Notes and reviews

‘A continuous process of reinterpretation’

The challenge of the universal and rational museum

Neil G.W. Curtis

In July 2003, the University of Aberdeen’s Marischal Museum repatriated a head-dress to representatives of the Blood Tribe/Kainai Nation of Alberta, Canada (Curtis, 2005). At about the same time as the University began considering the request in November 2002, the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums was published (British Museum, 2003), articulating the view that international museum collections have a special value that would be damaged by repatriation. Can these two approaches be reconciled?

The Declaration is a useful document, eloquently setting out the mission of these great museums. It opens with a statement that the ‘illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged’. This is hardly radical; one would hardly expect such institutions to promote illegal activity! It is perhaps more striking that it does not advocate that this group of museums should have higher ethical standards than the legal minimum. This would include following the 1970 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Convention (UNESCO, 1970) or the UNIDROIT: International Institute for the Unification of Private Law convention (UNIDROIT, 1995) that many other museums incorporate into their collecting policies, even though the conventions have not been adopted by government. The Declaration then goes on to contrast even this minimal constraint on their collecting activities with historical practices that are described as ‘reflective’ of earlier ‘sensibilities and values’. Rather than indicating that some of these practices would be condemned were they to occur today, items are neutrally described as having been acquired by ‘purchase, gift, or partage’. The first two terms describe means by which a museum can gain legal title to an object: ‘partage’ is an obscure term that does not appear in most dictionaries. One of the few references is in the 2nd edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), in which it is defined as ‘the action of dividing; division; partition; esp. division into shares’ (OED: 1989). Presumably the authors had in mind the way in which excavation assemblages have sometimes been shared between museums. Alternatively, partage could be read as referring to the times when objects were ‘parted’ from their owners in dubious circumstances, including looting and theft. Whatever the meaning of ‘partage’, such practices are not discussed openly, with material described apparently neutrally as ‘displaced from their original source’. The overall claim of the two opening paragraphs is thus the assertion ipso facto that the signatory museums have absolute legal title to all objects in their care, and that any criticism of the circumstances of acquisition is merely an anachronistic curiosity.

Despite an acknowledgment that ‘we are equally sensitive to the subject of a work’s original context’, the heart of the Declaration is therefore its claim that the importance of items now in museums’ collections lies in their being, and remaining, in the collections of these museums. The right of these museums is then underlined by the claim that they serve all of humanity, in contrast to repatriation,
which is seen as something that would ‘narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted’. As Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, said, ‘the diminishing of collections such as these would be a great loss to the world’s cultural heritage’ (British Museum, 2003).

**REACTIONS TO THE DECLARATION**

The Declaration has its origin in a meeting of a group known as the International Organisers of Large-Scale Exhibitions in October 2002, which decided to issue a statement in response to political pressure by the Greek Government for the repatriation of the Parthenon sculptures from the British Museum (Bailey, 2003). Rather than focusing solely on that one case, the group decided to make a statement that emphasized ‘the importance of the context which a great museum offers’ (Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, quoted in Bailey, 2003). While the list of signatories appears unambiguous, doubt has persisted as to whether it was actually signed by the British Museum (Museums Journal, 2003: 14). Given that the British Museum has published the Declaration on its website (British Museum, 2003), it is clear that the British Museum is, at the very least, grateful for the support offered by other museums.

Rather than leading to a discussion about the social role of these large museums, it was the underlying argument against repatriation that attracted most publicity in the months after its publication. In Australia, the Sydney Morning Herald titled its report ‘Top museums unite to fight Aboriginal claims’ (Fray and Moses, 2003), while Museums Australia (Museums Australia, 2003) described it as an ‘anti-restitution stand’. Even UNESCO was critical of the Declaration, reporting the statement by ICOM, the International Council on Museums, that ‘repatriation of objects is an issue that should be very carefully dealt with. Wise and thoughtful judgment is necessary. Unnecessarily strong judgments or declarations should in any case be avoided’ (UNESCO, 2003: 3). Maurice Davies, Director of the UK’s Museums Association described it as ‘a very crude statement that doesn’t give credit to the subtlety of thought that many museums give this issue’ (Morris, 2003a: 8). Other comment was less even-tempered, with Greekworks (2002) equating universal museums with ‘a looter’s cache’ and Deport Art (2002) claiming that ‘the timing of the “Declaration” seems too strangely chronologically coincidental with the impending war on Iraq’ and that it was a pre-emptive justification for the looting of artefacts.

