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**Organizing the World:
Power Dynamics and “Civilization” in the British Museum**

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Introduction

For Western¹ nations, national museums hold an important place, as a symbol of national identity and prestige. Museums are similar to theatrical or dance productions because all three of these events are narratives created in space. However, museums are the most participatory of these practices, as each individual visitor enacts the narrative by walking through the gallery space. Visitors to a museum have a number of choices regarding how they wish to use any given gallery. Almost all galleries include more written text than it would be reasonable to read, therefore each audience member can choose how many of the written labels they wish to engage with and what kinds of information that want to retain from what is offered. On an even more basic level each person who enters a museum chooses how long he or she will stay, if they are only breezing through a handful of galleries after work or if they plan to spend an entire day engaging with a single collection. The spectrum of visit lengths is perhaps even wider in the British Museum than it would be in an institution of the same size in America because admission is free, encouraging repeat visits, establishing accessibility for a wider socioeconomic clientele, and cutting down on time consuming entry lines, catering to patrons who may be more pressed for time.

Despite the variety of experiences and options that each visitor brings with them when they enter the museum, certain parts of the museum experience are set, established by the curators, and unalterable by the individual patrons. Curators also consciously create a narrative when they design an exhibit; often they create more than one. Also certain apparent choices open to the visitors are in reality heavily influenced or even dictated to them by curatorial vision.

¹ For the purposes of this paper “Western” refers to Western European and former colonies where governmental structures and nationalist histories construct their current society as the direct decedents of Classical Greco-Roman Civilizations with strong Christian influences.

Ludmilla Jordanova, a historian of Science at King's College London, describes museums as sights of controlled discovery². An important instance, in which the museum staff have crafted a civilizing narrative and encouraged unconscious audience participation, is in the physical plan of the museum.

The entrances to the museum are the like the first pages of a story. In the British Museum there are two entrances, allowing visitors to choose their own beginning, however the main entrance is unquestioningly the Great Russell Street entrance. This starting point is privileged in a number of ways from the signs on the street and gates surrounding the entrance, advertising the museum and the wonders inside, to the grandeur of the architecture of the building from this particular spot. To read the narrative embodied by the physical layout of the museum, this entrance is the place to begin. The museum experience begins with the first exterior view of the building's structure. The Southern Façade of the British Museum is designed in the style of a Greek temple. The entrance is ringed with white, stone ionic columns, and across the top is a triangular stone pediment, another feature borrowed from ancient Greece, and especially resonating the presence inside the museum of perhaps the most potent symbol of ancient Greece, the east pediment from the Parthenon.

The choice to design the museum in a Neo-Classical style is purposeful. It immediately establishes an intellectual connection between the museum, as a symbol of contemporary British culture, and the Ancient Greeks. This privileges Greek culture by drawing connections between the museum's authority and that of Greece. Even before guests enter the museum, they are confronted with the image of the museum as a modern day heir to the intellectual and cultural heritage of Greece. The specific choice to model the museum on the architecture of a temple,

² Ludmilla Jordanova, "Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums," in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989) 22.

designed in the context of 18th century Europe shows how the principles of Ancient Greece were appropriated by Modern Europe, and how Europeans have consciously manipulated Greek symbols to meet their own cultural needs, decontextualizing them as thoroughly from their original meanings as “Non-Western” artifacts. The temple architecture establishes the museum as a re-imagining of Ancient Greece, appropriating the temple architecture to fit the needs of the European Enlightenment, by creating a space to adore the secular creations of their own society, such as art and trophies from their Colonial exploits³. Museums are the ritualistic spaces, in which visitors enter into a communal environment to receive information and adore or worship great pieces of art, or historical artifacts in the same way that religious groups revere other types of relics. Beyond this, temples have a wider social significance.

