriation of culturally significant artefacts to source communities could be equally beneficial in helping reconstruct a sense of national identity.

Today, as successive polls demonstrate, the most profound challenges to the more anachronistic aspects of the museum’s inheritance come not from theorists or the academies, but from the museum’s core constituency – its visitors, its public. Whether the ‘universal museum’ will succeed in honourably discharging the public trust on the critical issues remains the great unanswered question facing the profession.

Tom Flynn