While the actions of the British Museum in Iraq counter such accusations, it is easy to understand why they could be believed. Unfortunately, what could have been the beginning of a thoughtful debate has become swamped by what seems to have been a politically naïve rearguard action to hang onto the Parthenon sculptures. The Declaration can, however, still be used as a means to explore the role of self-styled great museums today.

**THE LANGUAGE OF THE DECLARATION**

While most of the reactions have focused on the Declaration as an argument against repatriation, its language reveals much more about the self-perception of these museums. There is, of course, an emphasis on objects rather than other aspects of the cultural world (such as ‘archaeological, artistic and ethnic objects’, ‘objects’ and ‘monumental works’, ‘artfacts’ and ‘sculpture’) and their acquisition by museums as a formal and permanent act (such as ‘acquired’, ‘installed’ and ‘accession’, ‘part of museum collections’, ‘part of the heritage of the nations which house them’ as well as ‘purchase, gift, or partage’).

The appreciation of objects as ‘Art’ is highlighted throughout the Declaration. This is most clearly seen in the list of signatory museums that (apart from the British Museum) are museums of art, rather than archaeology or anthropology. It is also emphasized by the use of adjectives such as ‘artistic’ and ‘aesthetic’ when describing items in museums. While perhaps unintended, the frequent use of metaphors of light and vision is also a striking feature of the Declaration. Examples include ‘reflective’, ‘viewed in the light’, ‘illustration’ and ‘focus’. Alongside the emphasis on Art, this emphasizes the pre-eminence of visual approaches in Western culture. In contrast, it is striking that Marischal Museum’s decision to repatriate the head-dress was based on the recognition that it was a sacred item, which included an agreement not to commission a replica or to publish photographs of the head-dress, thus placing an emphasis on its non-visual aspects. Although this restricted media coverage, such as the BBC’s decision only to broadcast
the repatriation ceremony on radio when they discovered that they could not film it, the acceptance of these restrictions was key to the good relationships that have developed between the museum and the Kainai.

While the word ‘heritage’ occurs only once in the Declaration, the idea of valuable objects that have been inherited from past generations occurs frequently. It is therefore hardly surprising to see ‘classical Greece’ and ‘ancient civilizations’ discussed rather than archaeological finds from excavations of medieval towns or 19th century ethnographic collections. Instead it is the history of the museums themselves that is emphasized as an important heritage through the discussion of ‘the objects and monumental works that were installed decades or even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America’ or ‘the centuries-long history of appreciation of Greek art’. I have argued elsewhere (Curtis, 2003a) that while Western secular culture puts little faith in the sacred, ‘art’ and ‘heritage’ are terms that carry some of its intangible power. As well as the language of the Declaration, the sacred aspect of museums is also clearly seen in the temple-like architecture of some of the signatory museums and the ways in which they function as sacred places for Western elite culture.

It is striking that another powerful justification for museums’ care of material, that they are a scientific resource, is entirely absent from the Declaration. This is perhaps surprising, given the importance of scientific analysis of items in their collections by museums such as the British Museum (e.g. Rohl and Needham, 1998). It is, however, indicative of the gulf between the two cultures of art and science that is a widely acknowledged feature of Western society (Snow, 1959) and which is seen in the absence of any museums of science or natural history from the list of signatories. The pervasiveness of this divide is also seen in the recent Report of the Working Party on Human Remains in England (Working Group on Human Remains in Museum Collections, 2003), which promotes the repatriation of the remains of human bodies to their descendents, but which contains a minority report from the only scientist on the working party, Neil Chalmers, Director of the Natural History Museum in London, who argued that the report gave inadequate consideration to the value of scientific research.