As a government-funded building the British Museum becomes emblematic of the British Government’s self identifies values⁴. A museum’s power is partly derived from its exclusivity, by placing an object in a museum, those who fund that purpose, which in the case of the British Museum is Board of Trustees, many of whom are politically appointed, they are conferring value on that object⁵. Through this choice and act of display, an object on display in the British Museum comes to reflect a common societal value supported by the government, and therefore serves as a tool to create a common national identity. Museums can function as a nationalist creation myth, creating a common history and a cannon of important figures that revel social

³ Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds., Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 91.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Henry L Ward. “Modern Exhibitional Tendencies of Museum of Natural History and Ethnology Designed for Public Use,” in *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy*, ed. Hugh H Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 246.

values as well as forge a shared sense of communal belonging by identifying a common origin or ancestry, either biologically or intellectually⁶.

The growth of modern art history survey museums⁷ coincides with the creation of recognizable national identities in the early 19th century⁸. An understanding of a common history is one of the hallmarks of a sense of collective national identity because it creates an imagined a community, “we” among strangers who may have little else in common. This formation of a shared historical consciousness happens in a number of different ways, through a national historical school curriculum, that teaches each child in the “nation” a prescribed set of truths that dictate what a nation’s history “is,” and through public history sites, particularly war memorials, which perpetrate “service to nation” as a value in public spaces that can be accessed even by the illiterate and uneducated. Museums are another and equally important site for creating a nationalist historic consciousness. As research institutions, they enjoy a high level of respect and scholarly authority not shared by war memorials, furthermore their status as a repository for “authentic” objects of intellectual interest whether historical, anthropological, medical or art historical.

Museums are a uniquely Western construct, and their very existence helps to cement and legitimize the concept of a continuous “Western” civilization reaching from classical Greece to industrialized nations of Western Europe and North America today, linked by an unbroken chain of intellectual and cultural development. The word “museum” itself is derived from the word for

⁶Ludmilla Jordanova, “Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989) 26.

⁷ “Survey Museums” is a term used in this paper to refer to large museums that display artifacts and art from all over the world and representing various time periods, as opposed to specializing in a specific place or time. In addition to the British Museum examples of survey museums include the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

⁸ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 109.

the Greek goddesses of art, the muses. The term museum originally referred to a temple dedicated to the muses. The architecture of the British Museum further reinforces this resemblance, and symbolizes it visually even for the illiterate. At the same time, modern museums are a temple of sorts; they are secular temples for the adoration of genius and art, and in many cases, a space to worship the nation.

The British Museum simultaneously typifies two different types of museums, the national museum, and the survey art history museum, even though the British Museum does not see itself as a strictly art historical institution, but rather as a universal museum of human history. As a national institution it is a clear example of a museum that creates a specific narrative of national identity. Control of legitimate channels of knowledge is an important part of the project of creating and legitimizing a national consciousness. Science, for example played a key role in justifying British colonization, and the British Museum and other institutions like it, were government tools in forming a colonial nation. Many of the founders of the British Museum were active both in the natural sciences and in government such as Sir Hans Sloane whose bequeath started the British Museum, and Joseph Banks, a major benefactor and Museum Trustee and blurred the lines between scientific, governmental and museum authority.

None of these facts imply that the museum is a passive tool of national propaganda. It has its own mission and goals that are separate from the agendas of its government supporters. The British Museum is a world-renowned research institution, with high academic standards, and an internal press that supports and publishes research on the collections, for a wide audience. In its mission statement the museum describes its goal as the “illumination of world history”⁹.

⁹ Trustees of the British Museum. *Management Statement and Financial Memorandum* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), 14.

Therefore, its self-described primary purpose is as an educational institution to bring intellectual “enlightenment¹⁰” to the world, through its displays.

The museum also works hard to stay abreast of good museum practices and reinvents itself constantly within the wider discourses of the international museum community. Yet as a public institution, the museum receives a great deal of government revenue, in fact its main source of income is parliamentary grants¹¹. Furthermore membership to the Board of Trustees is basically a political appointment. Over half of the trustees are appointed by the prime minister as opposed to by scholars or independent experts in the fields of museum studies or history.¹² As trustee appointments must be reconfirmed every 5 to 10 years, this ensures that government maintains oversight over trustees that are currently serving, assuming they wish to be reappointed to their post¹³, Further ensuring an alignment between the current government’s political agenda and the goals of the museum, the prime minister must confirm new directors of the Museum. The museum also has other close ties to the government, for example it oversees the Treasure Act. Under that act the museum becomes the automatic repository for archeological finds made in the country. These close ties are nothing new, parliament made the original purchase that led to museum’s creation in the first place, and many important figures in the

