

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A History



DAVID M. WILSON

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In 2003 The British Museum celebrates its 250th anniversary. The oldest and most famous publicly funded museum in the world, it was founded on the collections of a great polymath, Sir Hans Sloane. Sloane's books and natural history collections form the core of what are now the British Library and the Natural History Museum, while the rest of his collection – antiquities, prints, drawings, coins and medals – grew to form the great Museum we know today.

Although the Museum was a product of the Enlightenment, it made its most original contributions to knowledge in the nineteenth century, based on a growing understanding of the antiquity of man and on the exploration of newly recognized civilizations in the Near and Middle East. Until the middle years of the twentieth century the Museum provided the only academic professionalism in fields such as archaeology, ancient languages and art history. Today it remains in the forefront of research and education in many areas, making the collections available to the public through exhibitions and publications at all levels.

The Museum's primacy in the study of material culture is based on collections which range from every corner of the world, from European porcelain and Stone Age axes to political cartoons and material brought home from the voyages of Captain Cook. This book chronicles the growth of the collections, setting the Museum in its intellectual context from Sloane to the present day. It tells of the staff, their passion for collecting, their achievements and petty rivalries; it tells of constant battles with government for money and space; it tells of excavators, collectors, benefactors and the public. The result is a fascinating and wide-ranging survey of one of the most internationally renowned institutions in Britain.

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DAVID M. WILSON

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PREFACE

To write a history of an institution of which one was once the head is not an enterprise to be undertaken lightly. It has, however, been a rewarding experience and one that I enjoyed enormously. I am not an historian, so help was needed on a massive scale and it is a pleasure to acknowledge that help here.

A great deal of this book was written in libraries, but I am particularly grateful to Sarah Dodgson and her staff in the library of the Athenæum, with its remarkable collection of books of and on the nineteenth century, who looked after me with patience and kindness. The staff of the British Library, the University Library Cambridge, the London Library, the Niedersächsischen Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Göttingen, and the Library of University College London were unfailingly courteous. Helen Burton of Keele University Library and Gaye Blake-Roberts and Lynn Miller of the Wedgwood Museum helped me in matters to do with Townley and Wedgwood. Jørgen Jensen of the National Museum, Copenhagen, answered my questions about P.-O. Brøndsted and Arthur MacGregor of the Ashmolean Museum helped me with John Evans. Richard Edgcumbe of the Victoria and Albert Museum gave me useful information about the material brought back from the Abyssinian campaign; Signe Weill of the Aabenraa Museum discussed north German museums with me, John Hurst helped me with medieval pottery, Barbara Watterson helped with Egypt and Dick Shannon provided me with historical references.

My ex-colleagues in the Museum were incredibly considerate. Many of them read passages of this book in draft, others answered importunate queries and provided me with references and photocopies. I must, therefore, warmly acknowledge help received from Sheridan Bowman, Andrew Burnett, John Cherry, Brian Cook, John Curtis, Aileen Dawson, Antony Griffiths, Margaret Hall, Harry James, Bob Knox, Christopher Liddle, Terence Mitchell, Andrew Oddy, Jane Portal, Venetia Porter, the late Tim Potter, Tony Spence, Susan Walker and Leslie Webster. Ian Jenkins was a tower of strength in relation to the classical collections and their display, while John Mack read a number of chapters and strengthened my knowledge of the intellectual history of the nineteenth century. Joanna Bowring, of the Museum's central library, provided me with printed material, old and new, with immense courtesy and alacrity. Thomas Carlyle lamented, in compiling his edition of the letters and speeches of Oliver Cromwell, of the 'shoreless lakes' of unsorted documents. The Museum is another example of that genre – there is paper without limit – and

without the constant help of the Museum's archivists this book could not have been attempted. Janet Wallace helped me initially, but I am deeply grateful to her successor, Christopher Date, and his assistant, Gary Thorn, who went to endless trouble when I was in semi-despair. Christopher also read the whole book in draft and sorted out many inconsistencies. Glennis Hoggarth and Christine Lawrence provided me with photocopies, files, keys and coffee and eased my path considerably. Elisabeth Ingles, my editor, and Teresa Francis of the British Museum Press were constantly helpful and courteous, saving me from much error and occasional hubris.