CLASSICAL GREEK SCULPTURE AND THE EUROPEAN WORLD

It is perhaps the unthinking elision of Western elite culture with ideas of the universal that is the most perturbing aspect of the Declaration, most clearly seen in the claim that the sculpture of Ancient Greece is of significance to ‘mankind as a whole’. The history by which Greek sculpture came to have the high value accorded it is rich, complex and specific, with its origins in the European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. As Rietbergen puts it (1998: 180), ‘the renewed acquaintance with classical culture was intensified greatly when many members of the cultural elite of the Byzantine Empire fled the Balkans and ancient Greece in the face of the Turkish threat’. The origins of the modern museum have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill, 1992), but three important points need emphasis: the role of classical antiquities in the development of modern European identity, the sense of a threat from Turkish and Islamic civilization and the role of museums in structuring and presenting this knowledge. In a similar way to the links developed between Renaissance Europe and the Classical past, the importance of its Classical heritage developed in Greece from the 18th century such that today ‘antiquity plays a central role in modern Greek society’ (Hamilakis, 2000: 57). It is also worth noting that in both 15th century Europe and 19th century Greece opposition to Islamic civilization has been a key factor in the recognition of the importance of the classical past. The Declaration recognizes the role of museums in fostering the importance of Greek sculpture, commenting that ‘its accession into the collections of public museums throughout the world marked the significance of Greek sculpture’, but fails to recognize the historically specific circumstances. While it can be argued that in the 18th century there was a stronger identification with Ancient Greece among well-educated western Europeans than among their counterparts in Greece, this is not the case today. Perhaps western European museums were the most caring home for ancient Greek sculpture in the 19th century; with the demise of Greek in school and university education this argument is no longer valid.

Like the Declaration, the new King’s Library development in the British Museum tries to follow an
Enlightenment humanistic and comparative approach to interpretation (Pes, 2004) and to offer that as an ideal for today’s ‘universal’ museums. The problem is that the Enlightenment origin of museum collections is inseparable from the exploration and exploitation of the New World, just as ‘archaeology and anthropology are the outcomes of colonialism’ (Gosden, 1999: 16). Developing a humanistic and comparative approach for museums today needs to deal with contemporary cultural concerns and ethics, not those of the Enlightenment shorn of its darker context. With all its signatories from Europe and North America and the certainty of its approach, however, the Declaration clearly follows the latter approach, employing an abstract language that claims to be devoid of political dissension, such as ‘universal’, ‘world’, ‘all visitors’ and ‘the people of every nation’, just as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are being used in Iraq. Only if the European Enlightenment tradition is seen as the apogee of human culture is it possible to see ancient Greek sculpture as being of significance to ‘mankind as a whole’. There are plenty of people in the world to whom ancient Greek sculpture is unimportant, other than perhaps as a symbol for the power of Euro-American culture.

‘ORIGINAL CONTEXT’ OR ‘SOURCE COMMUNITY’

Much of the opposition to the ideals of the Declaration has focused on its apparently arrogant attitude to demands for the return of sacred items to indigenous communities. The repatriation of the head-dress from Marischal Museum showed how consideration of it as a museum object or as part of a sacred bundle are fundamentally different perspectives. Rather than this having diminished the museum, it has added to the museum’s ability to interpret the material world by extending the number of perspectives that can be discussed. This approach, recognizing the plurality of viewpoints, has become an important strand of intellectual thought that offers museums many opportunities (Curtis, 2003b). While this is not the approach taken by the Declaration, neither is it adopted by most of the opposition to the Declaration who argue for the priority of the rights of source communities (e.g. in Peers and Brown, 2003).

