

THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM

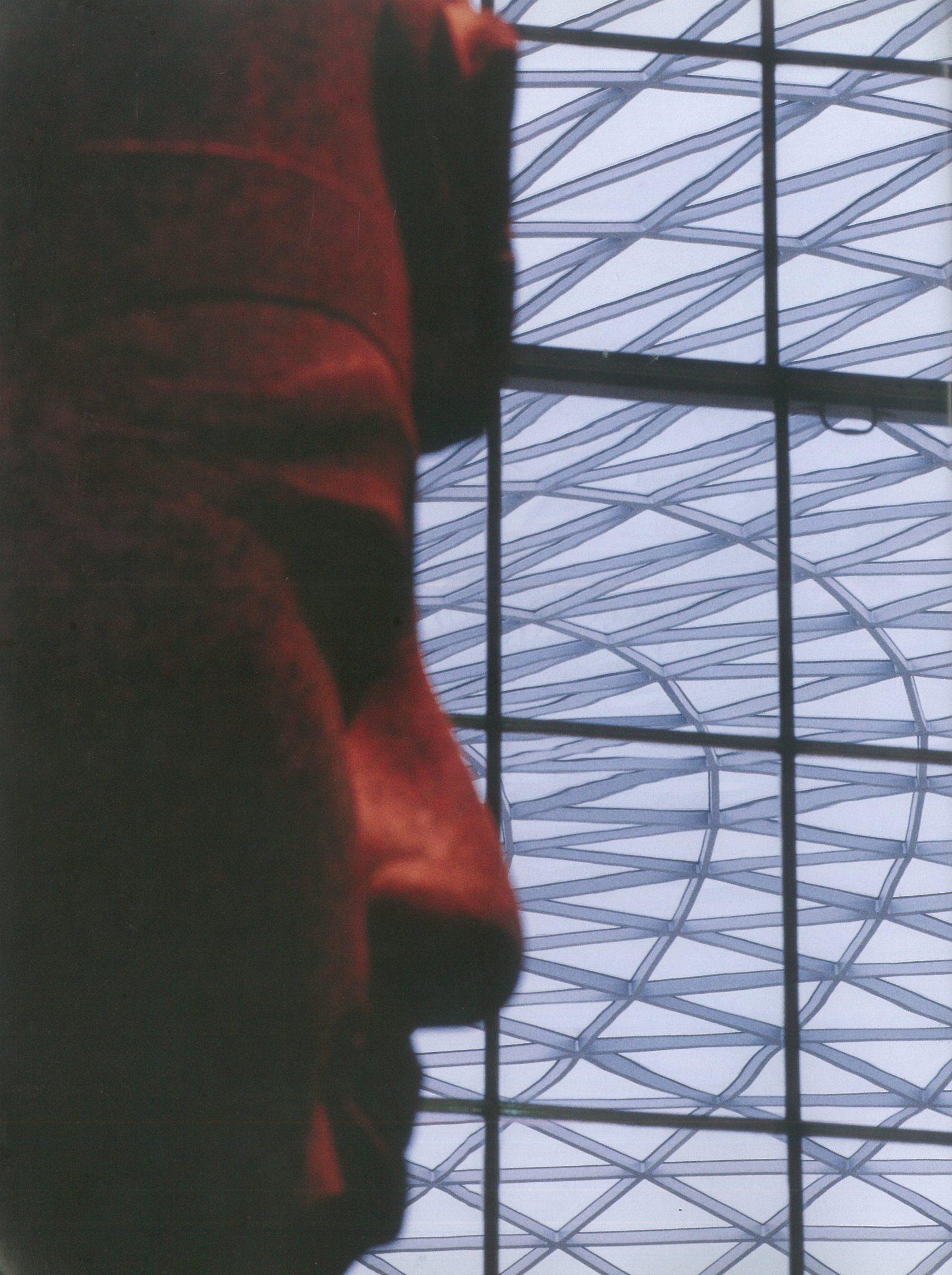


The British Museum 250 Years

Marjorie Caygill

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THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS



Preface

London 1753. The most populous city in Europe. The richest city in Europe. The greatest financial centre in the world. A cosmopolitan place, where Voltaire had discovered the true meaning of political and intellectual freedom, where Handel had discovered himself as the master of the oratorio, and where Canaletto painted the Thames and made it as seductively glamorous as the Grand Canal. The London of Garrick and Reynolds, Hogarth and Doctor Johnson. The London in which the first national museum in the world was founded.

This book, written by the scholar-historian Marjorie Caygill, tells the story of an extraordinary experiment in public education. The Europe of 1753 was rich in collections of paintings and antiquities, books and natural curiosities. But they were overwhelmingly collections belonging to princes, prelates or noblemen, graciously opened to the public. The British Museum on the other hand was a startlingly new idea: a collection bought by Parliament that was to belong not to the king, nor to the state, but to every person in the land. It was to be not so much a public museum as a private museum of every citizen, a key instrument in achieving the Enlightenment dream of an informed and educated political community.

The idea that this collection should belong to everybody was given legal form by borrowing a structure from English family law, the trust. The point of a trust is to ensure that property is managed not just for the benefit of this generation, but is preserved also for the enjoyment of generations not yet born. This was always a venture aimed at posterity. And to show that the beneficiaries of this particular trust were the entire nation, three principal trustees were appointed – the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor and the Speaker of the House of Commons, the leaders of the three

component elements of Parliament. There had never been anything like it before, but the Trustee Museum, on the lines of the British Museum, was in succeeding generations to become the model for the whole English-speaking world.

The collection bought by Parliament in 1753, although then one of the most important anywhere in Europe, has been completely dwarfed by the acquisitions of the following 250 years. Marjorie Caygill traces the history of that expansion, the fruit of scholarship and wealth, of political power allied to connoisseurship and systematic collecting. The result is a collection unique in the world, where the cultures of all humanity from the earliest times to the present day can be studied under one roof. And this is still, as it was in the beginning, free to anybody who wants to enter it – truly a museum of the world, for the world.

It was one of the great dreams of the eighteenth century to gather objects from all corners of the globe and then to organise them in systematic categories, so that points of similarity and difference would emerge and the great scheme of the natural law would become clear. It was an ambition which in France took the published form of the *Encyclopédie*. In London, it was built as the British Museum.

That eighteenth-century ideal is now visited by 4.5 million people from all over the world every year. And it is an ideal which is surely more important now than it ever has been. As the world becomes more interdependent and more tightly linked, it is more and more essential to have a place where the interlocking stories of humanity can be seen and explored.

Neil MacGregor
Director
The British Museum

Old and new.
Head of the Egyptian
pharaoh Amenhotep III
(1390–1352 BC),
and the steel and glass
roof of the Queen
Elizabeth II Great Court.

Celebrating 250 Years

'Books for Mead and butterflies for Sloane' quipped the poet Alexander Pope in his 1731 satire on those who laid out their fortunes on 'drawings and designs', 'statues, dirty gods and coins' and 'monkish manuscripts'. This was the 'Age of the Enlightenment' when collectors might contemplate capturing in one place specimens of all the works of humanity and nature; and the museum of the physician and naturalist Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) was perhaps the finest of them all.

The origins of the British Museum lie in Sloane's will. Trained as a physician, in 1687 Sloane travelled to the West Indies whence he returned with an extensive natural history collection and established a lucrative medical practice at Nos 3 and 4 Bloomsbury Place, promoting a milk chocolate drink and making a fortune out of the sale of quinine. There too he indulged his universal collecting passion. In 1742, to the alarm of his family, he retired to his damp manor house by the river at Chelsea. Lacking an heir who shared his collecting mania he bequeathed his beloved collection to the British nation in return for £20,000 for his two daughters.

Sloane died on 11 January 1753, leaving an estimated 71,000 objects of all kinds, 50,000 books, manuscripts, prints and drawings, and 337 volumes of dried plants. Horace Walpole, a trustee of his will, sarcastically remarked on 'sharks with one ear and spiders as big as geese'. But the nation had acquired a bargain and, after negotiations with Parliament, Sloane's trustees agreed to relinquish control to a new institution, the first of a particular kind of museum which has since had many imitators – national, secular and freely open to the public.