Else Roesdahl read the whole book in its roughest first-draft stage and saved me from many errors and inconsistencies. She also pointed to elements which would be unfamiliar to a foreign reader (this book is after all aimed at an international audience) and made me explain them (this is why I have tried not to use acronyms – although I have failed twice!). This is not the first time she has provided me with such help, and I would like to assure her that I am deeply appreciative. Philip Harris, historian of the British Library, read the whole text in draft and helped me in many other ways from his deep knowledge of both the Museum and the Library. My successor, Robert Anderson, and the Chairman of the Museum's Trustees, Graham C. Greene, read the manuscript in draft and provided me with much needed insight. It is almost a literary formula to thank one's wife, but my thanks are sincere. Only I can measure her support; not only did she read drafts, she put up with constant absences, irritable interludes and pleas for help; my gratitude is boundless.

It is, however, my erstwhile assistant, Marjorie Caygill, who deserves my deepest thanks. She should have written this book, as she has written so much about various aspects of the Museum's history; but she is at present far too busy in the Museum's service. No query was too small, no trouble too great. When I needed a reference she produced it immediately from her enigmatic filing system; she fed me with information, transcripts from manuscript sources, lists, obscure references and anecdotes by the score. She compiled the appendix which lists the staff and read the whole book in draft, commenting liberally. Much of this book was researched from a cubby-hole next to her office and I could shout questions at her, which she would answer with gay abandon. Thank you, Marjorie!

David M. Wilson
Castletown, Isle of Man
November 2001

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the British Museum, the oldest and greatest publicly funded museum in the world. It is the story of the collections, the buildings that house them, and the people who have administered and curated them through two hundred and fifty years. It is above all the story of the curators who have shaped the collections and made them available to the public and to scholars; who have reflected or created the collecting taste of their own time; who at their best formed collections long before others saw the value of the material they were accumulating. It chronicles the developing and sometimes deteriorating relationships with government and an almost chronic lack of financial support from the Treasury. It is the story of trustees, directors and curators who fought battles, publicly or discreetly, to acquire, publish and display material to illustrate the whole history of mankind. Finally, it details the developing and generally supportive relationship with its public – scholarly and popular, national and international.

The purpose of this book is to celebrate the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the British Museum. This is of course not the first history of the Museum but, with the exception of an excellent small book by Marjorie Caygill,¹ all other formal histories have been written by librarians. Even the best of them, Edward Miller's brilliant *That noble cabinet*,² takes too bibliocentric a view of the institution. This book is intended to redress that balance by following the thread of what is now the Museum from its origin to the present day.

As the Museum faced its anniversary in 2003, there were discussions as to how the milestone should be celebrated. The commitment to publish this book makes clear that in the Museum's history lies its present and its future. What it did in the past has shaped what it must do today, and it is proper to examine its past in order to understand not only where it has come from, but where it is going. The Museum's *raison d'être* is to illuminate and explain the past of the whole world through material culture; it must, therefore, illuminate and explain its own past, for it has been a formidable element in the universal cultural history of the last two and a half centuries.

The Museum founded in 1753 is still discernible in the Museum of 2003. The library and natural history departments have been split from the main stem, but flourish as independent institutions, continuing the tradition, shaped in the European Enlightenment, of a universalist approach to knowledge that encouraged the foundation of the Museum. The



history of the two separated institutions, the Natural History Museum and the British Library, has been told more than competently elsewhere,³ and concerns this book only in so far as it impinges on the main story.

The Museum could well have developed in other ways. It could also have functioned as a national gallery of painting. In its early days it collected paintings and could have brought within its walls the national picture collection; indeed, one of the founding collections of the National Gallery – that of Sir George Beaumont – was given to the Museum in 1823. By a number of accidents the National Gallery was founded in the following year and for a number of years after was in some respects run by the British Museum Trustees, who occasionally met in Trafalgar Square and who, until well into the middle of the nineteenth century, still claimed ownership of more than fifty of the Gallery's paintings. In related fashion the Museum from its foundation haphazardly collected historical portraits. In 1856 the National Portrait Gallery was created and a few years later, recognizing an illogical position, the Museum transferred its collection of painted portraits to the new institution. Thus the location of the national collection of paintings was satisfactorily settled. The problem of the Department of Prints and Drawings remained. It seemed to many to have an anomalous position within the British Museum structure, and indeed in 1887 there was a half-hearted attempt to transfer its Old Master drawings to the National Gallery. But the Old Masters are only a small element in its diverse collections, which embrace everything from Michelangelo to cigarette cards; the Department's collections, consequently, fit better with the Museum's universal outlook.

