

Bloomsbury Grouping: Classification, Colonialism, and Curiosity at the British Museum

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Museums are sites of both the organization and creation of knowledge. As such, they involve the deployment of new knowledge as much as the culling of old, and call into question the authority from which both arrive. Although the expressed purpose of the museum is neither control over a wide social body, nor the government of one class by another, it has at its core an elitist project of the deployment of knowledge from a central, authoritative position: “As with political imperialism, the center of gravity of the imperium of natural history was not in the colonies but in the metropolis.”¹ To go one step further, the museum, as symbol of the metropolis in its beautiful heterogeneity, pursuit of curiosity, and commitment to modernity, can be seen as an important part of the Enlightenment narrative. Although the museum was by no means the central driving force in the British imperialist-Enlightenment project, it certainly contributed substantially to it. This is most pertinent in the case of the British Museum, whose history is inextricably linked with both colonial exploits and imperial attitudes. This is a history, therefore, bound up in elitism. What remains crucial, however, is the way in which bodies of knowledge – particularly those concerning scientific practice – to which everyone, including the elite, was made subject, were developed and deployed.

Originating in a spirit of curiosity which saw its manifestation in early modern curiosity cabinets, the museum as an institution is dedicated to the display and presentation of the wonders of the world, from the fantastic to the straightforward, the grotesque to the common. This project would be incomplete without systems of order through which to render it comprehensive

¹ Harriet Ritvo, “Zoological Nomenclature and the Empire of Victorian Science,” in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. Bernard Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 350.

and comprehensible. The history of the museum is thus intertwined with that of systems of classification which work to express the knowledge or *episteme* of their time. Classification plays a crucial role in the development of the British Museum, and the modern project of knowledge-seeking and knowledge-forming it espoused. This role is one which finds its place couched within scientific and imperialist strains, as "... classification represented European possession of exotic territories, as well as intellectual mastery of their natural history."² Classification in the British Museum was therefore as much about expanding knowledge as it was about refining it. This two-fold process of knowledge gathering and sorting was largely controlled by individuals who felt an inherent right to make claims on nature as well as set parameters around it. This is most clearly seen in the controversial history of the division of departments within the British Museum and the profound effects it had on the metaphysical and scientific meaning ascribed to the objects contained therein. There was an increasing sense that by sub-dividing departments, objects within different disciplines would be ascribed newer, perhaps deeper, meanings.

The classification of materials within the museum in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries points to the existence of new space in which knowledge was constructed, interpreted, and proliferated, not only by those in charge of classification, but those made witness to it. One of the reasons why the museum is such a fertile site of examination for the history of ideas – be they scientific, cultural, or some other type – is that they encapsulate the minds and imaginations of both the elite and the public at large. The history of the museum, from its murky origins in the cabinet of curiosities to the bastions of public, stable, and profitable knowledge they are today, provides a fascinating glimpse into the unfolding of the world as it has been seen.

The history of the ordering of knowledge is inextricably linked with the questioning, subverting, and reinvention of boundaries. In the *Order of Things*, Michel Foucault asks us to examine ways in which these boundaries are constructed and the reasons why, as well as the knowledge and meaning created in the spaces they open up. Moving from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, Foucault argues that the depth and vigour of these knowledges expanded. He writes, "Histories of ideas or of the sciences... credit

² Ritvo, "Zoological Nomenclature," 336.

the seventeenth century, and especially the eighteenth, with a new curiosity: the curiosity that caused them if not to discover the sciences of life, at least to give them a hitherto unsuspected scope and precision.”³ Under the auspices of providing both new discovery and new passion to the exploration of the world, the cabinet of curiosities came to play an important role in the intellectual and scientific life of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Curiosity cabinets have a long history which sees the intersection of collection, power, architecture, science, wonder, and, naturally, curiosity.⁴ All of these were of great pertinence to both collectors and viewers of often sprawling collections, who attempted to make sense of the world by examining the huge and diverse array of objects it contained: “the copious, various, and costly *Wunderkammern* contained precious materials, exotica and antiquities, specimens of exquisite workmanship, and natural and artificial oddities – all crammed together in order to dazzle the onlooker.”⁵ The desire to dazzle, while tied to the project of collecting, was also a desire to impress. The collection of strange, beautiful, and wondrous objects had largely aristocratic and political beginnings. Monarchs and men of high social and political standing saw collecting as a way of exerting, or at least appearing to exert, power over a wide and varied world by containing its treasures within their grasp: “...most of these grand cabinets were set up by princes for whom the known world might be thought of as something that could, just about be controlled by a single source of power.”⁶ Curiosity cabinets were not only used to express domination over an existing world, but the power to create a new one. Subscribing to a “magical correspondence between man and the world about him... ‘the prince could symbolically reclaim dominion over the entire natural and artificial world.’”⁷ This desire for worldly control, however, developed congruously with a desire for worldly wonder. This is reflected by a wide range of cultural practices such as ‘raree shows,’ which

³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 136.