On 7 June 1753 King George II, sitting in state in the House of Lords, gave his formal assent to an Act of Parliament which established the British Museum. Parliament, with evident relief, changed its nature by adding the hitherto neglected Cottonian collection of coins and manuscripts, given to the nation in 1700, and authorised the purchase for £10,000 of the Harleian manuscripts. The fourth founding collection was the Old Royal Library, given by King George II in 1757, which brought with it the right to a copy of every publication printed in the country and hence indefinite expansion.

The Museum's exhibition galleries and a reading room opened to the public on 15 January 1759, in 17th-century Montagu House in Bloomsbury, on the site where the British Museum remains today. At first visitors were drawn by the natural history collections – glittering and bizarre, scholarly and scientific. Antiquities and ethnography were relatively meagre, but in due course the balance began to change. From the voyages of Captain Cook, almost equivalent to today's expeditions into space, came ethnographical and natural history specimens never before seen in Europe. This was also the era of the Grand Tour: Classical antiquities began to permeate the collections, and in 1772 the purchase of the collection of Sir William Hamilton, particularly rich in Greek vases, gave the Museum its first antiquities of note. Other connoisseurs such as Mordaunt Cracherode, whose bequest of 1799 included an outstanding collection of prints and drawings, enriched the Museum.

Although admiration for the Classical collections held sway, the transformation of the Egyptian collection began in 1802 with the acquisition of the Rosetta Stone and other antiquities found by Napoleon's army in Egypt. If not quite 'art', their fascination began to take hold. From 1818 onwards colossal sculpture acquired by Henry Salt, then British Consul-General in Egypt, awed the public and, encouraged by the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone by Champollion in 1822, knowledge of this ancient culture began to emerge.

In 1816 came the so-called 'Elgin marbles', sold to the government by Lord Elgin. These included some of the sculptures of the Parthenon and other monuments in Athens, acquired by Elgin's artists and moulders, horrified at their continuing destruction. The Museum was active elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire and later sought out remains of Lykian Tombs (1840s), the Mausoleum of Halikarnassos (1850s) and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesos (1860s).

The Assyrians were known to the Victorians from the Bible but their cities were lost. In the 1840s and 1850s the Museum financed excavations by A.H. Layard and others. While prizing the magnificent sculptures, of equal interest to the Museum's

curators was the discovery of Ashurbanipal's great library of cuneiform tablets, which made the Museum a focus for Assyrian studies and the decipherment of these ancient texts. Excavations continued throughout the 19th and into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Until the mid-19th century the Museum's horizons were relatively limited, but with the appointment to the staff of Augustus Wollaston Franks in 1851 the Museum began for the first time systematically to collect British and medieval European material, and prehistory, branched out into the Orient, and diversified its holdings of ethnography. Franks, perhaps the Museum's greatest benefactor, had a private fortune. He was one of a circle of major collectors whose collections, with tactful and determined urging, eventually came to the Museum. Franks himself in 1897 bequeathed 3,300 finger rings, 153 drinking vessels, 512 pieces of continental porcelain, 1,500 netsuke, 850 inro, over 30,000 bookplates, and miscellaneous items of jewellery and plate, among them the Oxus treasure, having already given around 7,000 objects.

The Museum did not remain as the founders first envisaged but it put out some sturdy offshoots. The first major break in the collections – the transfer of oil paintings – came with the establishment of a separate National Gallery in 1824 and subsequently the development of the National Portrait Gallery. Because of the pressure on space, the natural history collections were transferred to South Kensington in the 1880s, to become the Natural History Museum. Around a century later, in 1973, the library departments split off to form, with other libraries, a new institution – the British Library. In 1998 the British Library's new building at St Pancras was opened.

An integral part of the Museum is the public – at first somewhat grudgingly and now enthusiastically admitted. The Museum has been open to visitors since 1759 and, apart from three months in 1974, general admission has always been free. The early Trustees were torn between a responsibility to admit visitors as directed by Parliament and alarm at the well-deserved reputation for mayhem of the London mob. They

solved the problem by requiring the first visitors to apply for tickets in advance and conducting them around the collections in small parties supervised by curators. These restrictions were lifted in 1810 and access gradually became easier until, by the end of the 19th century, the Museum opened seven days a week and on virtually all public holidays. Today around 5 million visitors come to Bloomsbury each year.

The Keeper of Antiquities wrote in 1851 that 'Europe cannot show any Building so ill adapted for its intended purpose, as the British Museum' but this to some extent reflected exasperation at the complexity of the building. The main Museum buildings consist of a neo-Classical core designed by Sir Robert Smirke and his brother Sydney, erected between the 1820s and 1850s. Sydney Smirke was responsible for the round Reading Room (1857). The latest addition is the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court, a Millennium Project designed by Lord Foster of Thames Bank, OM, which was opened in 2000.

An ever-present theme throughout the Museum's history has been shortage of money. Funded initially on the proceeds of a scandalously conducted public lottery, as capital diminished, government grants began to be made, and from 1801 regular annual funding was provided by Parliament. Whilst the Museum would not have developed without the generosity of private donors, Parliament financed the great 19th-century building programme and later projects, and also provided grants for the acquisition of objects. Some of the prices for which objects were acquired and buildings erected are cited here as evidence of continuing support from many sources.

Today the British Museum is one of the world's handful of large-scale universal museums, concerned not just with 'art' but with cultural history from prehistoric times to the present day. It has been likened to 'the world in a box', 'the memory of mankind', 'an enormous mind'. In 1778 John van Rymdsdyk wrote 'It is Matchless! There is certainly no Mine, or Treasure like this in Europe . . . nor can such a one ever be compiled again unless by a Miracle'. How much more true is this statement today.

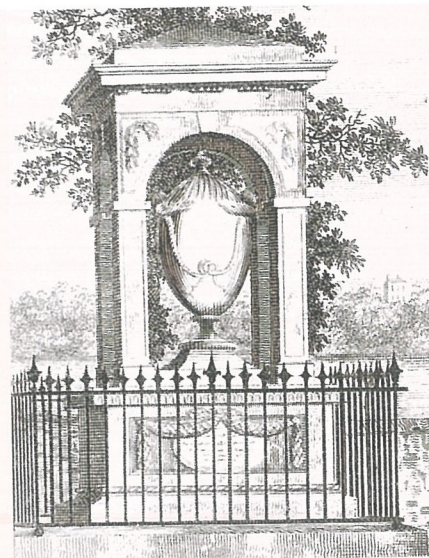
'Dr Mortimer, secretary to the Royal society, conducted their Royal Highnesses into the room where Sir Hans was sitting, being antient and infirm. The Prince took a chair and sat down by the good old gentleman some time, when he expressed the great esteem and value he had for him personally, and how much the learned world was obliged to him for his having collected such a vast library of curious

books, and such immense treasures of the valuable and instructive productions of nature and art...

Their royal highnesses were not wanting in expressing their satisfaction and pleasure at seeing a collection, which surpass'd all the notions or ideas they had formed from even the most favourable accounts of it. The Prince... express'd the great pleasure it gave him to see so magnificent a collection in

England, esteeming it an ornament to the nation; and expressed his sentiments how much it must conduce to the benefit of learning, and how great an honour will redound to Britain, to have it established for publick use to the latest posterity.'

Visit by the Prince and Princess of Wales to Sir Hans Sloane at his Manor House, Chelsea. Gentleman's Magazine, 1748



1 Left: Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), founder of the British Museum. On his death his collection consisted of a miscellany of around 71,000 objects, 337 volumes of dried plants, and 50,000 printed books, prints, drawings and manuscripts. It was estimated to have cost Sloane £100,000.

2 Above: Sir Hans Sloane's memorial in Chelsea Old Churchyard, Cheyne Walk, where he was buried on 18 January 1753 'with great funeral pomp'. Parliament accepted Sloane's bequest of his collection and on 7 June 1753 the British Museum Act received the royal assent.