The foundation of the South Kensington (now the Victoria and Albert) Museum in 1852 was a crucial element in shaping the British Museum. Established in the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851, in its first rather muddled incarnation it reflected in its collections the material shown there – everything from food to machinery. Its philosophy was based on the education provided by the government's School of Design and carried through by the driving force of the Great Exhibition, Henry Cole. Cole and a number of colleagues bought what they considered the most important material from the Great Exhibition and displayed in Marlborough House, from which it was to move in 1857 to South Kensington. Cole was omnivorous and built up a major collection in a very short time.

At that period, although a Royal Commission had urged the establishment of a section of the British Museum to deal with national antiquities, there was a strong feeling in the Museum that the future of its Department of Antiquities lay with artefacts from the classical world and with the newly emerging treasures of Egypt and the Levant. The proponents of this idea would happily have moved all other antiquities to South Kensington and were not slow to say so to official committees of enquiry. In 1854 the sale of the Bernal Collection of decorative art of the medieval period and the Renaissance allowed for co-operation between Cole's newly founded institution and the British Museum. A government grant was given to buy at the sale and a killing was made by both institutions; this was a signal that the British Museum had interests outside the ancient Mediterranean basin and that the South Kensington Museum had a brief to collect material from the past. Although Cole was often out of sympathy with the British Museum, he had a warm relationship with some members of staff and between them they managed to work out a series of *ad hoc* arrangements that established the unofficial briefs of both institutions. The British Museum was to collect on an historical and cultural basis and the South

Kensington Museum was to build a collection based on the history of design and applied art. In 1873 the government floated a lunatic proposal to amalgamate the two museums, but this very properly came to nothing. Although there were from time to time muddles, particularly on the South Kensington side, the distinction that was evolved in the middle of the nineteenth century survives to this day.

Each generation makes its own contribution to the Museum and it is often the actions of individuals that change its course or consolidate its strengths. In the decades at the turn of the eighteenth century it was a Trustee, the tyrannical Sir Joseph Banks, who strengthened the Museum's scientific work and fought for the institution in the corridors of power. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the Swiss-born Principal Librarian (as the Director was then called), Joseph Planta, liberalized the regime and in practical ways encouraged the staff to publish the collections. To librarians Antonio Panizzi is simply the best Principal Librarian the Museum has ever seen, the man who tidied up the copyright laws, masterminded the building of the Reading Room, raised the book-purchasing grant to realistic levels and battled for his vision of the catalogue. Hawkins, Newton, Madden, Birch and Franks were the academic heroes of the nineteenth century to the antiquities departments; the greatest of these was Franks, who was as innovative in his scholarship as he was aggressive in his collecting and generous in his giving.

In the twentieth century, because of corporate memory, judgement is less sure. Sir George Hill vies with Sir Frederic Kenyon as scholar-director, while Campbell Dodgson, Keeper of Prints and Drawings and benefactor, arguably the most significant figure in the first half of the century, attains that position because he was backed by a remarkable group of colleagues. This is not to say that others did not contribute on a grand scale to the strength of the Museum as conciliators or innovative scholars, or that some few did not do positive harm through inertia or tunnel vision. At all times, however, the curators in the Museum were professionals, and for more than a hundred and fifty years – on the humanities side at least – they were among the very few professionals in the country. Until well into the twentieth century there were few professional archaeologists and even fewer art historians. Their specialities only gradually evolved as taught subjects in the universities; consequently, until the explosion of interest in them after the Second World War and the expansion of the number of universities, the 'experts at the British Museum' were the real professionals to whom many automatically turned for information.

For this reason I have paid a good deal of attention to the middle years of the nineteenth century, when the academic influence of the curators of the antiquities departments was in national and international terms at its strongest and most innovative. It was also a period when the collections increased almost exponentially, a period when government money was made available for the purchase of objects, although money for buildings was only grudgingly delivered. The first half of the twentieth century also saw much change as the staff became even more professional, and became more involved nationally in the development of their various subjects. It has been most difficult to write of my own period as Director, and even more difficult to write of the last ten years, which have seen many changes. Chapter 8 should therefore be considered as an essay, unavoidably biased, but communicating, I trust, enthusiasm for an institution which since its foundation has been much loved by those who have worked there, even if they have sometimes grumbled about personalities and conditions.