The way in which we think about ‘source communities’ is, however, as much a product of Western culture as is the idea of the ‘universal museum’. There are two ways in which this happens. Firstly, when we talk of ‘indigenous people’ or ‘source communities’ we are contrasting them with Western culture. The danger of doing this is that the differences between these cultures are minimized, homogenizing them into an undifferentiated ‘other’. Secondly, the power of Western culture is such that indigenous people have to deal with us on our terms. Tim Ingold (2000) has shown how the ways in which Western notions of what it is to be ‘indigenous’ are rooted in a model that emphasizes linear descent from an ancestral population in a particular place. This is quite unlike the way that many indigenous people have traditionally considered their relationship to a place, being a result of their lived experiences of their environment. As people articulate their claims for land or objects now in Western hands, they are forced to do so in ways that may be incompatible with their traditional experiences, ultimately affecting their own view of themselves. The historical relationships between the people from whom something was collected and those who are claiming it today may be very complex and ambivalent, while the ‘source community’ may not be a harmonious, bounded ethnic group. This does not mean that objects should not be repatriated, but these are issues that must be confronted and discussed before meanings can be properly understood.

The argument that only certain people can properly interpret material according to their own rituals is something that applies whether we are speaking of a First Nations elder or a Western museum curator. Objects have tangled histories involving many people and meanings: makers, users, collectors, curators, etc. The power of these histories can be seen in demands for repatriation; they can also be seen in the strong links between families and museums that can continue decades after the death of the original donor. Likewise, the history of objects after acquisition by a museum can be important, such as the unprovenanced ancient Greek pot in Marischal Museum that is the type specimen for the so-called ‘Aberdeen painter’. Even if curators give up the rights to provide the sole authoritative interpretation, when judging repatriation claims or a request to restrict access they still claim the right to decide which of the meanings has precedence. The Collections for the Future enquiry initiated by the
UK's Museums Association in January 2004 is an interesting example. This has focused on the importance of 'subject networks' of museum experts to 'improve the care and interpretation of collections' (Museums Association, n.d.), emphasizing the importance of Western academic subject classifications in thinking about museums. Unlike the Declaration, this enquiry is encouraging museums to consider transferring objects to other museums and 'redistributing their collections beyond museums' (ibid.). Nonetheless, discussions have spoken of 'planned collection' and 'rationalising collections': terms that recall those of the Declaration in their apparent neutrality and dependence on the omniscience of the museums profession.

It is unfortunate that the Declaration's attempt to strike a balance between the value of an object's 'original context' and its present-day museum context is undermined by the Declaration's uncritical attitude towards the political role of museums. Museums that offer an insider's view of a culture, such as the Glenbow Museum in Alberta, which has worked with the Kainai and other Blackfoot people to devise exhibitions about and for the Blackfoot (Conaty, 2003) and many local museums throughout Europe, offer much richer perspectives. The difficulty for 'universal' museums is that such approaches are not possible with people who live thousands of miles away. Collaborative travelling exhibitions might help, while the exposition of some of the stories of collection would illuminate the historical circumstances behind the creation of museums and so challenge the idea of a single universal perspective. For example, a beaded crown worn by the Elepe of Epe is displayed as an example of African art in the African gallery of the British Museum, revealing nothing about how it was confiscated by the Governor of Lagos, Sir William MacGregor, in 1903 and allocated to the British Museum as Crown property. The records of the confiscation 'illuminate the subversion of Yoruba ritual values and their appropriation by a liberal-minded governor for colonial, capitalist ends' (Hunt, 1991: 177). Similarly the display of Benin bronzes in the same gallery pays little attention to the controversies surrounding claims for their repatriation that reveal much about 19th, 20th and 21st century Africa and its encounters with Western culture. The new Enlightenment gallery in the British Museum does start to address such issues, while the 'Collecting the World' exhibition by Charles Hunt (see http://www.abdn.ac.uk/virtualmuseum), which opened in Marischal Museum in 1995 was one of the pioneers of a historicizing approach. That exhibition focuses on the histories behind the museum's collection, contrasting the viewpoints of collectors with more recent comments by figures including Edward Said, Joseph Conrad and Ali Mazrui alongside collections of objects from various parts of the world. Telling stories in these ways offers excellent examples of the 'valid and valuable context for objects that were long ago displaced from their original source'.

