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The King's Library Project
- Brendan Moore: British Museum

Last year the British Museum celebrated the 250th anniversary of its founding by Act of Parliament as the world's first national museum. The nucleus of its collection was the great assemblage of 80,000 objects formed in the *wunderkammer* tradition by Sir Hans Sloane and offered to the nation at his death for the relatively modest price of £20,000. It must be remembered that apart from archaeological, ethnographic and fine art collections familiar to modern day visitors, the early British Museum also included vast numbers of books, manuscripts, natural history specimens and portrait paintings - collections that would later be transferred to the specialist institutions which sprang from the Museum in the form of the Natural History Museum, the British Library and the National Portrait Gallery. The young British Museum was thus truly universal in its diversity, seeking to represent all the material world through its collections and forming an encyclopaedia of human knowledge. The culminating event of the 2003 anniversary was the re-opening of the newly restored King's Library and with it a new exhibition *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*. This new permanent display explores the changing approaches to understanding the world that began to emerge from the late seventeenth century onwards - the period of intellectual ferment we know as the Enlightenment of which the British Museum itself is a product.

The King's Library, constructed between 1823-1827, is the earliest completed room in the present British Museum building and is regarded as the finest Greek Revival interior in London, indeed one of the finest in Europe. It was designed by Sir Robert Smirke to house the extraordinary collection of books formed by King George III and gifted to the Museum by his son George IV in 1823. The books of the royal library, perhaps the greatest formed in the second half of the eighteenth century, were moved to the British Library's new St Pancras building in 1998 leaving behind a grand library space divested of purpose. So the challenge for the British Museum was firstly to restore Smirke's great room, returning it to something close to its original state, and secondly to create a new role for it by way of an exhibition that would be respectful of and pertinent to its architecture. Furthermore, to ensure a safe and stable environment suitable for the display of a vast and materially diverse range of objects it would be necessary to introduce potentially intrusive modern services into this grade 1 listed space. To achieve this in a manner that would not impinge upon the early nineteenth century character of the room would prove to be a major design challenge.



"Trade and Discovery" section at North end of Enlightenment gallery.

The exhibition

From the outset of the project, curatorial opinion leaned in favour of a new permanent exhibition that would explore the institution's genesis and early development. Importantly, it was decided that the display should embrace all parts of the Museum's collections – a necessarily ambitious plan given the 10,000 sq ft capacity of the room. But more than a narrow focus on the Museum's own history, the resulting exhibition attempts to describe and explain the cultural, aesthetic and intellectual climate of the Enlightenment as experienced in Britain between 1680, when Sloane commenced his collecting activities, and 1827, the year Smirke completed work on the King's Library. It was necessary to harness and direct the expertise of a vast number of internal and external staff to support the project: curators, conservators, architects and engineers, designers and technicians, fund raisers, educators, multi media experts, accountants and administrators, press and media consultants – the list is endless. Furthermore, the project required close collaboration with the many national and regional museums and learned institutions who generously lent important objects and specimens to the exhibition. To manage all this activity a core team of four staff was formed to work full time on the project for a period of three years.

Work in earnest commenced in the early months of 2001. While the construction and exhibition design team, lead by Sat Jandu and Caroline Ingham respectively, were formulating and refining their ideas for the restoration and refitting of the room, the curatorial team, lead by Dr Kim Sloan of the Department of Prints and Drawings, began the daunting task of gathering together over 4,000 objects and forming them into an intellectually coherent and visually exciting display. Seven themes were to be investigated in the exhibition: The Natural World, The Birth of Archaeology, Art and Civilisation, Classifying the World, Ancient

Scripts, Religion and Ritual and Trade and Discovery. Pragmatically, this number allowed the architectural divisions created by Smirke within the room to be exploited. By focusing on the Enlightenment the exhibition draws attention to an historical period in which many of the ideas and principles that have driven the modern world were formed. Despite its importance, the eighteenth century has remained a neglected and undervalued area of study in this country; the new display aims to redress this imbalance.

The elucidation of the themes and ideas under discussion in the exhibition required curators to research, and in some cases rescue from obscurity, many of the objects that were entering the Museum in its formative period. Information appertaining to contemporary interpretation (or misinterpretation as was the case sometimes), provenance and the context of acquisition, the mode of classification and original method of display - all could provide fresh insight into the manner in which eighteenth century collectors, antiquaries and learned men and women understood the world and mankind's place in it. Such information could also help trace the development of scholarly practice through the 'long eighteenth century' as specialist studies such as archaeology, ethnography, geology, palaeontology, philology and classical art history began to evolve and progress.