Chapter I

BEGINNINGS

1753-9

You will scarce guess how I employ my time; chiefly at present in the guardianship of embryos and cockleshells. Sir Hans Sloane is dead, and has made me one of the trustees of his museum, which is to be offered for twenty thousand pounds to the King, the Parliament, the Royal Academies of Petersburg, Berlin, Paris and Madrid. He valued it at fourscore thousand and so would anybody who loves hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese! It is a rent charge to keep the foetuses in spirits! You may think that those, who think money the most valuable of all curiosities, will not be purchasers. The King has excused himself, saying that he did not believe that there are twenty thousand pounds in the treasury. We are a charming, wise set, all philosophers, botanists, antiquarians and mathematicians; and adjourned our first meeting because Lord Macclesfield, our chairman, was engaged to a party for finding out the longitude. One of our number is a Moravian, who signs himself Henry XXVIII, Count de Reus. The Moravians have settled a colony at Chelsea in Sir Hans's neighbourhood, and I believe he intended to beg Count Henry XXVIII's skeleton for his museum.

Thus Horace Walpole to Horace Mann on 14 February 1753, just over a month after Sloane's death.¹

Sir Hans Sloane

The story of Sir Hans Sloane (pl. 1) has been often told and need only concern us in outline;² but concern us it must, as his will was the document that triggered the foundation of the British Museum. He was born in modest circumstances at Killyleagh, Co. Down, in 1660, the seventh son of the agent of Lord Clandeboy (later Earl of Clanbrassill), to whom he was probably related.³ It was this connection which presumably gave a start to Hans and his brother William, both of whom, through influence and their own energies, became seriously wealthy. At the age of nineteen he moved to London and for four years studied to become a physician at the Apothecaries' Hall. He also pursued a growing interest in botany at the Chelsea Physic Garden and was taken up by the distinguished natural scientists John Ray and Robert Boyle. There was clearly enough money available for him to be able to extend his studies through travel. He spent three months in Paris; he took the degree of Doctor of Physic in France at the University of Orange in 1683 by disputation,

and then went to the University of Montpellier (where Ray and Boyle had preceded him) and continued his study of botany, medicine and anatomy. His physical appearance at this time is described in the records of his university as, 'of medium height, hair very short, light chestnut, face rather long and grave, marked with small-pox'.⁴ He returned to London in May 1684 and took up the practice of medicine. Clearly a personable and clever young man, he made friends easily and quickly became a Fellow of the Royal Society (1685) and of the College of Physicians (1687). He might easily have settled immediately into the life of a prosperous and fashionable doctor, but adventure came first in the form of an opportunity to travel to Jamaica as the personal physician to the Governor, the second Duke of Albemarle. Sloane was attracted to this opening for scientific reasons. Writing to John Ray he confessed that he wished to investigate the botanical resources of the island as a source of medicinal drugs, as well as in more general terms.

By the time the party reached Jamaica in December 1687, they had already called at Madeira, the Canaries, Barbados and many islands of the West Indies. Throughout the voyage Sloane made observations and collected specimens, both animal and botanical, as he did for the fifteen months of his residence in Jamaica before the death of the Governor. He returned to England with the embalmed body of his patient in May 1689. Clearly not blamed for the duke's death, Sloane became personal physician to his widow for four years before setting up practice on his own account in fashionable Bloomsbury. In 1695 he married money in the form of the widow of Fulk Rose of Jamaica, who was also co-heiress of her father John Langley, a London alderman. They set up house in what is now 3 Bloomsbury Place, two hundred metres from the building which became the British Museum.⁵ His wife died in 1724.