⁴ J. Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum*. (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1972), 24. “The Italian gabinetto, the French cabinet, the English closet, the German Kammer or Kabinett, were all varieties of the same thing.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 260

⁶ Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums*. (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2006), 14-15.

⁷ Guiseppe Olmi, quoted in *Ibid.*, 18.

form a great part of the history of collections. “Wonders,” writes Lorraine Daston, “tended to cluster at the margins rather than at the center of the known world and... constituted a distinct ontological category, the preternatural, suspended between the mundane and the miraculous.”⁸ Medieval and early modern collections therefore represented a straddling of science and religion and appealed to curiosity as such. The Enlightenment, however, created a demand for greater demarcation of these realms. A more rigorous search for scientific certainty arose, complemented by a denigration of wonder as both trivial and vulgar: “Just as diligent curiosity replaced delighted curiosity during this period, discipline replaced pleasure in natural inquiry.”⁹ While curiosity was by no means banished from a new approach to collecting, its emphasis shifted from marvel, wonder, and spectacle to order, taxonomy, and knowledge.

The *Wunderkammer* is a collection with “encyclopaedic ambitions, intended as a miniature version of the universe, containing specimens of every category of things and helping to render visible the totality of the universe, which otherwise would remain hidden from human eyes.”¹⁰ Implicit in these ambitions to display the world in microcosm is the importance of the object as a carriage of meaning; scientific, cultural, and metaphysical. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, objects ceased to be ‘curious things,’ important or attractive because of the sense of mystery or awe they invoked or the illusion of other worlds to which they pointed. Rather, they became important vehicles for deciphering the world at hand, thus making it comprehensible.¹¹ Significant to this pursuit of knowledge were those who took on the task of deciphering.

The meaning of objects is entwined with the way in which they are described. In the Early Modern period, the description of objects was narrative-driven. In the catalogue for Sir Hans Sloane’s impressive and expansive collection, he wrote of a bone spoon acquired in New England:

⁸ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature*. (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁰ Krzyszttof Pomian, quoted in Carla Yanni, *Nature’s Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 16.

¹¹ Yanni, *Nature’s Museums*, 14-17.

An Indian spoon made of the breast bone of a pinguin made anno 1702... by Papenau an Indian whose squaw had both her leggs gangrened and rotted of to her knees and was cured by bathing in balsam water made by Winthrop Esp., of New England.¹²

This type of anecdotal description was common in both collections and natural histories. Plot, for example, in writing on “a piece of a Kind of jasper stone” from an Obelisk in Rome also included information about “...the Egyptian markings on it... how the stone could have been brought from Egypt; the type of sea-going craft used by the Egyptians; and finally, the poor man that an antiquarian had introduced him to, in whose cellar he saw another bit of a pyramid.”¹³ This kind of narrative-driven description of objects is demonstrative of Foucault’s model of history and its telling. He writes: “[u]ntil the mid-seventeenth century, the historian’s task was to establish the great compilation of documents and signs... His existence was defined not so much by what he saw as by what he retold.”¹⁴ With the coming of what Foucault calls the ‘The Classical Age,’ however, we see a decisive shift toward a history based more on rationalized information than on the somewhat nebulous collection of empirical facts and anecdotal observances.

As the shift in ways of describing things was occurring, so too was the way in which those descriptions interacted. The eighteenth century saw the rise of taxonomy and distinct systems of classification. Like the description of individual objects before it, taxonomies of objects, both natural and man-made, evinced their own peculiarities. Under the heading “Some Kindes of Birds, their Egges, Beaks, Feathers, Clawes and Spurres” the entry in the *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, compiled in 1656 reads: “Divers sorts of Egges from Turkie, one given for a Dragon’s Egge... Easter Eggs of the Patriarch of Jerusalem... the Claw of the bird Rock, who, as Authors report, is able to trusse an Elephant.”¹⁵ Although we see here a greater attempt to make connections between objects, the connections remain marked by a decidedly personal bent. Thus, while the

¹² Arnold, *Cabinets*, 88.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 142.