CONCLUSION

The Declaration is a flawed and imperialistic document. It is also idealistic and humane, highlighting the importance of contemplating the variety of humanity, access to collections for all people and the many meanings that objects can have. The challenge for museums is to develop a real universal ideal: one that is available outwith Europe and the USA where all the signatories to the Declaration are based. Here, Neil Macgregor's belief that 'a universal museum is where the world can discover the world' (quoted in Morris, 2003b: 23) is very apposite.

The ideal universal museum would also appreciate that there are certain aspects of people's lives that are not appropriate for display. Restricting access by ethnicity, gender or other status may be appropriate for institutions, such as Aboriginal Australian 'Keeping Places' that are embedded in local culture, but not for universal museums. Instead, if something is so sacred that providing access causes deep offence, it has no place in a universal museum. The specificity of requests for repatriation probably answers the concern that museum collections will become denuded by repatriations. For example, although a shirt that had probably belonged to the last person to wear the head-dress was identified in Marischal Museum, it was not requested as it was not a sacred item. Even the creation of a museum for Greenland out of the collections of the National Museum of Denmark left a rich collection of thousands of Greenlandic items in Copenhagen (Lundebæk, 2001). There are other factors, such as the cost of repatriation and the ambassadorial function of having material in
museums around the world, which will also mean that it is unlikely that there will be many requests for the repatriation of large numbers of objects. It is essential, however, that such repatriations derive from the actual beliefs of the people making a request, not those that are the product of Western conceptions of ‘indigenous’ beliefs.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is recognizing that what we take to be ‘rational’ or ‘universal’ is a product of our own culture rather than being absolute concepts. By understanding museums in this way (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992) and by engaging with different views of the world, museums can play an important part in offering a deeper understanding of other cultures and our own, particularly the differing views of what is rational and universal. Far from narrowing the focus of museums, repatriation is therefore one of the most effective ways of answering the challenge of the Declaration that museums should ‘foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper originated in a presentation at a debate on the Universal Museum held during the 2003 Museums Association conference. I would like to thank the conference organizers for inviting me to participate and Neal Ascherson for encouraging me to publish my thoughts.

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APPENDIX

Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums

The international museum community shares the conviction that illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged. We should, however, recognize that objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era. The objects and monumental works that were installed decades and even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America were acquired under conditions that are not comparable with current ones.

Over time, objects so acquired – whether by purchase, gift, or partage – have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them. Today we are especially sensitive to the subject of a work’s original context, but we should not lose sight of the fact that museums too provide a valid and valuable context for objects that were long ago displaced from their original source.

The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums. Indeed, the sculpture of classical Greece, to take but one example, is an excellent illustration of this point and of the importance of public collecting. The centuries-long history of appreciation of Greek art began in antiquity, was renewed in Renaissance Italy, and subsequently spread through the rest of Europe and to the Americas. Its accession into the collections of public museums throughout the world marked the significance of Greek sculpture for mankind as a whole and its enduring value for the contemporary world. Moreover, the distinctly Greek aesthetic of these works appears all the more strongly as the result of their being seen and studied in direct proximity to products of other great civilizations.

Calls to repatriate objects that have belonged to museum collections for many years have become an important issue for museums. Although each case has to be judged individually, we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation. Museums are agents in the development of culture, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation. Each object contributes to that process. To narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors.

Signed by the Directors of:

The Art Institute of Chicago
Bavarian State Museum, Munich (Alte Pinakothek, Neue Pinakothek)
State Museums, Berlin
Cleveland Museum of Art
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
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Louvre Museum, Paris
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence
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Prado Museum, Madrid
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
The British Museum
The encyclopaedic museum
Enlightenment ideals, contemporary realities

A reply from
Neil MacGregor and Jonathan Williams

We heartily agree with Neil Curtis that the challenge facing museums is a continuous process of reinterpretation. The British Museum is in the middle of just such a period of re-orientation at the moment, as we ask the question every generation is obliged to ask: 'what, and whom, is the British Museum for now?'. Our answer will necessarily differ in some respects from that of previous generations, and it requires us to have an awareness of our history. From the pre-imperial to the post-colonial era, it is a history of events, some of which have become matters of intense controversy. But it is above all the history of an idea, which takes us back to the founding moment of the Museum.