¹⁰ This term is used in a number of ways throughout this paper. In this context the museum management statement uses it to mean giving useful knowledge and bringing visitors out of ignorance, here metaphorically constructed as darkness. However, the use of the term is also a nod to the Museum’s foundation, which took place during, and according to the principles of the “Age of Enlightenment.” 18th century Enlightenment when I refer to it in the paper is a philosophical system that viewed the world as a rational whole, it therefore imagined different disciplines of knowledge as linked and scholarship was broad as opposed to specialized. The Enlightenment also represented a firm belief in progress in which time is linear and the condition of the world is objectively improving as this linear progression moves forward.

¹¹ Trustees of the British Museum. *Management Statement and Financial Memorandum* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), 14.

¹² The British Museum Act 1963. (c.24), London: HMSO

¹³ Ibid

museum's history such as Sir William Hamilton and Sir Joseph Banks, whose story I will examine more closely later, also played key political and diplomatic roles in the history of the British nation, roles that are tied to and reinforced by their connections with the British Museum.

This relationship has obvious benefits for the museum. It is lucrative, grants the museum prestige, and especially in the case of the national treasure act, is a great asset to increasing and improving its collections. However this relationship also creates tensions. The museum must function in partnership with parliament, which provides their funding, while trying to maintain enough independence to create responsible and independent scholarship that holds validity in the international museum and scholarly community. These two roles of the museum seem to operate at odds, is it possible to be both a nationalist institution and a responsible base of scholarship in a postcolonial world¹⁴?

The main entrance for the British Museum is off of Great Russell Street in London, and it is at this entrance that the resemblance between the museum and a Classical temple is at its most striking. Upon entering through this door, visitors are and participating in a narrative of civilization, more specifically two separate and distinct narratives. One begins with the ancient world, and follows a linear progression to the climactic end point of modern Britain. The other narrative explores the non-European world, without clear delineations of time and space, creating a narrative of exoticism and stagnation. While many non-Western cultures do not represent time in a linear manner, Vine Deloria Jr in particular has written about the difficulties of presenting the concept of time in the context of a global or universal history which, the British Museum

¹⁴ "Post colonialism" for this paper refers the body of knowledge and the ways of understanding the experiences of peoples who lived under European and North American Colonial rule and how their relationship to the experience of colonization and their colonizers has shaped all aspects of their current experiences.

does see as its task¹⁵. The alternative narrative created by the absence of a linear temporal progression in the Non-Western galleries may be interpreted as an understanding of the differing modes of time across cultural boundaries. However museums, especially the British Museum, with its location in Britain and its Classical architecture, is an explicitly “Western” space, therefore visitors entering the Museum carry certain expectations about time, which are born out by the Western collections, thereby “Otherizing” the objects presented nonlinearly as opposed to validating them.

The collections of Europe and the Classical world are separated physically in the museum into two different narratives and two different ways of relating to space. Beyond that they are further separated by their differing styles of display. The Classical and European displays enjoy the most prominent and largest amount of gallery spaces. Spread out in the central square comprising the main body of the museum, these galleries are the easiest to access from the main entrance. These galleries are arranged roughly chronologically, with various periods clearly delineated by separate rooms, and cultural groups, such as the Britons and Romans, clearly differentiated.

The British Museum’s name often seems something of a joke, it is renowned for its Egyptian, Greek and Assyrian collections, its widely known treasures hail from all over the world, except, it sometimes seems, from Britain itself. Yet the majority of the museum, while not containing British artifacts, that is to say, objects discovered on British soil, it is never the less a museum filled with and dedicated to Britain¹⁶. The museum appropriates the cultural,

¹⁵ Vine Deloria Jr, *God is Red A Native View on Religion* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1973), 64.