¹⁵ Crook, *British Museum*, 37.

seventeenth century saw the beginning of a turn towards order, it would not become substantially realized until the eighteenth.

A marked turn towards objective empiricism in classifying knowledge during the eighteenth century saw the recession of the more nebulous and untenable notion of curiosity. As Daston suggests, “[c]entral to the new, secular meaning of enlightenment as a state of mind and as a way of life was the rejection of the marvellous.”¹⁶ Accordingly, curiosity cabinets took a distinct turn away from curiosity altogether, moving towards a more pragmatic pursuit of detailed knowledge. This was partly manifest in the rise of natural history as a scientific discipline, which was seen as a new attempt to understand the world in a straightforward, objective, and identifiable way. Eighteenth century collectors therefore abandoned much ‘curiosity’ in the name of scientific certainty. Certainty, however, was not attainable, even in this new project which had its quest at heart. The scientific naming and classification of objects was made subject to as many fluctuations and obscurities as their wondrous predecessors.

Enlightenment thinkers and collectors believed that the pursuit of scientific certainty not only relied on the correct naming of things, but on the ordering and systematization of those names. As such, the process of grouping and organizing within collections became of paramount concern. By grouping together objects “it became possible in theory to co-ordinate absolutely all the disparate elements of the material world.”¹⁷ For Foucault, this co-ordination, is central to the creation of knowledge as it facilitates the intersections between classified objects. The co-ordinated items “form a table on which knowledge is displayed in a system contemporary with itself.”¹⁸ By examining objects in conjunction with one another, it was believed that one was able to bring greater understanding to them. Like the classification of isolated objects, however, their schematic mapping remained part of a general process of historical knowledge-formation. As Ken Arnold suggests, “[o]rder was, in and of itself, becoming one of the principle ‘items’ on display.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Daston and Park, *Wonder*, 331.

¹⁷ Arnold, *Cabinets*, 214.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

This change in the approach towards collections had a great impact on the way in which they were actually exhibited. In the Early Modern period, taxonomy was not a consideration of the curiosity cabinet. Although classification systems were not entirely absent from early collections, they did little in the way of imposing meaning on, or finding it within, the relationships between objects. Affinities between objects were tenuous, based mostly on the material from which they were made. Daston points out that collection catalogues "...provide no clue as to why the objects were coveted, and moreover, coveted in common."²⁰ The main thrust of the display of these collections was that the objects themselves were sufficient decoration; no efforts were made to put them into a greater decorative scheme.²¹ The physical display of objects in such a way, as to draw connections between them, was an Enlightenment phenomenon. It is no surprise, then, that this period saw the birth of the museum; its express purpose being to make collections publicly available, understandable, and useful.

Considered one of the most, if not the most, important museums of natural history in the world, the British Museum began its life under the umbrella of imperialism and as a collection of wonders. Although many argue that modern museums share little in the way of history with early modern collections and cabinets of curiosity, their stories intersect at the birth of the British Museum. After an expedition to Jamaica in September in 1687, the collection which eventually became the foundation for the British Museum was begun by Sir Hans Sloane.²² As recorded in John Evelyn's *Diary* of 1691, the collection included "plants, fruits, corails, minerals, stones, Earth, shells, animals, Insects &c collected by him with greate Judgement."²³ The collection eventually expanded to include 'artificial curiosities' which would, after the formation of a separate institution for natural history, become its focus. Sloane's collection was housed in a "Handsome saloon, furnished with a curious selection of

²⁰ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 266.

²¹ Crook, *British Museum*, 24.

²² Edward Miller. *That Noble Cabinet: A History of the British Museum*. (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1973), 36. Sir Hans Sloane, famous physician as well as collector, is described as being "largely responsible for the development... of the practice of inoculation against smallpox and the popularisation of milk chocolate."

²³ John Evelyn *Diary*, in *Noble Cabinet*, 37.

miscellaneous objects... including the first of the Museum's famous collection of mummies, various specimens of coral, a vulture's head in spirits, and the stuffed flamingo."²⁴ With the establishment of the British Museum as a national institution came the culling of the collection of its more fantastic elements; those whose origin was curiosity rather than discovery. This was done in the name of science, education, and progress. All three came to underlie the new era in collection, most clearly articulated by the mandate, scope, and organization of the British Museum.

As Horace Walpole wrote, "[t]he establishment of the British Museum seems a charter for incorporating the arts, a new era of *vertu*." In contributing one's collection to the museum, Walpole believed one would feel he was no longer collecting for his own individual pleasure, but that "he was collecting for his country."²⁵ As such, the significance of colonialism for the British museum as an important collector and repository of important collections is undeniable. 'Collecting for his country' is a thinly veiled account of collecting for an empire, as the British Museum was often used as both an instrument of colonial dominance and might and a site of its display.