Sloane was not simply a fashionable physician; in 1719 he became President of the College of Physicians and in 1727 succeeded Newton as President of the Royal Society. He was a physician to the royal household and attended Queen Anne on her deathbed, he was Physician General to the Army for five years from 1722 and a governor (and benefactor) of most of the London hospitals. He was created a baronet in 1716. He was an innovative doctor, promoting the introduction of inoculation and popularizing the use of quinine. He made a fortune from investment in the raw material from which this was distilled and also from the promotion of milk chocolate (his recipe was used by Cadbury until 1885).⁶ Amidst all his other duties he continued his scientific work, publishing papers in the *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society* and, in 1696, his great work on the botany of Jamaica, *Catalogus plantarum*. In 1707 he published the first volume of a major work entitled *Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica...*, which, with the second volume (published in 1725), was a definitive account of the natural history of this part of the world. His work was much admired, both in England and abroad, receiving praise from such diverse authorities as John Ray, John Locke and the *Journal des sçavans*. It must, however, be recognized that Sloane was writing about, and collecting, natural history in the period immediately preceding the establishment of the systematized taxonomy of Linnaeus. Consequently his methods seem to the modern scholar curiously old-fashioned and rooted in the past.

In 1712 Sloane bought the manor of Chelsea from the last Viscount Newhaven (the early sixteenth-century manor house was pulled down in 1760) and, while continuing to live in Bloomsbury, used it as a country retreat until the death of his wife, finally moving

there in retirement after a serious illness in 1742. Here he was the landlord of the Apothecaries' Physic Garden, which he conveyed to the Society for an annual rent of £5. In the garden was erected a statue by Rysbrack of Sloane in his robes as President of the College of Physicians. It stood there until it was moved (much eroded) to the British Museum in 1985. Sir Hans died at Chelsea on 11 January 1753 and was buried a week later in the churchyard of Chelsea Old Church. A splendid monument by Joseph Wilton was erected in 1763 over his grave – it still survives.

Sloane was a friendly man, much esteemed by his associates, who included some of the greatest thinkers of his day. Patrick Blair wrote of him 'You will find him very affable and free'; while Birch described his person as 'tall and graceful, his behaviour free, open and engaging, and his conversation cheerful and communicative'.⁷ He was the epitome of the rising middle classes of the eighteenth century and perfectly reflected the spirit of the Enlightenment rather than the dying fall of the Renaissance, to which he is sometimes ascribed.⁸ He was a professional, trained professionally as a physician – a scientist who would merit the French description *savant*. He was not, as Voltaire described so many of his contemporary members of the Royal Society, an amateur.⁹ As Secretary and then President of the Royal Society, he was what would nowadays be called an academic administrator; but he was more than that, he was a true – if not a great – scholar and a considerable polymath who assembled one of the greatest universal collections ever made by one man. In his professional life he not only himself practised medicine free of charge for the poor, but also encouraged others of his profession to do the same. Heartfelt tributes to him as a medical practitioner may be found; few are more illuminating than those of the poor scholar and great Saxonist Humfrey Wanley, who was for a short time employed as a cataloguer of Sloane's library.¹⁰

What is perhaps the most balanced tribute to him comes from the pen of one of his contemporaries and a trustee of his will, the antiquary William Stukeley, which chimes with more modern estimates:

Sr Hans Sloane is an instance of the great power of industry which can advance a man to a considerable height in the worlds esteem with moderate parts & learning. industry may be said to have raised Sr. Hans... [He] has had this piece of luck too, that being a Vertuoso has made his fortune which generally ruins others. Indeed the whole business of his life has been a continued series of the greatest vigilance over his own interest, & all the friendships he ever makes are to himself. the same industry has made him perfect master of the knowledg of his immense collections... & may be said to be the greatest that was ever a private mans possession... he has no faculty of speaking, either fluently or eloquently, especially before any number of people, & and he do's it with great timidity. his most commendabl quality is his love for natural learning, & the pains he takes to promote it.¹¹

The broad international spread of his interests and contacts is patent. This first emerges with his studies in France and his adventures in the West Indies. The contacts he made in these countries stood him in good stead, but as he became an established figure in the world of science (particularly through his offices in the Royal Society) he came into contact with many other international scholars. Many of them visited Sloane, among them Carl von Linné (the Swedish botanist Linnaeus) to whom he was introduced in 1736 by the Leiden botanist, chemist and physician Herman Boerhaave.¹² As he grew older and more