¹⁶ Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds., Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 99.

artistic and intellectual achievements of the Classical tradition for contemporary Britain by making an unbroken cultural chain. This is a story of civilization, but also a story of progress marked by the forward trajectory through time, as the objects change and advance through the ages.

Yet, this is one of only two narratives in the museum. The European and Classical collections reside in the square shaped main galleries ringing the central core structure of the museum, but all regions, time and groups, that are not being incorporated into the story of Britain are otherized, exoticized, and physically pushed to the margin of the museum. Located in discrete, non-continuous galleries in the basement, a separate back wing, or up a back staircase, these galleries present the misleading image that these regions, unlike Europe, have remained essentially unchanged throughout their history. The artifacts from Africa, for example, are not arranged chronologically. Masks made in 2003 and 1800 may be displayed in the same case. While there are many valid reasons why a curator might choose to display objects in this manner, taken in the context of the museum as a whole, where so many periods are clearly delineated, it creates a confusing absence of time, denying the coevalness of Africa and the European galleries. The Asian, African and indigenous American collections share this isolated style of display, forcing these collections into the same marginalized narrative of the “other.”

The museum is aware that throughout its history it has privileged certain narratives and perspectives over others, and over the last several years it has worked hard to address discrepancies, and include more diverse voices in the planning and programs of the museum. As ethical standards relating to the display of objects from other cultures, and frameworks for interpreting and interacting with colonialism have changed and evolved, the museum has adapted itself to fit a changing world. Yet the museum’s connection to the government seemingly

complicates its goals of creating complex scholarly history. I wish to explore how these two simultaneous roles of the British Museum, as world-renowned institution of learning, and as public national symbol complicate, complement and overlap each other, and how each function of the museum relates to the diverse narratives it presents.

The Building

The pediment above the south entrance to the museum is one of the identifying marks of the Greek Temple style architecture, and is also a clear example of the values and narrative that this museum is presenting to contemporary Britain. The pediment's title is *The Progress of Man*, and it depicts the creation and progress of civilization in a linear fashion. On the left-hand side of the pediment man is crawling away from the beasts, his first step of progress is agriculture, illustrating the 17th and 18th century belief that nomadic societies were less developed than



Figure 1

sedentary societies and that as development was linear modern day nomadic societies offered an image of western Europe's ancient past as opposed to accepting nomadic groups as unique with cultures different from and independent from those of western Europe. This philosophy denies coevalness to any cultures that develop along non-western lines by implying that they are backwards, or eternally stuck in a historical past, that they represent a lost phase of Europe,

where European understanding of time and progress are assumed to be objective truth, rather than allowing societies that do not embrace Western ways of life to have distinct or meaningful values¹⁷.



Figure 2

Following agriculture, the next accomplishment of civilization, according to the roadmap provided by the pediment, comes architecture and sculpture, and then painting and science. Science is in the center of the pediment, and is therefore a midpoint of civilization rather than its

highest achievement, however because it is located in the center of the pediment it is directly underneath the apex of the triangle framing the pediment, and is therefore the tallest figure represented. The size of the figure representing science draws the eye, as does her scientific instruments golden color, ultimately making science central to this narrative of civilization. This declares certain ways of knowing, for example myth or oral wisdom, not subject to the rigors of the scientific method, as “uncivilized” brands of knowledge. Specifically in its context above the door to this particular museum the figure of science underlines to the way in which during the

¹⁷ Kevin Birth, “The Creation of Coevalness and the Danger of Homochronism,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 4.

18th under the banner of science many “civilized” western modes of knowledge such as anthropology, became a state tool to justify and foster the colonial project. It also conjures the relationship between this museum



as an 18th century scientific tool and repository of knowledge and the violence and looting that ultimately contributed a great deal to the collections and prestige of the institution and continues to haunt, and inform it to this day.

The far right third of the pediment is the most advanced stage of civilization and introduces the “fine arts,” drama, music and poetry. As the entire building is designed in a Greek classical revival style, it is unsurprising that these arts are depicted in a Classically Greek style, drama is holding a tragedy mask, and music is playing a lute. However these figures are not depicted as Greeks for purely aesthetic reasons. In this pediment Greece is literally the pinnacle of civilization, and the quality of arts can be judged based on their relative proximity to the Grecian ideal, therefore otherizing and invalidating non-western artistic and design styles that are not based around Greek aesthetic principles.