3 One of a selection of butterflies, largely 'milkweeds' (*Danainae*), preserved between sheets of mica, from the collection of the apothecary James Petiver (c. 1663–1718) which was bought by Sloane in 1718 for £4,000. (Natural History Museum)



4 Right: An Asante drum from Ghana, from the Sloane collection. Acquired in Virginia c. 1730. The wood is African and the drum may, therefore, have been brought from Africa on a slave ship. H. 40 cm



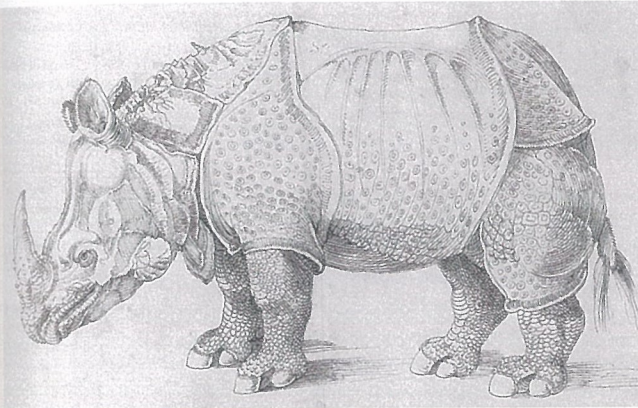
5 Right, top: Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford (1661–1728), who laid the foundations of the Harleian library. The books were auctioned but around 7,660 volumes of manuscripts, plus 14,236 original rolls, charters, deeds and other legal documents were in 1753 bought by Parliament for the Museum for £10,000.



6 Left, bottom: Edward Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford (1689–1741), began his collecting career with excessive book bills at college and went on to spend much of his wife's fortune of £500,000 in extending his father's collection.



7 Portrait of the early English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400) from the manuscript of Thomas Hoccleve's early 15th-century *De regimine principum* in the Harleian collection. (British Library)



8 Left: Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), *The Rhinoceros*, drawn in 1515 from reports, not from life. Sloane's collection included a large black leather-bound album which contained the majority of the Museum's present collection of 138 drawings attributed to Dürer. The album, acquired by Sloane in Holland in 1724, was marked '1637' and may have belonged at one time to Pieter Spiering Silfvercrona (d. 1652), a wealthy art collector from The Hague. 27.4 x 42 cm



9 Right: Sloane's catalogue of his collection includes the 'Sloane astrolabe': 'A brasse astrolabe made at London for the latitudes of Rome, London etc. with a perpetuall almanack upon it'. It is probably the earliest surviving English astrolabe, made c. 1295, and one of three he owned. Diam. 46 cm



10 Above: 'Carpet page' from St Mark's Gospel, Lindisfarne Gospels. Written and illuminated in honour of God and St Cuthbert c. AD 698, probably by the monk and Bishop Eadfrith, on Holy Island

(Lindisfarne), Northumberland. The Cotton collection also included two of the four surviving copies of Magna Carta and the manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. (British Library)



11 Left: Lower Palaeolithic flint handaxe, about 350,000 years old, found in 1696 with the remains of a prehistoric elephant (thought to have been drowned in Noah's flood or imported by invading Romans in AD 43), the first recorded discovery of a prehistoric stone

implement in Britain. Listed in Sloane's catalogue as 'A British weapon found wt Elephants tooth opposite to black Marys near Grayes inn lane. Conyers. It is a large black flint shaped into the figure of a Spears point.' The Museum now has about 2 million flints. L. 16.5 cm



12 Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631), founder of a collection of 958 volumes of manuscripts given to the nation in 1700 by his descendants. The Museum in 1753 acquired 861 volumes

and some fragments which had survived a fire in Ashburnham House in 1731. Cotton was able to acquire much material which had been dispersed following Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries.

'The British Museum, consisting of the immense collections of Sloane and the Royal Society [*sic*], will soon begin to be placed in Montague house, but the whole undertaking can hardly be accomplished in the space of ten years. When complete, this Museum will alone well repay the trouble of a visit to England. Both these collections however

are at present in the greatest confusion, and many articles have been lost, either through neglect, or from being placed in a bad situation, but they receive acquisitions daily from every part of the globe.'

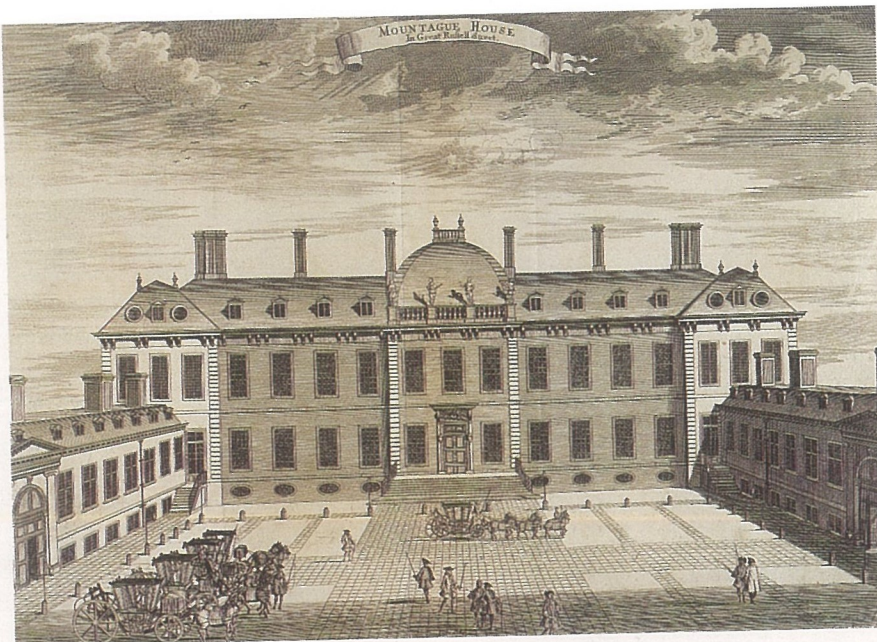
Letter from Dr Peter Ascanius to Carl Linnaeus, 1755

2 Inner coffin of Irtyru, 26th dynasty, c. 550 BC, from Memphis. The first mummy to enter the Museum's collections, it was bequeathed in 1756 by Colonel William Lethieullier who had visited Egypt in 1721. The collections were beginning to grow by gift although much that was offered would have been more at home in an earlier cabinet of curiosities.

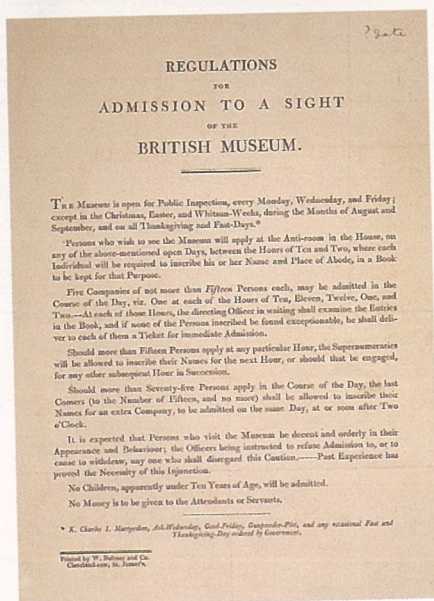
L. 1.99 m



1 Montagu House, Bloomsbury, South Front and Courtyard, c. 1714. The house, designed by Robert Hooke, was built for Ralph, Duke of Montagu, in 1676. Damaged by fire in 1686, it was rebuilt and purchased by the Museum in 1754–5 for £10,000. The façade was probably original. The printed books were arranged on the ground floor, and manuscripts, natural history, antiquities and 'modern curiosities' on the first. The Museum opened to the public on 15 January 1759.



3 18th-century 'Instructions to Visitors'. Fearing unrestricted admission by the notoriously volatile London mob, the Trustees decided that visitors should be admitted by ticket only, applied for in advance, and conducted around the collections in small groups by the staff, the first of whom were appointed in 1756.



4 Right: Queen Mary's Psalter, English, early 14th century AD, from the Old Royal Library which King George II (1660–1727) presented to the Museum in 1757. With the library came the privilege of copyright deposit. The collection, now in the British Library, consisted of about 9,000 printed books and about 2,000 manuscripts. The psalter was given to Queen Mary Tudor by a customs officer who stopped it from being exported after the arrest of its owner, the Earl of Rutland, in 1553.