The British Museum was set up by Parliament as a place of public study and learning in 1753. Based loosely on the model of ancient Alexandria, the library and museum were to embrace the literatures and artefacts of the whole world, as well as natural history. It is a monument to the British empirical tradition. Knowledge would come from the study of things and the taxonomies and insights derived from its collections have indeed changed scholarship. Funded by Parliament and open free of charge to all, the British Museum is a resounding assertion that truth is a civic virtue that the state should foster. Set up in the year after Hume was denied the Chair at the University of Glasgow because of his radical scepticism, it was a very public declaration of the right of free inquiry – perhaps easier to assert in a great cosmopolitan city with no university than in any of the university towns of 18th-century England or Scotland, where the Church sought to limit its scope.

One principal object of that free inquiry was the nature of society itself. Adam Ferguson famously argued that the a priori hypotheses of both Hobbes and Rousseau should be set aside in favour of empirical investigation based on observation and evidence carefully gathered and compared. The British Museum must by now be the largest, most widely accessible store of such evidence. Other, later a priori orthodoxies have come and gone: the role of the British Museum in shaping them and in shaping arguments to challenge them is, we would suggest, as necessary now as in Ferguson's day.

The Museum was established by Parliament as a trust, a system of governance that preserves the collections in the public domain, takes them out of the realm of commerce, and crucially puts them beyond the reach of politicians. It requires its Trustees to keep asking themselves who are the beneficiaries of their trust, and how best to discharge their obligations towards them.

In reconsidering these questions, the British Museum is working out a new definition of its responsibilities and of the meaning and purpose of its collection now. This means returning to the Museum's Enlightenment beginnings, as a place where, for the first time ever, Parliament offered the people a publicly funded opportunity to investigate for themselves the cultural complexities of the world in which they lived. This was a citizen's museum, not a royal collection. It existed for the benefit of all curious and studious persons, and you did not have to be British to benefit.

The Museum was conceived for David Hume's citizen of the world – a member of that international republic of letters which prized the shared pursuit of
truth above national particularism. In Hume’s day, the Republic was limited to the educated of Europe and America. It is now worldwide. The real challenge for the British Museum is how to serve that expanded Republic, allowing a worldwide examination of the nature of societies and cultures.

This aspiration can today be realized in ways that were inconceivable in 1753, and were only just imaginable a generation ago. This offers new solutions to the questions that face Trustees. It is clearly not enough to assume that a combination of Internet and mass travel means that everyone can either get to London or access the collections at a distance – they cannot, and this would in any case now be far too passive a position. Museums such as the British Museum must find ways to share the narratives and understandings of human culture that are embodied in the collections, by taking them to places where they have not been before, and communicating directly with the ‘people who live thousands of miles away’, whom Curtis would place beyond our reach. Museum objects can now be shown in many places and many contexts, allowing growing numbers of different readings.

This is what the British Museum has been doing with increasing vigour and in sometimes ground-breaking ways, since the advent of the travelling loan exhibition in the 1970s, when, thanks to improved packing and cheap air transport, the international circulation of objects from museum collections really took off. In the thirty years since then we have witnessed an unparalleled sharing of cultural patrimony, as museums in the developed world collaborated to bring great civilizations and great artists to new publics. Two recent examples: the British Museum’s exhibition on memory in world cultures was seen last year by over 1.3 million Japanese, while a selection from its Egyptian collection has now been seen by over 1.5 million North Americans.

This period also saw the beginnings of collaborative projects with indigenous communities in several continents, typified by the Living Arctic exhibition of 1987, which have led to decades of fruitful interchange and, which now, from Canada to New Zealand, are an integral part of the role of the Museum’s address to the collection.