Like the princely project of early modern cabinets, museum collections became a way of displaying national might, colonial power, and intellectual superiority. As Tony Bennett suggests, "the museum can only be understood in terms of a nineteenth-century tendency to see culture as useful for governance."²⁶ While there is some truth in Bennett's claim, especially given the conflation of the culture of the museum with that of scientific authority, to construe the museum purely as the site of an attempt to control the public would be to discredit all the more dynamic shades of its educational mandate. To view even the educational function of museums in this way is to view those at the heart of its project not only above, but entirely outside of, the greater systems of power which affect its unfolding. Because of this, Foucault's "influence was valuable in museum studies, for it caused museum scholars to consider the high political stakes of exhibitions," not only because one could no longer assume that power and knowledge were being decreed from above, but because any

²⁴ Miller. *Noble Cabinet*, 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁶ Yanni, *Nature's Museums*, 8.

“claim [to] an internal logic based on supposed neutrality”²⁷ within museum display could no longer be traced to a single all-powerful source. The museum as a cultural site within a broader grid, as Foucault terms it, produced knowledge, as much as it produced individuals, by whom it was run.

Affecting both the ordering and display of knowledge was the organization and division of the museum’s departments. In the case of the British Museum, this issue pivots around the place of Natural History in a broader catalogue of man-made goods and the epistemological importance brought to each. Until the acquisition of the Towneley collection in 1805, which saw the arrival of an invaluable collection of antiquities from one of the country’s top collectors, antiquities was a division of the department of Natural and Artificial Products. Partly as a matter of space and partly as a matter of precedence the arrival of such a large and impressive collection caused the splitting of the old department into Natural History and Modern Curiosities and the Department of Antiquities and Coins.²⁸ The arrival of the new collection caused more than the creation of new departments, however. It raised many fundamental questions about what kinds of matter were considered to have a place at the leading museum in the world, and what were not. Consequently, the meaning and significance of objects, their grouping, and the manner in which they were displayed were greatly altered. The major controversy arose out of the collections included in the sub-divisions of the Natural History and Antiquities departments.

In 1806, the department of Natural History included botanical, zoological, geological, and mineral collections, as well as Ethnography.²⁹ After its split from Artificial Products, significantly more attention was paid to the organization of the museum’s natural history collection, and a fundamental restructuring occurred of department affairs, both behind the scenes and in the politics of display. It was determined that all the cases which housed objects should be properly inscribed to make clear their contents, and the following year a properly classed catalogue of all books on natural history was to be prepared and the botanical collections were to be completely rearranged in their ‘proper

²⁷ Yanni, *Nature’s Museums*, 8.

²⁸ Miller, *Noble Cabinet*, 99-106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

sequence.³⁰ Furthermore, the department culled its basement stores, relegating all materials deemed “unfit to be preserved in the Museum” to the Hunterian Museum (the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons). These included monsters in spirits, anatomical preparations, and stuffed quadrupeds; horns, however, which had been kept among these items, were considered too valuable and kept on the premises.³¹ These items, when considered by professionals increasingly interested in a dogmatic scientific approach, were seen to have no place in an institution built on serious study. As the committee minutes from a June 1808 meeting put it, as quoted by Miller: “Thus with the last traces of the ‘old curiosity shop’ appearance of the past carefully removed, ‘all the refuse which ought to be either sold or destroyed’ cleared away, the Natural History departments faced the future, eager...to take full advantage of the growing scientific spirit of the new century.”³² This ‘growing scientific spirit’ was more fully realized when, in 1881, the entire Natural History collection was excised from the British Museum’s Bloomsbury site and moved into its own newly formed institution, The British Natural History Museum, at South Kensington.

Space, a constant issue for the British Museum (as is no doubt the case for collections of all kinds), spurred a similar re-classification and organization within the Antiquities department. Upsetting national beliefs and international boundaries, the restructuring of the department brought to the forefront many commonly held imperialist and nationalist attitudes.

Much of the controversy came as a result of Antonio Panizzi, the pre-eminent administrative librarian of his day and one of the most important figures in the history of the British Museum. Despite being described as “becoming more English than the English,”³³ (or perhaps because of it), Panizzi, an Italian immigrant, strongly objected to the inclusion of British and Irish antiquities and ethnological objects within the museum, specifically at the cost of Greek and Roman collections. The department underwent restructuring efforts in 1857 and it was suggested that items from the aforementioned collections be moved in order to make way for those from the ethnographic. In response Panizzi wrote

³⁰ Miller, *Noble Cabinet*, 114.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 115.