5 Painting of a dodo given to the Museum in 1759 and said to have been drawn from the living bird. Attributed to Roelandt Savery (1576–1639), it may have previously been in the Sloane collection. (Natural History Museum)

'On the 16th of November we went with our two travelling companions to see the British Museum, which deserves a full description. It originated in a bequest of Sir Hans Sloane, by whom the first foundation was laid; he was a rich man, who passed his life in collecting, at great expense, everything that seemed in any way remarkable. He is said to have spent

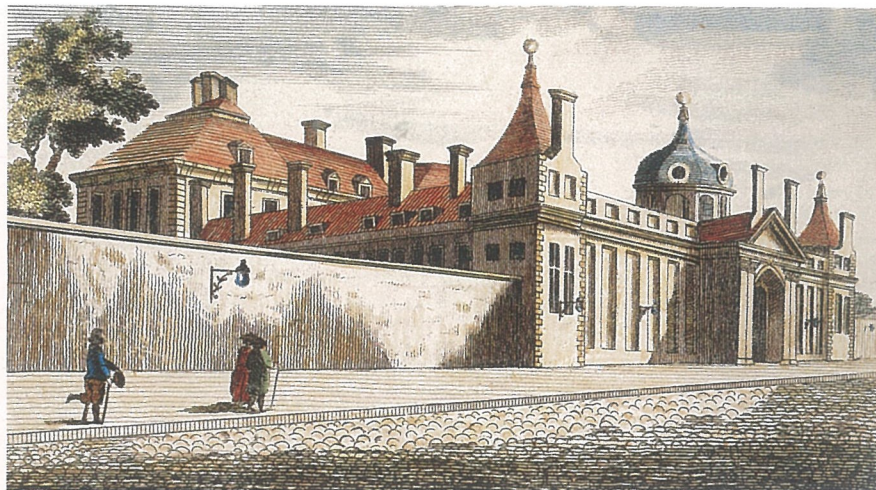
about £50,000 upon the collection, the whole of which he left, when he died in 1753, for the benefit of the public, on condition that Parliament should pay his executors £20,000...

Everybody can obtain a ticket, and receive permission to enter the museum daily for some time to look over the books, and no servant or warder, etc.,

is allowed to receive a penny under penalty of dismissal. It is said that the wages of the people employed, and the cost of the maintenance of the building and objects, and the heating of the rooms, amount to £8000 annually.' *Count Frederick Kielmansegge, Diary of a Journey to England in the years 1761-2, trans. Countess Kielmansegg*



1 Hellenistic Greek bronze head of a poet, 2nd century BC, perhaps the playwright Sophokles (c. 496–406 BC), given by the Earl of Exeter in 1760. Acquired in Constantinople in the early 17th century for the Earl of Arundel and later owned by the noted antiquary Dr Richard Mead (1673–1754). H. 29.5 cm



2 Above: The British Museum at Montagu House in Great Russell Street from the south-west. Preceding the Museum in this part of Bloomsbury were the 'Dog and Duck' (now the Museum Tavern) and St George's Church (consecrated in 1730).



THE
General Contents
OF THE
BRITISH MUSEUM:
WITH
REMARKS.
Serving as a
DIRECTORY
In Viewing that
Noble CABINET.

THE SECOND EDITION,
With ADDITIONS and IMPROVEMENTS, and a
COMPLETE INDEX.

*Caster gaudet equis; ovo prognatus eodem,
Pugnis: quot capitum vivunt, totidem studiorum
Milia.*

L O N D O N:
Printed for R. and J. DODSLEY, in Pall-mall.
MDCCLXII.
1762

3 Left: The first guidebook to the British Museum, written by Edmund Powlett 'to give a general idea of the Contents of this wonderful Collection' (1761, 2nd edn 1762). It was soon apparent that the majority of visitors were easily bored with the outside of books and the occasional glimpse of a manuscript, and had mostly come to delight in the glittering natural history display, with its combination of science and sensation. Visitors were from 1761 permitted to agree democratically in which rooms they would spend the most time.

4 Left: One of a pair of 'very fine porcelain Jars of the Chelsea Manufactory, made in the year 1762, under the direction of Mr Sprimont, from a person unknown through Mr Empson' given in 1763. Known as the 'Cleopatra

vases' since one shows the death of Cleopatra and the other the death of Harmonia (daughter of her and Mark Antony's patron deities), they were the first pieces of porcelain and the first 'modern' objects to be acquired. H. 50 cm

'April 3rd [1775]. Fair – I went to the British Museum – The sight was so various that it is hard to remember anything distinctly. – But what pleased me most was the ruins of Herculaneum. – The original magna charta of K John was in the Harleian (Cottonian) [*sic*] I think – The shell for which a cardinal gave 500£ I wd be sorry to give five pence for, unless merely because it is a specimen of human folly – The magnitude of the crocodile (20 feet) & the horn (5 feet at least) growing out

of the nose of the unicorn fish were extraordinary – to me – The form of the pulpits was curious. A cylindrical form with spiral geometrical stairs issuing from the central upright. This evening I sketched out a letter on the method to read the Liturgy &c.

NB. The transparent picture of Vesuvius in the last eruption from the side, done by direction of Sir Wm Hamilton was very well.'
Dr Campbell's Diary of a Visit to England in 1775, *James C. Clifford (ed.)* (1947)

1 Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait of Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803) – diplomat, volcanologist and antiquary – whose Classical collection, purchased in 1772 by a government grant of £8,410 plus £840 to house it, began the transformation of the Museum's collection of antiquities. The balance of the Museum began to change as the predominance of the library and natural history lessened. From its 18th-century beginnings, the Classical collection has developed into one of the most comprehensive in the world.



3 Red-figured water jar (*hydria*), signed by Meidias as potter and attributed to the 'Meidias painter', named from this vase. Made in Athens c. 425–400 BC, it is shown (bottom right) in Reynolds' portrait of Hamilton. Artists from the late 18th and 19th centuries often copied groups of figures from the vase as decoration. H. 52.5 cm



2 Above: 18th-century mourner's costume from Tahiti, probably that mentioned by Captain Cook in his journal in 1774, and given to the Museum by Cook in 1775 as part of 'A collection of artificial curiosities from the South Sea islands'. H. 2.14 m

4 Right: The botanist Daniel Solander (1736–82) who joined the Museum in 1763 to catalogue the natural history collections, and in 1768 accompanied Banks on Cook's first voyage. He is depicted as a goose growing fat on Banks's patronage. The ethnographical and natural history collections were enriched by objects from Cook's voyages.



5 Portrait of Mary Davis of Great Saughall, near Cheshire, and her horns. The portrait was hung above the 'Cleopatra vases' (p. 9). Other curiosities included the 'Cyclops pig', the vegetable lamb of Tartary and a brick from the Tower of Babylon (*sic*).



6 Right: Plate (detail) from van Rymsdyk, illustrating a horn from the head of Mrs French of Tenterden, Kent, displayed in Montagu House in the room 'filled with Productions of Art, disposed in several Cabinets'.



7 Left: Jasperware portrait medallion of Captain James Cook (1728–79), explorer and circumnavigator, by Josiah Wedgwood, from a design by John Flaxman Jnr, c. 1784. A South Sea Room was opened in 1778 to house objects brought back from recent expeditions. The Museum's ethnographical collection is now the best in the world for range and quality. H. 10.6 cm



8 Above: 18th-century Maori carved wooden treasure box (*wakahuia*) from New Zealand, collected on a Cook expedition. The Museum's collection is particularly rich in objects derived from first-time contact between Europeans and indigenous peoples. L. 59.5 cm



9 Left: Portrait (detail) of Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), botanist and plant collector, patron of Captain Cook's first (1768–71) voyage, and later, as President of the Royal Society, an influential *ex officio* Trustee of the Museum. In this portrait of 1771–2 Banks is wearing a Maori cloak brought back from Cook's voyages.

MUSEUM BRITANNICUM, BEING AN EXHIBITION OF A GREAT VARIETY OF ANTIQUITIES AND NATURAL CURIOSITIES, BELONGING TO THAT NOBLE AND MAGNIFICENT CABINET, THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

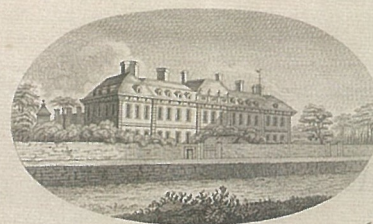
ILLUSTRATED WITH
CURIOUS PRINTS,
Engraved after the ORIGINAL DESIGNS, from NATURE, other OBJECTS;
AND WITH DISTINCT
EXPLANATIONS OF EACH FIGURE,
By JOHN and ANDREW VAN RYMSDYK, PICTORS.