It is the official stance of the trustees of the British Museum, according to their website, that the pediment reflects the 18th century museum experience, depicting when the pediment was designed, not the current outlook

Figure 3

or narrative presented by the museum¹⁸. The 18th century was the height of the neoclassical resurgence; when Ancient Greek architecture and art were especially popular. This popularity created an inconsistency in 18th century notions of progress, that believed that (European) civilization was constantly improving, while at the same time imagining Ancient Greece as the ideal to ascribe to as well as the foundation of all that was positive in the contemporary European world. The context of the 18th century obviously influenced the creation of the pediment however, its continued presence, especially because as the first image that visitors encounter, does not read as a nod to a bygone era of the museum. Rather it serves to highlight how much of the museum still displays a progressivist, modernist viewpoint that marks it as a distinctly late 17th and early 18th century creation.

All of this information presents itself to visitors before they even enter the museum. Upon walking up the marble stairs leading to the front door, visitors must choose which gallery to start their visit in, however this apparent choice, the chance for visitors to choose their own adventure in the British Museum, is also heavily pre-determined by the museum staff. From the main entrance certain galleries are much more accessible than others. The African Gallery for example is located in the basement and only one staircase and one elevator leads to it. Neither this staircase nor this elevator is visible from the Great Court, which is the central hub of the building from which the galleries radiate outward.

The Asian collections also do not have any gallery space on the entry-level floor, and the stairs that most easily feed into the galleries housing the Asian collections are also not visible from the Great Court. Indigenous American artifacts are the only groups that are not

¹⁸“The Museum’s Pediment In Detail,” http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/history/architecture/south_pediment.aspx. Trustees of The British Museum, accessed February 25, 2012.

representative of Europe's intellectual heritage that is located on the entry level but even these are only accessible through other galleries, there is no main hall or traffic channel that leads to them. The design of the museum instead directs visitors coming in off of the street, unless they have a specific destination in mind, to the Ancient Egyptian Gallery located to the left of the Great Court (if you are entering from the Great Russell Street entrance) to the gallery dedicated to history of the museum itself, on the right side of the Great Court, or up the central staircase to Ancient Greece and Rome. Classical Greece and Rome occupies about 50% of the gallery space on the street access level, making these collections easier for visitors to find.

The expansion of the Greek and Roman galleries across half of the lower floor, versus the compression of the African artifacts into a single gallery, has wider implications than simply the comparative size of these two collections. The Greek and Roman galleries allow shifts in time and region to differentiate themselves within the space of the museum. Different rooms within the Greek and Roman galleries can show the passing of the centuries and highlight cultural shifts or architectural and artistic changes. One of these explicit shifts is a room dedicated to Roman Britain. While a number of factors could influence the decision to have an entire gallery depicting this period, for example the museum has a large collection of antiquities from Roman Britain, as the automatic repository for all ancient "treasures" found on the island under the British Treasure Act¹⁹. Yet ultimately, this room strengthens the connection drawn throughout the museum, from the southern façade through gallery plan between the Classical world of ancient Greece and Roman and modern Britain, by looking at the Roman influence in Britain importing the Classical world to the island and shifting the center of civilized society from the Mediterranean to Great Britain.

¹⁹ "Welcome to the Portable Antiquities Scheme Website," Trustees of the British Museum, accessed February 30, 2012, <http://finds.org.uk/>

The African gallery, however, in which one room holds artifacts from all over an entire continent, spanning across its history, changes and regional differences are muted. Time becomes compressed when an 18th century mask and one made by an artist in 2010 are on display next to each other as happens in this gallery. There are a number of reasons why a curator might choose to display a collection in the style the African gallery represents. However in the wider context of the museum, the African gallery reads as a-historical, creating a monolithic “Africa” with a single culture that feels stagnant, when of course Muslim north Africa, with its strong middle eastern influence, could hardly be different than South Africa, the former British colony.