³³ *Ibid.*, 134.

that “[i]t does not seem right that such valuable space should be taken up by Esquimaux dresses, canoes and hideous feather idols, broken flints and so on.”³⁴ He showed even greater disdain for other ethnographical collections in saying: “You have, also, I imagine Byzantine, Oriental, Mexican and Peruvian Antiquities stowed away in the basement? ... I do not think it is any great loss that they are not better placed than they are....”³⁵ His attitudes were not uncommon and increasingly became the grounds on which many criticized the museum. Accounts of British priggishness can be found throughout the museum’s history, with instances of their refusal to purchase important foreign collections³⁶ and the entwinement of the many of the museum’s collections with colonial expeditions ranking high.

Popular attitude became a significant factor in many of the changes the departments underwent during the Museum’s rockier phase in the early to mid-nineteenth century. With a rise in popularity for the theory of evolution came the desire “to observe specimens which were instructive about general principles in natural history – not nature’s quirks, God’s inexplicable moments of bad taste.”³⁷ This was a far cry from the seventeenth and eighteenth century pursuit of natural history, which found its organizing principle specifically in God’s work: “it was His scheme of creation that came to provide the dominant organising principle about which museum investigations were marshalled.” Of his own collection of curiosities, Sir Hans Sloane wrote: “these things tend many ways to the manifestation of the glory of God, the confutation of atheism and its consequences.”³⁸ The principles of organization around which museums operate therefore demonstrate the dramatic change of belief and attitude from one era to another and the degree to which those beliefs and attitudes come to shape much more than the simple placement of objects in a room.

The organization and classification within the British Museum arose from an Enlightenment view that a new authoritative way of looking at the

³⁴ Miller, *Noble Cabinet*, 191-92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 210. In December 1835, for example, a sedan chair of Grand Master of the Knights of Malta was refused by the museum, while George III’s coronation anointing cap and gloves were accepted.

³⁷ Yanni, *Nature’s Museums*, 18.

³⁸ Arnold, *Cabinets*, 225.

world had emerged from, and triumphed over, a backward vision of the world. Curiosity and wonder as predominant aspects of this vision were largely abandoned by the arrival of a system of thought which promised greater certainty. What it offered, however, was more pondering. Awe had not been discounted, merely displaced by authority. For Foucault, this new way of looking at the world emerged spontaneously. Rising from neither a ruling party nor from the reality so classified, the Enlightenment as set out in the *Order of Things*, comes to appear as chimerical as the objects of wonder so enthusiastically collected during the Early Modern period. As the case of the classification and organization of objects in the British Museum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrates, the knowledges of an era – the common approaches society takes to looking at the world - affect how those knowledges are displayed, debated, and proffered. Consequently, the knowledge of one time cannot be grafted onto another; they exist as separate entities, often described as incommensurable. As Arnold suggests, “[w]e will... be doomed to be at a loss if we simply try to translate the meaning they [the Early Moderns] to objects into something that makes complete sense today.”³⁹ Although significant shifts occur in the way in which we view - and therefore make sense of - the world, to deem them incommensurable, let alone entirely spontaneously generated, is to ignore the more subtle, internal workings of power. In the case of the British Museum, the workings of power within an Enlightenment model are highlighted. What they expose, however, are not subtleties.

Dominated by patronage, nepotism, and a persistent unfaltering imperial spirit, the knowledge created and subsequently publicly displayed by the British Museum was neither spontaneously generated nor an inadequate reflection of reality. The British Museum established itself as an authority, scientific, cultural, and political, and as such a reasonable site at which knowledge could be produced. While a great deal of important scientific work occurred within the museum throughout its history, particularly that of the classification of natural history and its aid to its establishment as a separate and viable discipline, much of it came at the behest of narrow, sometimes racist social and political attitudes which denigrated others. As with any institution which has a dual mandate of authoritative research and educational outreach, there were great “... tensions

³⁹ Arnold, *Cabinets*, 147.

involved in a collection meant for public viewing versus a collection meant as a scientific instrument,”⁴⁰ complications which would come to challenge the knowledge being created and the vision of the world it was reflecting.

⁴⁰ Gordon McQuat, “Cataloguing Power: Delineating ‘Competent Naturalists’ and the Meaning of Species in the British Museum.” *British Journal of the History of Science* 34 (2001): 26.