famous, anybody who was anybody had to visit him – everybody from Voltaire to Handel to Franklin (who sold him an asbestos purse which is still in the collections of the Natural History Museum),¹³ not to mention British and foreign royalty. He became a member of foreign academies – those of France, Prussia, St Petersburg, Madrid and Göttingen – and through such honours he made more contacts. Little is known of his linguistic ability, although von Uffenbach commented upon his facility in French and Nickson reckons that he necessarily read Latin (he published a book in this language, and probably disputed for his degree in it), had some Greek, probably read German, Dutch and Italian, and perhaps Spanish and Portuguese.¹⁴ He collected books and manuscripts in languages far beyond his linguistic capabilities. His interests were as broad as those of any man of his period, as is demonstrated by the eclectic nature of both his collections and his publications. He was one of the makers of Enlightenment. Roy Porter puts him in the ‘first team’ of the English enlightenment.¹⁵ The first volume of Diderot’s great *Encyclopédie* was published in 1751, just before Sloane’s death; he could only have approved of it. The universalist approach to knowledge exhibited by the philosophes was a reflection of Sloane’s lifelong work with the animate and inanimate, sharpened by his sympathy and friendship with John Locke. He belonged to an age which, in the words of Isaiah Berlin, ‘is perhaps the last period in the history of Western Europe when human omniscience was thought to be an achievable goal’.¹⁶ It was this aspiration to universalism that informed Sloane’s collecting and thereby shaped the British Museum. It is this idea that still differentiates the Museum from the great ‘art’ museums of the nineteenth century with which it is often in ignorance lumped together.

Sloane’s Collections

Sloane’s collections have recently been reviewed in some detail and with vast critical apparatus by a group of scholars led by Arthur MacGregor.¹⁷ Importantly, Sloane collected not only for himself, but also for the whole scholarly world. The curious were made welcome in his collections and scholars were encouraged to use them in pursuit of their studies. To this end he not only catalogued the collections himself, but also employed cataloguers to assist him.¹⁸ By the time of his death it was patent that the collections needed to be saved for the good of the scholarly community; perhaps it was for this reason that the trustees of his will had such an easy ride.

In their earliest form Sloane’s collections concentrated on natural history and this remained at the centre of his interest:

He buys for Topham, Drawings and Designs,
For Pembroke, Statues, dirty Gods and Coins;
Rare Monkish manuscripts for Hearne alone,
And Books for Mead and butterflies for Sloane

quipped Pope of the architect Earl of Burlington.¹⁹ John Evelyn (who consulted Sloane professionally and did business with him in the Royal Society) visited him on 16 April 1691 and provides one of the earliest descriptions of his collection:

I went to see Dr. Sloane's Curiosities, being an universal Collection of the natural productions of Jamaica consisting of Plants, Coralls, Minerals, Earth, shells, animals, Insects &c: collected by him with great Judgement, several folios of Dried plants & one which had about 80: severall sorts of Fernes & another of Grasses: &c: The Jamaica pepper in branch, leaves and flowers, fruits &c: with his Journal, & other Philosophical & naturall discourses & observations is indeede very extraordinary and Copious, sufficient to furnish an excellent History of that Iland, to which I encouraged him, & exceedingly approved his Industry.²⁰

No purchased 'dirty gods and coins' here. Sloane was no magpie, but a selective collector, primarily of natural history, who planned his acquisitions with some care. Clearly not all his material was collected with his own hands; rather he set out to improve his collection in various ways. As he grew wealthier he would buy whole collections as well as individual items. Other collections were given to him. His first major acquisition (one of the most important he made) was a legacy, the collection of an old friend whom he had first met at Montpellier, William Courten, who died in 1702.²¹ While this collection included natural history specimens, clearly of great interest to Sloane, it was more famous for its antiquities, coins and medals. Courten's collection was valued at some £50,000 (in 1686 Evelyn had estimated its value at £8,000, so it had obviously grown considerably in sixteen years) and it was left to Sloane with his residual estate on condition that he paid legacies to the amount of £2,500 and that he kept the collection 'intire'.²²

Most of the collections Sloane acquired, chiefly through purchase, were of natural history; but some, like Courten's, included what were for a long time known in the Museum as 'artificial productions' (i.e. man-made objects). Few of the artificial productions were individually of supreme importance; in total, however, they made up a splendid and important collection and one that would not ultimately be overshadowed by the books, the manuscripts or the natural history collections as the British Museum developed. A remarkable number of the 'artificial' items still exist.