The different spatial organization of the Western and non-Western galleries create two different sets of meaning, leading to two distinct narratives, one of progress culminating in contemporary Britain and ultimately the museum itself. However, meaning is a complex and fluid creation, and in order to discuss it, it is necessary to understand how meaning is created, especially in the context of a participatory museum. Objects on display operate as signs, because they become a symbol that conveys some meaning greater than themselves to individuals that read them²⁰. Objects are inherently meaningless, instead meaning is created within the relationship between an individual and an object. This relationship is dictated by the viewer’s cultural background. For example to western observers familiar with the conventions of museum display, an objects presence in a museum signifies that it is worthy of interest and must in some way be unusual or valuable²¹. Alternatively, if a visitor has never entered a museum before and

²⁰ Edwina Taborsky. “The Discursive Object,” in *Objects of Knowledge*, ed. Susan Pearce (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 52.

²¹ Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum*

is unfamiliar with their role as sites of cultural and intellectual authority, the objects housed within the museum do not carry the same significance. While each individual visitor and curator can produce their own meaning for an object or exhibit these meanings are dictated by the reader's culture, and therefore only certain interpretations are logically available to them based on their experiences. The culturally derived nature of signs is a particular concern to the British Museum as they are an institution with an international reputation that attracts visitors from across the world, each bringing a unique range of interpretations based on their culturally derived relationships to museums or object display. Furthermore as the stated goal of the museum is to display universal human history, it must face the reality that a universal display is impossible and that a multiplicity of meanings and readings will grow out of the collection to both complement and complicate other interpretations. Finally the diverse origins of the objects in the collection and the conflicted history of their acquisition can create tensions surrounding an objects meaning as in many cases the three different interactions that give meaning to cultural productions, the creator, exhibitor and view can each be operating against widely different historical contexts even while acting on the same object²².

Meaning can be created individuals, but in the context of a museum each object on display has three individual wills and interpretations acting on it at any given time. The artist, creator or originator of the object is far removed from the business of museum display, however their design and artistic choices, or even the way they used a particular object all effect the physical object that the curator experiences and designs a display around, and ultimately what a viewer sees.

Display, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 33.

²² Edwina Taborsky. "The Discursive Object," in *Objects of Knowledge*, ed. Susan Pearce (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 51.

The artist behind an object in some cases may be creating in a culture or a time in which museums do not exist, in which the concept of an isolated and decontextualized display, is completely foreign. Ironically, most museum displays are at least nominally most interested in the meaning of the object that the creator originally had in mind. It is this kind of information that is most commonly included on written labels mounted in galleries. Yet even as interest in the creator's intention is displayed by the word choices on written labels, the space of the museum, the decision to place objects behind glass serves to in many cases render the objects almost unrecognizable, and places them under a type of scrutiny and way of viewing that the creator never intended²³. While many works of art are created for display, however in Museums of human history such as the British Museum when many objects were created, for example to be buried with the deceased and never viewed by human eyes, simply placing them in the museum space irrevocably alters their meaning²⁴.

Therefore by choosing to accession an object, curators are already assigning a specific type of meaning to the object, they are picking it out as valuable and privileging it as worthy of attention. Museums in the 20th and 21st century have become pinnacles of cultural recognition; a museum display confers legitimacy.²⁵ Curators label objects, but not solely by writing place cards. The overall tone of an exhibition, the lighting on and around the object, and the order in which the objects are placed are all part of the label. These are all elements of text that influence

²³ Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds., Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 27.

²⁴ Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991),

33

²⁵ Ibid 30.

how to read the exhibit. The curator's role is the least obvious, and museums often seem to encourage visitors to believe or pretend that they have unmediated access to the original object, that it speaks for itself, and that visitors come to a museum in search of "authentic" objects. Authenticity as an experience, however, is dictated by expectations, which are in turn created by museums. Therefore what visitors experience as authenticity may actually be the voice of exhibitor's authority.²⁶ Museum displays are always mediated and directed by the creative team, therefore "authenticity" is an illusion created by established codes of presentation.