Thousands of objects started to emerge from basement store rooms all over the Museum and to understand how they could be displayed to best effect it was necessary to mock-up all 24 island cases and 110 wall cases that would feature in the exhibition. This process would prove to be a considerable logistical, intellectual and aesthetic challenge, and to facilitate it the selected objects were gathered together in a centrally located storage area. A pragmatic approach was taken in respect of conservation and wherever possible objects were chosen that would require minimal intervention. However, very major work was required in some instances as large sculptures and oversize vases required months of laser cleaning and reconstruction. Additionally, an extraordinary list of objects needed to be examined and, when necessary, treated: vast numbers of wooden and bronze gods from Egypt and India, Greek vases, Etruscan armour, hundreds of ceramics from all parts of the globe, Babylonian brick inscriptions, delicate Japanese water colours, significant ethnographic objects collected by Captain Cook, rare English Mediaeval alabasters and much more.

Apart from the British Museum's own collections the exhibition also features a very large number of loan objects that further illuminate the ideas and concepts under discussion. To maintain the historic function of the room and to signify to audiences the importance of books during the Enlightenment as means of disseminating information 16,000 volumes from the historic House of Commons Library are now displayed on the shelves that formerly housed the royal library. The House of Commons Library, formed in the nineteenth century but largely comprising of eighteenth century publications, contains many works relating to the themes explored in the exhibition. Indeed, a number of books are displayed, pages open, in some of cases. The Science Museum, National Maritime Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, British Library, Royal Collection Trust and a number of learned societies have also contributed generously to the exhibition.

Collaboration with the Natural History Museum

Over 450 mineral, fossil, animal, shell and plant specimens have been lent to the exhibition by the Natural History Museum whose staff have been active collaborators in the project. Led by Lorraine Cornish of the Palaeontology Conservation Unit, the curators, conservators, librarians and technical staff at the British Museum's sister institution set about the task of researching their own early collections and conserving and preparing specimens for exhibition with the same degree of enthusiasm as their Bloomsbury based colleagues. 'Natural curiosities' formed the heart of Sir Hans Sloane's own collection and in the four cases of the Natural World section are displayed some of the animal, vegetable and mineral substances of his *material medica*: all specimens that had a practical application in his work as a physician. Here we find ground Egyptian mummies' fingers, used to treat 'contusions', different seed, root and bark samples, nephrite for the cure of kidney disease and amethyst to combat the effects of drunkenness. The dazzling display of natural history specimens, sitting alongside what Sloane referred to as his 'artificial curiosities' (that's to say man made objects), recreates for visitors something of the experience of Montague House, the original British Museum, and explains how people were trying to make sense of the world by gathering together such a universal collection of artifacts.

The exhibition examines the Enlightenment from a novel perspective, the objects themselves being the starting point for the discussion of ideas and concepts. Fossils collected by William 'Strata' Smith, a stone-age handaxe unearthed with the remains of an elephant, one of Mary Anning's ichthyosaur specimens – such artefacts are used to illustrate how a literal interpretation of the Creation story given in the Book of Genesis would eventually be challenged and a new scientific explanations developed. Exotic plant and ani-

mal specimens brought back from distant parts of the globe reveal how a desire to explain the diversity of life was fuelled. Artefacts collected by Captain Cook in the Americas and Pacific region testify to encounters with previously unknown societies; they explain how increased competition between European powers for new trade routes added to the development of ethnography, social anthropology and a new understanding of the world.

The statues displayed in the room are mainly Roman copies of ancient Greek works and were part of the influx of ancient marbles into the Museum's collection during the second half of the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth. Many of these sculptures had been purchased from connoisseurs such as Charles Townley who had acquired them while on the Grand Tour and built up an important collection which he displayed in his own house museum. Nearly all the sculptures had been heavily restored, with missing limbs and heads being added, in a manner that made their display in the Museum's main galleries inappropriate in the modern age. Only with this new exhibition could they be satisfactorily exhibited and appreciated in the context of Enlightenment sensibility. In addition, portrait busts of significant Enlightenment collectors and patrons of the Museum cast their gaze over the room from gleaming new scagliola and porphyry pedestals.

Restoration and environmental control

Prior to the design stage extensive environmental monitoring of the room was carried out revealing erratic ambient conditions. The room had previously had very little by way of environmental control and temperature had fluctuated wildly according to season so a sophisticated new air cooling system has been installed in a basement below the room, its duct work lying in the existing floor void to deliver tempered air through the new Smirke-styled floor grills. The target temperature is now 22°C and the relative humidity target is 55%±10%. Automatic blinds have been fitted to the window embrasures and VU filtering film added. Off-gassing is controlled by the use of active charcoal in trays - again, especially designed to discreetly merge into the background of the cases. All of these systems have been incorporated into the space in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. Additionally the historic display cases, introduced into the room in the mid nineteenth century, have been fully refurbished and humidity control installed. Of the two types of cases used in the exhibition, the larger 'atlas' cases (so named as they originally housed George III's topographical collection) have had new vitrines added - a clever adaptation that allows the display of larger objects. Happily, the room had suffered no major alterations during its life time. Two exceptions were the introduction of a grand door on the west side of the tribune, mimicking those to the north and the south, some decades after its completion, and the restoration work carried out to an area north east of the tribune following bomb damage during the war. Although the fabric of the room was generally in a good state of preservation, the décor, internal fittings and furniture were all in great need of repair. Extensive cleaning would also be necessary to wash away 170 years of London grime and restore the lustre of a space described by J. Mordaunt Crook as 'one of the noblest rooms in London'.