When Cicero went to consult the Oracle about his future Conduct in Life, he received for Answer,

Follow Nature!

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

Mrs. A. BEHN,
in *Ælop's Life*, 7th Plate.



L O N D O N :

Printed by I. MOORE, for the AUTHORS, CHARLES-STREET,
ST. JAMES'S-SQUARE. 1778.

10 Above: Title page of *Museum Britannicum* by John and Andrew van Rymsdyk (1778), the first illustrated guide to the Museum, a somewhat idiosyncratic selection of objects such as an encrusted sword and skull from the Tiber, together with more conventional items like fossils, precious stones and birds' nests.

'I came to the Chevalier Hamilton's magnificent collection of Roman and Etrurian antiquities, which appears to contain some wonderful rarities. His life-size portrait hangs there too. This room alone rewards the student of history and of nature for his trip to England. Several Greek and Roman urns are to be seen; in one of the latter there is still a piece of asbestos in which the body was incinerated. These human ashes, whose lust for power sought to disturb peace and welfare all over the earth, are quite appropriately placed

near some fragments of Vesuvius and Etna, which by means of forces supplied to them by nature, shattered the fatherland of these haughty conquerors, burying thousands of them beneath their glowing lava. With what sensations one handles a Carthaginian helmet excavated near Capua, household utensils from Herculeum, ruined two thousand years ago, lachrymary vessels from the graves of Magna Graeca... Hamilton's room leads into that devoted to Captain Cook, that luckless, excellent man, and all the pots,

weapons and clothes from the South Sea islands just recently discovered, are on view there, just as they are shown in the prints illustrating the description of his voyage: crowns, helmets and war-masks, state uniforms and mourning – the former made of tiny shells and feathers, very densely and neatly sewn on in strips according to colour, the latter also partly of feathers and partly of bast, and made out of linen from the so-called lace-bark tree.'

Sophie v. la Roche, Sophie in London (1786), trans. Clare Williams (1936)

1 The Grand Staircase of Montagu House with ceiling frescoes by Charles de Lafosse (1636–1716) depicting the fall of Phaeton, painted c. 1686. These disappeared, probably destroyed, when Montagu House was demolished in the 1840s. Watercolour by George Scharf Snr (1788–1860), in 1845, purchased from his widow 1862. The introduction of an admission charge in 1784 was shelved because visitors 'consisted chiefly of Mechanics and persons of the lower Classes' who would be unlikely to pay. 36.2 x 2.8 cm



4 The Gordon Riots of 1780: Colonel Stanhope Harvey's York Regiment of Militia – around 700 soldiers with wives and children having arrived by forced march – parade in the gardens of Montagu House. In the distance can be seen the beginnings of Southampton Row. 36.4 x 53 cm



2 Above: Detail of Lafosse's drawing for the Montagu House ceiling: 'Diana, Aurora and the Morning Star with two Horae pouring Dew, by the Zodiacal Arc'. Presented by Miss Diane Nixon in 1998 through the American Friends of the British Museum. 22.6 x 32.4 cm

3 Below: The blue jasperware 'Pegasus vase' given to the Museum in 1786 by the potter Josiah Wedgwood who was influenced by the Museum's collections and made drawings of vases there in 1769. Wedgwood described the vase as 'the finest & most perfect I have ever made'. The scene of the 'Apotheosis of Homer' was adapted by John Flaxman Jnr from a Greek vase in the Hamilton collection. H. 46.4 cm



'This museum is composed of manuscript and printed books; of Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities; Indian, Chinese, and Japanese idols; of the vestments, weapons, and utensils of the islanders of the South Seas and other savage nations; of quadrupeds, amphibious animals, birds, insects, fishes, shells, and other marine productions; of minerals, petrifications, and fossils of every kind.

This immense assemblage of objects was partly formed by the celebrated

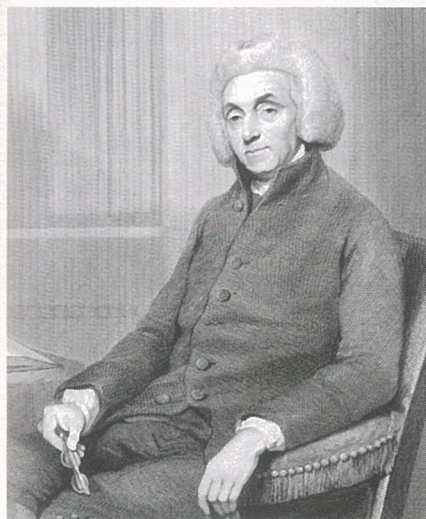
Hans Sloane. It is a pity that the collection was not allowed to remain as he originally left it. Had no additions been made to it, and had it been allowed to retain the modest title of *Sloane's Museum*, many would doubtless have been anxious to visit the collection of that indefatigable naturalist, and would have viewed with as much astonishment as satisfaction, what the love of science, aided by an affluent fortune and liberal disposition, had been able to perform...

The British Museum contains many

valuable collections in natural history; but, with the exception of some fishes in a small apartment, which are begun to be classed, nothing is in order, everything is out of its place; and this assemblage appears rather an immense magazine, in which things have been thrown at random, than a scientific collection, destined to instruct and honour a great nation.'

Barthelmi Faujas Saint-Fond, Travels in England, Scotland and the Hebrides (1799)

1 An Indian elephant by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), one of four drawings probably made in 1637, and a treasure of the Cracherode collection. The great series of Rembrandt etchings was one of the strengths of Cracherode's print collection. Building on gifts such as this, today the Department of Prints & Drawings has one of the world's greatest collections, consisting of approx. 2½ million prints and 60,000 drawings. 17.9x25.6 cm

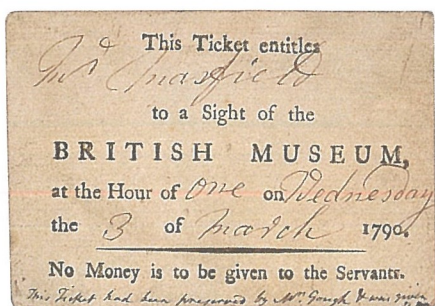


2 Left: The only likeness of the reclusive connoisseur the Revd Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode (1730–99) who used his fortune of around £31,000 a year to purchase 'fewer and better rather than more and worse'. His bequest of 4,500 rare books, 662 drawings, 5–10,000 prints (the exact number is not known because of a theft which occurred not long after their acquisition), coins, gems and a small cabinet of minerals greatly enriched the Museum's collections.



3 Among the coins in the fine cabinet bequeathed by Cracherode was this tetradrachm from Naxos, Greek Sicily, c. 460 BC, depicting the satyr Silenus, with animal's ears and a bushy tail, holding a wine-cup. The coins of Sicily are some of the most beautiful ever made. Diam. 26 mm

4 Right: Admission ticket for a tour of the Museum in 1790. Admission was free but the Trustees waged a continuous battle to prevent the staff soliciting tips from visitors.



5 Right: Montagu House with its 'ever smoking chimneys' seen from the north-east, c. 1800. The appointment in 1799 of the energetic Joseph Planta (1744–1827) as Principal Librarian was the prelude to many changes and a greater professionalism.