In order for a museum object have any meaning however, it needs someone to view it. Audience members are not passive repositories for the curator's vision or the artist's viewpoint. Instead audience members actively craft their own meaning by choosing to accept or reject the information offered to them by the object's creator and the collection's curator. Viewers mediate the space between object and label²⁷. Just as in work of literature or theater, the reader is the third point of interpretation, along with the author(s) and the text itself that renders a textual production complete. Furthermore, the curator can only create the objects label, the final act of integrating a perception of an object with the information clues offered by its label can only take place on the level of each individual visitor.

Museums are a contested space in which multiple voices create meaning, nevertheless they present specific narratives, audiences, especially audiences who share a cultural background with the exhibitors crafting the narrative will encounter on some level. In the case of the British Museum, which is a public institution an important national symbol, this narrative centers on delineating a distinct British Identity. Drawing on the theory established in this section the next

²⁶ Ibid 162.

²⁷ Ibid 37

section presents a case study of two objects in the museum and analyzes how they create a specific history of Britain in which the museum itself plays a central role.

The Men

Most major European museums currently struggle with the fact that their collections are partially the result of colonial expansion. In the case of the British Museum, this association is further complicated by the institution's relationship to a man named Sir Joseph Banks. Joseph Banks was a trustee of the British Museum for forty-two years, and donated several important collections, as well as functioning as a statesman and one of the first generation of professional scientists. His presence at the axis of three such potent sites of colonial authority; the government, the scientific academy and the museum, makes him an ideal case study to illustrate the theory about how these three institutions function together in the execution of the colonial project and the formation of a British National identity and how the museum is currently choosing to deal with that legacy. Simultaneous with his work in the British Museum Joseph Banks actively campaigned for the colonization of Australia, thereby using his scientific authority and that of the museum, to justify the colonial project as it was taking place. This paper compares the journals and letters of Sir Joseph Banks with the sanitized image of him on display in the current British Museum, to demonstrate how museum's relationship to its past, and colonialism, has evolved. The goal of the paper is to remove Joseph Banks from the literal and metaphorical pedestal that the British Museum has placed him on in order to assess his legacy within the context and of his historical moment.

The History of the World In 100 Objects is a popular radio show conducted jointly with the British Broadcasting Corporation and the British Museum. It seeks to explain important moments and trends in history across all cultures since the beginning of the human species by analyzing 100 objects currently on display in the British Museum. The physical objects in the museum all bear a uniform label that outlines their significance and the wider cultural trends they

represent so that visitors can trace the series' narrative of human history from object 1 (the earliest) through object 100. In this spirit I am creating a history of Joseph Banks and the British Museum in two objects, both of which are on display in the same room, the Museum's Enlightenment Gallery. One is a bust of Banks himself; the other is an imitation Maori hand club that Banks designed. The bust is the tool through which the museum crafts its image of Banks as a beacon of civilization and progress. The club however, which is on display in the same room, exposes the violent history that is being silenced. I have created my own labels for these objects based on *The History of the World's* format and placed them within the body of the paper to introduce each object.

Object 1 of 2

Busts Of The Founders of the British Museum

Marble

Britain, 19th Century AD

These statues show images of the three foundational figures in the British Museum's history.

What do these men share?

Each donated important collections to the British Museum during its earliest stages.

What is happening across the world?

1801

Kingdom of Ireland incorporated into Great Britain

1815

Napoleon is defeated at the Battle of Waterloo

As a "temple" of learning the British Museum, like all holy relics has a foundational mythology filled with larger than life figures and tests of faith. The Neo-Classical façade also gives the institution a façade of timelessness, however the British Museum is always a product of its time, constantly reinventing itself. The foundational figures of the museum in particular are constantly reinvented to align the museum's past with its present goals. Yet these changes are silenced, manipulating visitors into believing in the objectivity of the museum's truth claims to universal truths.