The end result is memorable. Smirke's great coffered ceiling has been repaired and cleaned inch by inch, its highly ornate plaster work now stands out in crisp relief. Under the guidance of a historic paints expert the original stone paint scheme, lit by primrose yellow roundels, has been reinstated and later Victorian gilding removed. The oak and mahogany boards of the floor have also been extensively repaired and strengthened to carry the load of the many sculptures now displayed in the room. Elsewhere, the granite, marble and alabaster stone work has been made to gleam, as has the scagliola panelling that sheaves the lower and upper walls. All the joinery is now repaired and polished, and a wash of picture gallery red now enhances the backs of the wall presses setting off the objects they contain. The brass balustrade hand rail that runs the length of the gallery was dismantled in order that it be repaired and polished. Painstaking as this work was, the introduction of new services - necessary for a modern gallery environment - into the historic fabric of the room proved to be a greater design challenge still. A unique electronic locking system, designed with the assistance of the Museum's own locksmiths, has been fitted into the wall presses. 200 km of fibre optic lighting has also been threaded through the backs of the cases to subtly lift the display bringing a warm glow to display (the lamps providing the light source are remote from the cases providing zero heat build up). A soft lighting scheme has also been integrated into the window recesses to subtly light the ceiling and pick out the sculptures and busts displayed below. The guiding principle of the restoration process has been to intrude as little as possible upon the room's late Enlightenment character; the degree to which this has been achieved can be measured by the fact that, upon initial inspection at least, the visitor will find very little evidence of twenty first century at all.

Reactions and evaluation

Public and media reaction to the both the exhibition and the restoration of the room have been very positive thus far, indeed, beyond what might have been expected: Simon Jenkins in the *Times* described the room as ‘a sensation’ and Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian* called it ‘unprecedented’. But the project does not end here. The room is very much a working space requiring day-to-day maintenance, educational activities and evening events need to be managed, study days and conferences organised. A handling-object collection has been formed and daily sessions, run by the volunteers of the Museum’s Friends organisation, allow visitors to handle many of the types of objects on display, and daily tours and talks by both curators and trained volunteers also take place as well as regular special educational events. But there are improvements that we would like to make, especially concerning the provision of more detailed information about the objects on display, and a full evaluation of the gallery will be undertaken over the summer that will include a survey of the reactions of both visitors and peers, and changes made where necessary. But in refurbishing the King’s Library and installing the new exhibition one key objective has been achieved, as was noted by Giles Worsley in *The Telegraph*: ‘One of London’s great rooms has been restored and given life back at the heart of British Museum’.

Design aspects of Enlightenment exhibition in the restored King’s Library **- Hanna Payne: Assistant Designer of The Enlightenment Gallery**

This was a very different project to the ones we normally work on for the Museum as the main exhibit is the room itself. The showcases which line the walls were originally glazed bookshelves made to house George III’s Library and to suit their new use for displaying objects as well as books they have had to be completely restored. A fibre-optic lighting system has also been fitted. The floorcases are all original to the room and have also been restored. Additionally a number of new facsimile cases, built to the same specification as the originals, have also been especially built.

It was a great pleasure to work with beautiful materials such as oak and walnut for the cases and marble for the plinths. All the materials used in the design of the exhibition had to be thoroughly researched to make sure they were appropriate to the early nineteenth century. We called in experts in historical interiors to advise us on details such as the type of paint we should use and the appropriate fabrics. Everything had to be authentic, even down to the way objects were displayed and mounted. The standard material used in the Museum for the construction of object mounts has traditionally been inert Perspex but in this instance only powder coated brass mounts have been used, again to maintain the early nineteenth century feel of the display.

Sourcing these materials was challenging as all the fabrics and paints had to be tested to conform with the standards set by our conservation department. Normally we would avoid using materials like silk in a showcase as it often fails Oddy testing, the standard requirement for all in-case materials, but after much searching we found some silk that would be suitable with the objects and work with the overall design.

The majority of the objects on display have come from the reserve collections. They were often very dusty from being held in storage for so long, especially the large stone sculptures. A team of conservators worked over a two year period on the task of cleaning them up - it was amazing to see the details that had been hidden.



View of gallery looking south, bust of Sir Joseph Banks to right.