'The British Museum is situated on the North side of Great Russel-street Bloomsbury. The site is a square, inclosed by a high blank brick wall, which excludes the house from view in every direction on that side. At each corner is a turret, and over the great Ionic arch of entrance a large and handsome cupola. Upon entering the court, the spectator finds himself in a grand Colonnade of Ionic pillars, extremely chaste and well proportioned,

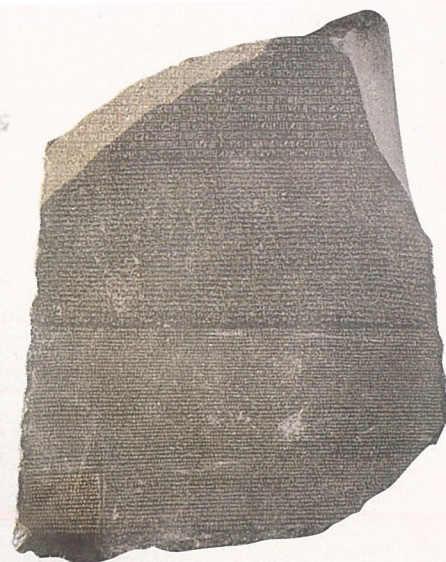
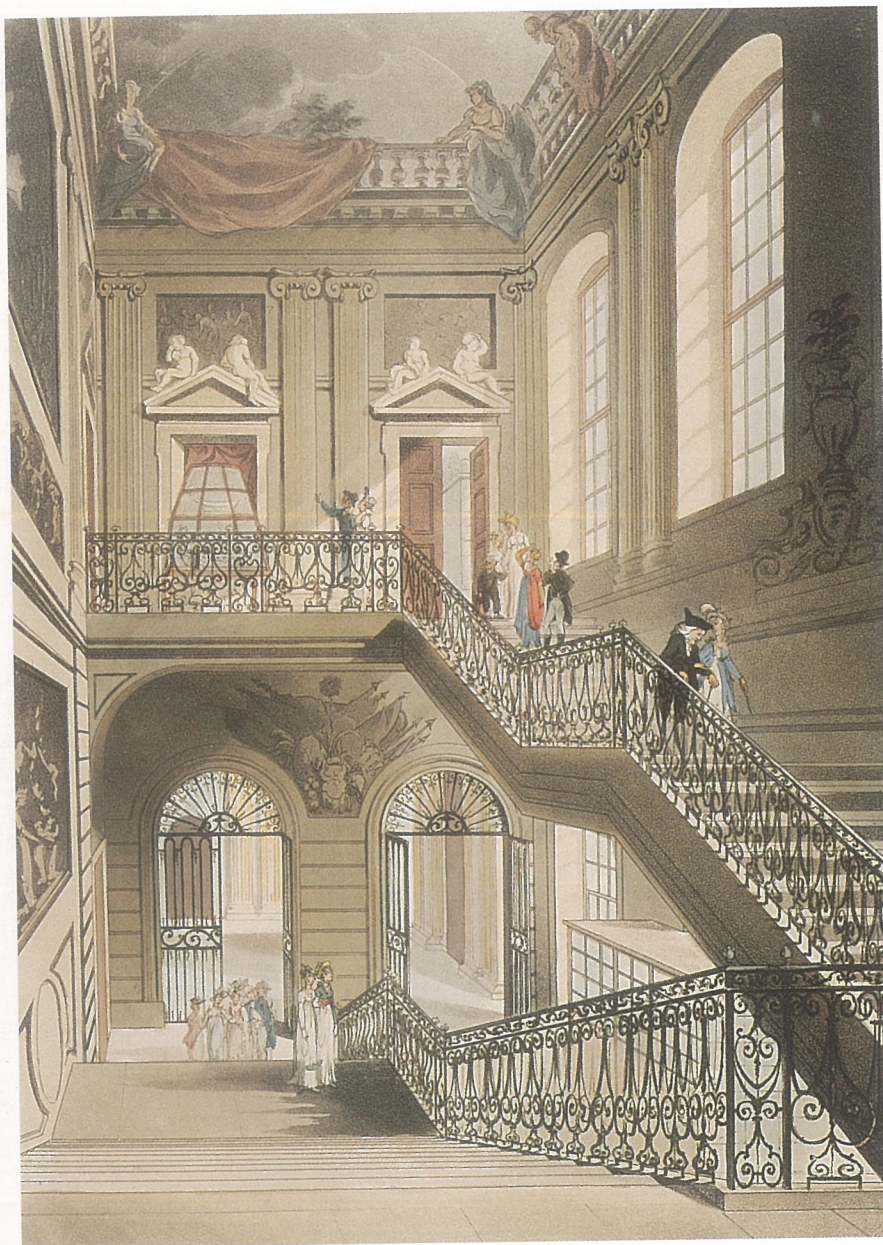
which extends the whole length of the front. At the East and West ends of the quadrangle are the lodgings of the different officers, connecting the Colonnade and Museum... On the West side of the house is a flower-garden and a terrace, disposed with much taste, and shaded by numbers of flourishing trees and shrubs... The basement story contains the largest and most repelling specimens of Nature and Art.

The ponderous spoils of our Egyptian

campaign are at present under two temporary sheds in the quadrangle. Of those the huge baths and coffins covered with hieroglyphicks are the most interesting. To which may be added the deities, the enormous clenched hand, and excellent ram's head, in friable stone, together with coffins, fragments of grand columns, and two Romans in statuary marble.'

James Peller Malcolm, Londinium Redivivum... (1803)

1 The Staircase of Montagu House in 1808. In that year the first official Synopsis (guide to the Museum) was published, and the Department of Prints & Drawings opened its first students' room. However it was not until 1810 that 'persons of decent appearance' were allowed to wander unescorted on certain days.

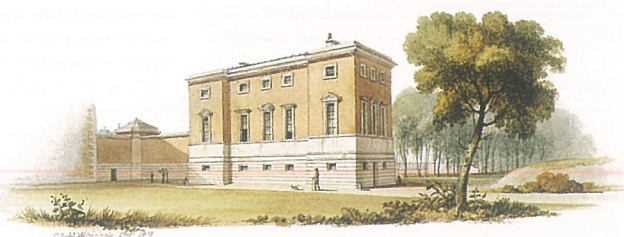


2 Above: The Rosetta Stone, key to the decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, bearing a decree written in three scripts, issued on 27 March 196 BC at Memphis, in honour of Ptolemy V Epiphanes. It was found by a French engineer at el-Rashid (Rosetta) in 1799, ceded with other antiquities to the British Crown in 1801 under the Treaty of Alexandria, and given by George III in 1802. H. 1.14m (max.)

3 Below: Townley's favourite sculpture, 'Clytie' – a marble funerary portrait, probably of a wealthy woman, c. AD 40–50, copying the style of Antonia (d. AD 38), daughter of Mark Antony and Octavia. Purchased by Townley from Prince Laurenzano of Naples in 1772, the figure enjoyed huge popularity and influenced English artists and craftsmen. H. 57 cm



4 Left: Exterior of the Townley Gallery, designed by George Saunders (c. 1762–1839) and opened in 1808, showing (left) the connection with Montagu House. This was the first purpose-built exhibition gallery. A Committee had been formed in 1802 to consider expanding the Museum's buildings. 18.3 x 24.9 cm





6 Right: Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, taking with him more than 150 scholars and artists to record its marvels. Here, members of the expedition inspect a fist from a colossal red granite

statue of Ramesses II, c. 1250 BC. Said to be from the temple of Ptah, Memphis, the fist was among the antiquities ceded by the French and given to the Museum by George III in 1802. L. (off fist) 1.3 m (max.)

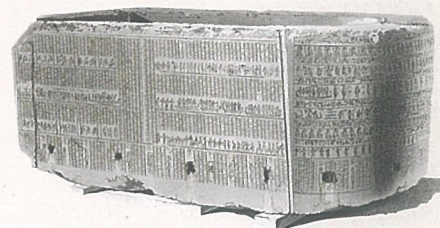


5 Below: Charles Townley (1737–1805) and an ideal depiction of his collection in his library at his home in Park Street, Westminster (1781). The objects were purchased from collectors and dealers in Rome largely between 1768 and 1774 – Discobolus was painted in later. Townley bequeathed the collection to his family,

directing that they establish a new museum. Unable to do so, they sold it to the Government for £20,000 and a place on the Museum's Board of Trustees. It is a rare example of an intact 18th-century collection. Townley's archive was bought in 1995 with the aid of the NHMF, BMF and Caryatids. 12.7 x 9.9 cm



7 Right: 'Discobolus' (the discus-thrower) from the Townley collection, one of several Roman copies after a lost Greek bronze original by the sculptor Myron, 5th century BC. Found in the villa of the Emperor Hadrian at Tivoli in 1791 and bought by Townley in 1793. The head was restored, wrongly, in the 18th century. H. 1.7 m



8 Sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, last native pharaoh of Egypt (r. 360–343 BC), c. 343 BC, given by George III in 1802. It was found in the Attarin Mosque at Alexandria, having

been used as a ritual bath. At first thought to have been the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, this was disproved once the hieroglyphs could be translated. L. (of sarcophagus) 3.14 m

'There is now light and length of day sufficient to see the sights of this capital. We have begun by the British Museum. The building is disposed round a vast court, and in very good taste. You have to wait in the hall of entrance till fourteen other visitors are assembled, for the rule is, that fifteen persons are to be admitted at one time, neither more nor less. This number completed, a German cicerone took charge of us, and led us *au pas de charge* through

a number of rooms full of stuffed birds and animals; – many of them seemingly in a state of decay. We had a glimpse of arms, dresses, and ornaments of savages hung around; – of a collection of minerals; – next of antiquities from Herculaneum and Pompeia and monstrous Egypt. We remarked a treble inscription on a large block of dark porphyry, brought from Rosetta; one in hieroglyphics, one in the common language of Egypt, and one in Greek; –

all three saying the same thing serve as a glossary to each other... The last and most valuable acquisitions are the Greek and Roman marbles brought from Italy by Mr Townley. The merit, however, of a considerable part of these marbles consists mostly of their being undoubtedly antique.'