In the 1990s, the British Museum sought to extend the reach of its loans. To take two examples: in 1996, a major exhibition on Ancient Mesopotamia was lent to Mexico City, and in 1997 the Museum contributed to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of India’s independence by sending an exhibition on the human form in world art to venues in New Delhi and Bombay, as it then was. Both were highly successful, helping to build relationships with partners and audiences in parts of the world where the Museum had not previously made major loans of this kind and where the public had rarely, if ever, been able to see a comparable range of artefacts. More is planned.

In 2006 the Museum will send an important exhibition of objects from East Africa to the National Museum in Nairobi, Kenya. Its curator is Kiprop Lagat, Keeper of Ethnology at the National Museum, who is now working in the British Museum and selecting the objects. His aim is to show how, over centuries, the different cultures of East Africa have interacted with each other, as a result of trade, migration and conflict. He has examined the entire British Museum East African collection – around 12,000 objects. From it he has selected artefacts from Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and Somalia that he will exhibit beside the Kenyan objects already in the Nairobi collection. The result will be a narrative never previously presented of the making of East Africa’s cultures. This is, as far as we know, the first ever major loan from a European museum to a partner institution in sub-Saharan Africa. And the interpretive voice shaping the exhibition, though curatorial, will not be European. This is, we believe, a very British Museum project.

What is happening in Kenya is not an isolated example. The British Museum also has agreements with the national museum services in Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and South Africa: these provide for curatorial exchanges and co-operation in areas such as conservation and interpretation. Similar arrangements already exist with the National Museum in Tehran, the Palace Museum in Beijing and the Islamic Museum in Kuala Lumpur. Over the next few years, a number of exhibitions will present ancient non-Chinese civilizations to the Chinese public, beginning with Mesopotamia. When peace returns, the British Museum will resume its longstanding collaborations with colleagues in Baghdad and Mosul.
These ventures exemplify the sense in which the collections of the British Museum are best seen as universal: not that they cover every aspect of human life or every known human culture – clearly they do not – nor that the Museum itself is, by virtue merely of its extensive collections, the privileged interpreter of a set of universal cultural values. This would be arrogance indeed. No. The only sense in which universality should be relevant to the British Museum is in its aspiration that the collections in all their diversity are to be held by the Trustees, not as a national possession but as a universal resource for the citizens of the world.

This goal was clearly implicit in the Museum’s foundation. But it is taking our practice in new directions, as we reinterpret its significance now. The exchanges of people and the movement of objects discussed above are a key means for the Museum to realize its essential role as a place where ‘the world can discover the world’, to quote Curtis quoting the British Museum itself. It is happening, not just in Bloomsbury but around the world.

If there is a universal position that the Museum advocates, it is the necessity of cross-cultural comment and interpretation, the belief that most objects hold many meanings. Above all, the Museum must continue to defend the value of rigorous scholarship and unconstrained debate. We would insist on the importance of the ‘outsider’ as well as the ‘insider’ view, in Curtis’ terms, as being both legitimate in itself, and an indispensable means whereby ‘we’ can come to a different understanding of ‘us’ by listening to ‘them’. We take the point that recognizing the curatorial voice as particular, not universal, and admitting external comment on the museum as an institution with a complex history as well as a collection of objects, are necessary steps in making the dialogue a real one between equal viewing subjects, rather than one between subject and object – in Martin Buber’s terms, an interaction between ‘you and me’ rather than ‘me and it’. The current display of comments on African objects in the Museum by Londoners of African descent is, we believe, an example of just such a dialogue.

In conclusion, as a rich and uniquely diverse collection representing the history of human cultural achievement, the British Museum, and other museums like it, at their best embody the Enlightenment belief that we can all talk about, and to, one another across our cultural boundaries – that we need to find new, and better, ways of doing so than hitherto; and that if we do, we shall discover how much unites us. This is the ideal – to create real citizens of the world – which the British Museum was founded to make a reality: imperfect of course, flawed in many ways, but no less needed now than in 1753.

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