The collection of orientalia formed by Engelbert Kaempfer, the German physician who had been medical officer of the Dutch East India Company in Nagasaki in 1690–2, was perhaps the most outstanding of Sloane's collections not exclusively taken from the natural world. It included Japanese prints, paintings and lacquer, Turkish and Persian bazaar paintings and Chinese prints, paintings and various other objects.²³ Islamic items included a collection of seals and amulets and the famous and beautiful astrolabe, made in Persia for Shah Sultan Husayn, the Safavid ruler, in 1712/13.²⁴ From disparate sources Sloane amassed a collection of well over 20,000 coins and medals, which was already by 1721/2 important enough to be singled out by Stukeley as a major source in his attempt to make a 'Compleat description and history of all the Coyns relating to Great Britain from the Earliest times to our own'.²⁵ It is clear from the comments of his contemporaries that this part of his collection had a broader range than any in the country.

Sloane's ethnographic collection was perhaps his most remarkable 'artificial' assemblage. It was not only comparatively large (well into the hundreds), but it contained many unique items, some derived from first-time contact with indigenous peoples.²⁶ Sloane collected through a network of acquaintances who worked overseas or amassed material at home. Thus Mark Catesby, an artist and naturalist, who worked in Virginia as a sponsored observer and recorder, sent both botanical specimens and artefacts home to Sloane and other collectors – some of his material even fell into the hands of pirates on its

way and was recaptured!²⁷ Henry Elking, who sent him Inuit material from Greenland, was probably a trader in whale oil and other arctic products.²⁸ Often items came into the collection as incidental appendices to natural history collecting, such as the Chinese compass sent in 1701 to Sloane from Chusan by James Cunningham (a Scottish doctor working for the East India Company) – ‘200 botanical specimens and a compass’.²⁹ He bought from other collectors and from their heirs. In 1718 he paid £4,000 for James Petiver’s collection, which included some hundred objects other than items of natural history, some of which may be identified by means of illustrated plates published during the collector’s lifetime.³⁰ Many of the artefacts collected by Sloane from his correspondents abroad were made of materials in which he was, as a naturalist, interested – bark cloth, shoes, baskets, an Indian hat of cane, many semi-precious carved stones and so on. Some are of enormous interest historically. An Asante drum, for example, made of West African woods, said to have been collected in Virginia, may well, if this is true, have been taken there on a slave ship.³¹

Classical antiquities, much collected by gentlemen on the Grand Tour, apparently interested Sloane little. Ian Jenkins, who has examined the material, says of him, ‘Sloane... appears to have had no more interest in antiquities, his own included, than he did in an account in his possession of maggots taken out of a man’s ear on 27 August 1702 by J. Hare, Vicar of Cardington, Bedford’.³² This is a little unfair, for Sloane was not unwilling to purchase classical antiquities – although on a small scale. Those he did acquire largely came incidentally with other collections. Most ultimately came from two Italian sources, Cardinal Gualtieri and the Abbé Sterbini; others came from the collections of John Kemp and the Soranzo family of Venice. Others came singly, as for example from the cabinet of the Neapolitan lawyer Giuseppe Valetta. If Sloane was simply a magpie in this field, he did at least collect within it, and it is fortunate that later in the century others built on the classical collections which he had (possibly accidentally) founded.

Sloane, like many collectors of the period, owned a few unremarkable Egyptian pieces, although some of them have some historical interest in that seventeenth-century English travellers had acquired them.³³ Similarly, his collection of prehistoric and provincial Roman antiquities is unremarkable but historically interesting. In the main he was interested in material of archaeological importance. Such, for example, was the Acheulian (Upper Palaeolithic) hand-axe found with some mammoth tusks and bones during gravel digging in Gray’s Inn Lane, London, in 1696. This was thought to be a British weapon which had been used to kill an imported Roman elephant. While it was recognized as an artefact, the idea that this was really an extremely ancient implement would not fit with the then accepted date for the Creation of the year 4004 BC.³⁴ It was not until 1797 that John Frere boldly wrote of some similar implements from Hoxne, Suffolk, that ‘the situation in which these weapons were found may tempt us to refer them to a very remote period indeed; even beyond that of this present world’.³⁵ Knowledge of prehistoric artefacts was nugatory at this period. Sloane recognized flint arrowheads for what they were, but was not so sure about stone axe-heads, which he says were ‘called by some thunder stones’. Bronze Age implements were often identified as Roman, but the Roman material was rather better described and recognized. What is interesting, however, is that Sloane collected these objects and described them objectively and often with insight. The present-day archaeologist is happy to look at his collections and use them in his researches.