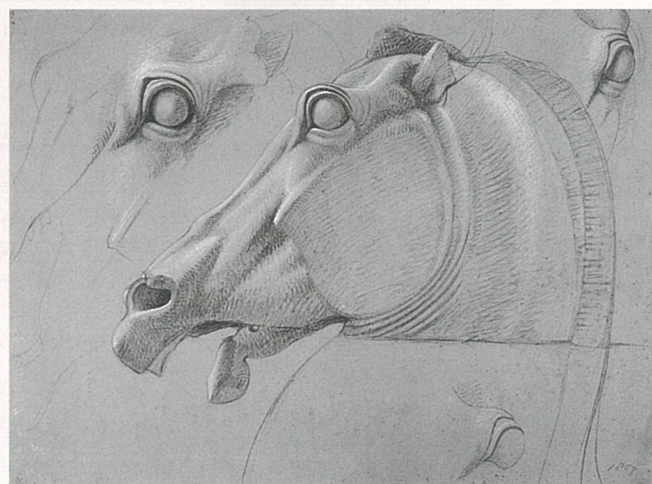
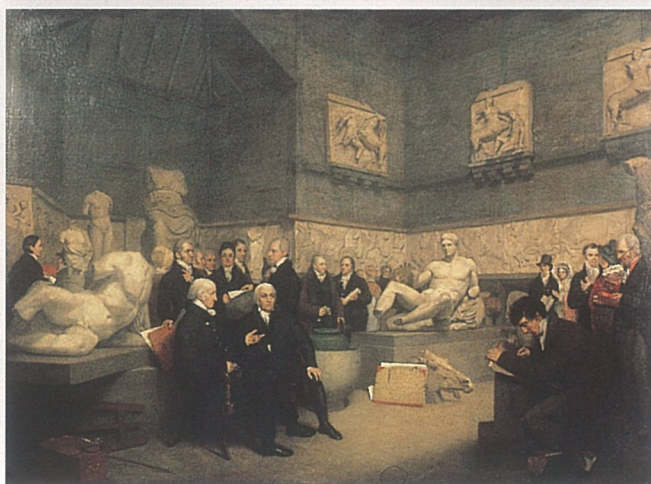
Louis Simond, Journal of a Tour and Residence in Great Britain, during the years 1810 and 1811, by a French traveller (1817)

1 'Mortality weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep' wrote the poet Keats on first seeing the sculptures of the Parthenon, and in his 'Ode on a Grecian urn' (1819) he described a sacrificial victim: a 'heifer lowing at the skies', portrayed in the Parthenon frieze. H. 1 m (approx.)



3 Below: The horse of Selene, the Moon goddess, from the east pediment of the Parthenon, one of a series of drawings made by the artist Benjamin Haydon (1786–1846) in 1809 when the sculptures were at Lord Elgin's house in Park Lane prior to their acquisition by the Museum. From an album of 264 drawings purchased from F.W. Haydon in 1881 for £75, the price having been reduced because the Museum was short of funds. 55.4 x 75.9 cm

2 Trustees, staff and visitors in the 'Temporary Elgin Room', designed by Sir Robert Smirke and erected in 1817 to house the Parthenon sculptures. The collection, which included other material such as a colossal scarab from Constantinople, was bought from Lord Elgin by the British government for £35,000 and, by Act of Parliament, transferred to the British Museum.

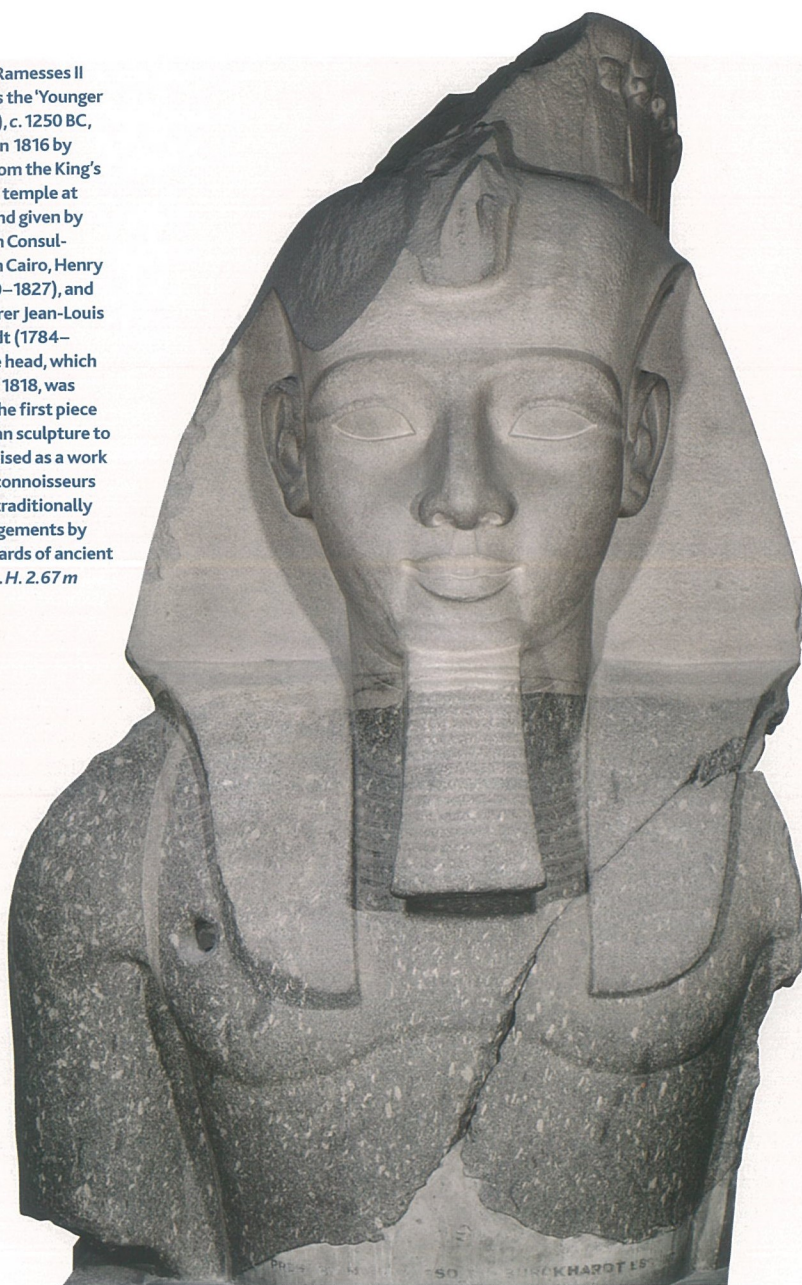


4 Left: 'Polar treasures' from John Ross's expedition to Baffin Bay are brought to the Museum in 1818. Curators dancing on the parapet of Montagu House can be glimpsed in the background.

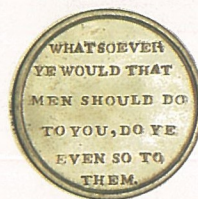


6 Reception attended by over 30,000 people at Kumasi, modern Ghana, for the 1817 expedition by the African Company to improve Asante-British relations. From T.E. Bowdich's *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (1819), 'one of the most vivid and detailed accounts of an African kingdom ever written'.

5 Bust of Ramesses II (known as the 'Younger Memnon'), c. 1250 BC, acquired in 1816 by Belzoni from the King's mortuary temple at Thebes, and given by the British Consul-General in Cairo, Henry Salt (1780–1827), and the explorer Jean-Louis Burckhardt (1784–1817). The head, which arrived in 1818, was perhaps the first piece of Egyptian sculpture to be recognised as a work of art by connoisseurs who had traditionally made judgements by the standards of ancient Greek art. H. 2.67 m



7 A Mourning cloth, woven in Dagwumba, but painted in Ashantee', part of a collection of around thirty objects from Ghana given to the Museum by T.E. Bowdich (1791–1824) in 1818, one of the earliest attempts by a European to make a systematic collection from an African society.



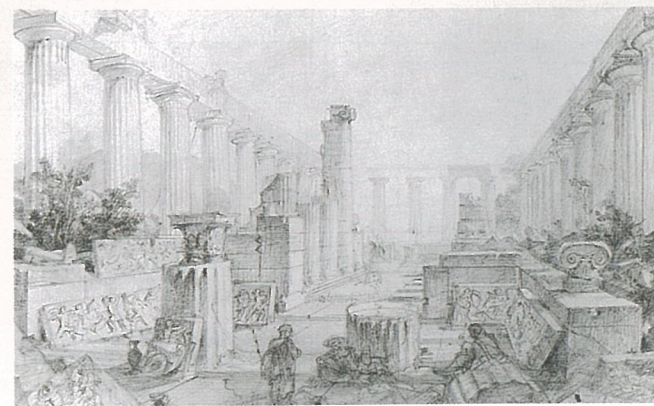
8 Above: Brass anti-slavery medal, London, c. 1787, from the collection made by Sarah Sophia Banks (1744–1818) and acquired after her death. Among her coins were some of the earliest issues from the new

United States of America. Miss Banks also bequeathed a pioneering collection of ephemera: some 20,000 items including trade cards, invitations, lottery tickets, turnpike tickets and election cards. Diam. 34 mm

9 Right: Portrait of the Italian Giovanni-Battista Belzoni (1778–1823) – circus strongman, hydraulic engineer and explorer – who was responsible for the excavation of a number of Egyptian tombs and temples.



10 Right, top: The Temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae in Phigaleia, Greece, 420–400 BC, after excavation. The site was first noted by Western travellers in 1765, but it was not until 1811 that a group of artists and architects discovered the sculptures which were bought at auction by the British government for £15,000.



11 Above: Herakles and the Amazon Queen Hippolyte from the Bassae frieze (the Phigaleian marbles)

which reached the Museum in 1815. Drawing from a 19th-century guidebook. H. (of sculptures) 64 cm

'ANTE-ROOM. This room contains one object of very great value and interest. It was long known as the Barberini Vase, from the name of the family in whose palace it was for several generations deposited. It has latterly been called the Portland Vase; – having been purchased off Sir William Hamilton by the Duchess of Portland, and afterwards presented [*sic*] to the Museum by the Duke of Portland. This vase is only a few inches high, and is formed of a dark blue glass, on the surface of which a white

incrustation has been deposited, and then the outer material sculpted down, so as to leave the white figures in relief on the dark ground, in the manner of cameos cut on onyx. The whole object offers a beautiful specimen of Greek art; but the design and sculpture are not so admirable as the high reputation which this vase has always enjoyed would lead us to expect. The subject of the design has never yet been satisfactorily explained; but it is, no doubt, connected with some sepulchral rites; as the vase

was found at a short distance from Rome, about the middle of the 16th century, in a sepulchral chamber, and was inclosed in a marble sarcophagus. The room also contains one or two curious specimens of ancient Fresco Painting.' A Guide to the Beauties of the British Museum, being a critical and descriptive account of the principal works of art contained in the gallery of antiquities of the above national collection (1826)



1 Left: Bronze head of an athlete, southern Etruscan, c. 300–250 BC. From the bequest by a Museum Trustee Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) which comprised 5,000 coins, 111 gems, 1,144 drawings, 800 bronzes, as well as sculptures and other material. Said by Knight to have been the first item to enter his collection. H. 21.5 cm

2 Above: Federico Barocci (1535–1612), *Landscape with Bank and Trees*, c. 1590. From the Payne Knight bequest of drawings, 'undoubtedly one of the major collections of this type formed in this country'. 39.3 x 24.9 cm

3 Right: Artist's impression of the South Front showing sculptural decoration, intended but not executed. Although Sir Robert Smirke's plans were first approved in 1823, the general plan was not published until 1836 and the front elevation in 1843. 40.7 x 58.1 cm





4 Left: Akkadian period cylinder seal, c. 2250 BC, from the collection made by Claudius James Rich (1787–1821), the East India Company's Resident in Baghdad. The beginnings of the Ancient Near Eastern collections are to be discerned in the purchase from his widow in 1825 of 800 manuscripts (£5,500), coins (£1,000) and 'Babylonish and Nineveh gems and antiquities' (£1,000). *H.* 3.6 cm

5 Left, below: Gilded lacquer and wood Buddha from Rangoon, Burma, late 18th to early 19th century, given by Captain Frederick Marryat RN in 1826. An attempt to make the gift dependent on Marryat's being appointed a hereditary Museum Trustee was refused. *H.* (excl. modern base) 1.48 m



6 Left: In 1823 King George IV gave his father's library (the King's Library) to the nation, and parliament allocated £40,000 to house it in the British Museum. This provided the catalyst for the architect Sir Robert Smirke (1780–1867) to begin his quadrangular neo-classical building. The East Wing, built to store the King's Library, was completed in 1827. Watercolour, c. 1850, by Eugene Armand Roy. Given by a descendant of the artist in 2003. 29 x 21 cm



7 Left: 6th- to 5th-century BC relief from the Apadana (audience hall) at the Persian royal capital of Persepolis, showing guardsmen in Persian dress. 'Tolerably fair specimens' collected by Sir Gore Ouseley (1770–1844) during his 'Embassy to the Court of Persia' (1811–14) and given to the Museum in 1825. *H.* 60 cm



8 Left: Sketch by George Scharf Snr of visitors to the Museum in 1828. The Museum recorded 127,643 visitors in 1825. It was now receiving annual grants from Parliament (£12,877 in 1827).

'Above all the British Museum pleased me best. It is a grand building, consisting of a great many rooms, all filled with curiosities. First we saw Egyptians that had been dead three thousand years ago. Next we saw the skull of an elephant, and the Queen of Otaheite's hat, the crown big enough to hold you, and the brim of it not much unlike the mat that lies at the bottom of our stairs. There was a piece of the wall of Babylon, and the head-dress of a lady five thousand years ago... There were thousands of other things which I have not time to enumerate, and indeed, we could not stay to look at half of them.'

John Coltman, aged twelve, to his brother, aged eight (1780)



This book has been published to record a quarter of a millennium in the life of the most famous museum in the world. The founding of the British Museum – the first ever public, national and secular institution of its kind – took place on 7 June 1753 by means of an Act of Parliament. Today, around 5 million people visit it each year, successors to countless others who have passed along Great Russell Street since the Museum opened to the public for the first time on 15 January 1759. Some of their comments – both admiring and critical, but rarely indifferent – are given here.

The British Museum's unique collections, drawn from cultures throughout the world from prehistory to the present, are shown as they were gathered together decade by decade under one roof – Sir Hans Sloane's Dürer drawings, Sir William Hamilton's Greek vases, the Rosetta Stone, the sculptures of the Parthenon, Assyrian lions, Mixtec-Aztec turquoise mosaics, the Oxus treasure, the 'Ram in the thicket' from the Great Death Pit at Ur, the Sutton Hoo ship burial, Japanese paintings, African carvings, Wedgwood pottery, and coins from the Cuerdale Viking hoard, to name but a few. *The British Museum: 250 Years* is a pictorial celebration of these and other treasures, illustrating how this fascinating and complex institution has developed over the course of two and a half centuries.

Marjorie Caygill is the author of a number of books and articles on the history and collections of the Museum, including *The Story of the British Museum*, *The British Museum A-Z Companion* and *Treasures of the British Museum*.

With 210 colour and 60 black and white illustrations.

The British Museum Press
38 Russell Square
London WC1B 3QQ
www.britishmuseum.co.uk

Printed in Italy

£6.00

THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS

ISBN 978-0-7141-2786-6



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