Upon entering the Enlightenment Gallery in the British Museum, (the long, stately, Classical revival room located directly off of the great court, that once housed King George III's library) there is a group of busts on the left hand side. These figures, immortalized in stone, are sculpted in a Classical style, like Greek gods or philosophers. These are the founding fathers of the British Museum. Present are Sir Hans Sloane, the man whose collection created the British Museum, Charles Townley, trustee of the British museum and donor of an important collection of Greco-Roman marbles, and Sir Joseph Banks, naturalist and museum trustee. Together they make up a triumvirate that speaks volumes about the contemporary organization of the museum's collection.

Each man has a distinct role in the history of the museum, but also holds a symbolic role for the organization of the present British museum. Sloane represents the museum as a whole; his collection spanned every possible discipline of research, from natural history to art. He was the ultimate Enlightenment gentleman for whom the world was a single integrated whole. His vision for the museum, set forth in his will, was that his "collection in all its branches may be, if possible kept and preserved together whole," which would "raise our ideas of the power wisdom, goodness, providence, and other perfections of the Deity²⁸." This excerpt from Sloane's will demonstrates his view that each branch of learning was compatible and part of a greater whole, created by an intelligent architect. In the contemporary museum he is not celebrated for his piety, rather his role within the company of founders stands for the universal nature of the modern museum, which aims to represent all human cultures. If Sloane is a symbol of unity

²⁸ Kim Sloan, and Andrew Burnett editors, *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 14.

within the museum, the other two figures, Townley and Banks, say more about how the collections are currently divided and in subtle but important ways expose the legacy of colonization within the contemporary museum. Both men served on the Board of Trustees of the British Museum at the dawn of the 19th century, a century that would see a near complete transformation of the British Museum.

A generation after Sloane, Townley and Banks' approaches to collecting and museum organization were incredibly different from their predecessor's²⁹. While all three are celebrated in the Enlightenment Gallery of the British Museum, Townley and Banks helped to bring an end to the kind of pseudoscientific approach that was characterized by the Enlightenment. Townley and Banks were both specialists. As opposed to the widely sprawling collection of Sloane, which prized variety, Townley's collection was comprised only of the classical antiquities that he collected during his many travels to continental Europe. Banks was a wider collector than Townley, but restricted his collections to items that were in his time categorized as natural history, which included objects that would now be categorized under the separate discipline of anthropology. Their images in the Enlightenment Gallery, a room dedicated to the history of the museum as much as it is to 18th century Europe generally, demonstrates the division between the two categories of objects collected in the present day museum.

While the museum is organized into a number of different departments, the organization of the research departments reflects the division between "Western" and "Non-Western" objects rather than presenting a range of approaches, privileging western artifacts over those from Asian or African intellectual traditions. For example the Department of Prehistory and Europe,

²⁹ Ibid 110.

combines the earliest stone-age human artifacts found in Africa with material culture from Europe up to the present day³⁰. This categorization actively claims human history as Western history and claims all aspects of “civilization” from the earliest stone tools as the forbearers of present day Europe and Britain. Alternately cultures from Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas, are all combined into one department, despite their obvious cultures differences, and segregated from the achievements of early African societies, such as stone tools and ancient Egyptian Civilization which are instead artificially linked to contemporary Europe rather than Africa.

These departmental divisions are not immediately evident in the displays that are open to the public, however a clear differentiation between Western and non-western collections are reflected in the display techniques curators employ for each type of object. The Galleries that house ancient Greek and Roman artifacts as well as the galleries containing objects from Europe all have equally bright lighting, and clean displays, similar to the way objects are generally mounted in art museums, with plenty of space and a label for each individual object. However, the African and American collections are much more dimly lit, with cases full of objects and generally a single label affixed to a larger cabinet. Perhaps the lighting difference is a result of the large amount of organic material located in these galleries, and the more detrimental effects bright light can have on their preservation, as opposed to the western focused galleries, which contain mostly marble and metal objects. No matter the reasons, the effect it creates is a sense of exotic mystery that surrounds these objects, and an establishment of two distinctive categories for collections: western and non-western.

³⁰ “Department of Prehistory and Europe,” Trustees of the British Museum, accessed November 12, 2011. www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/departments/prehistory_and_europe.aspx

The British Museum's layout exemplifies this tendency, to create two distinct historical narratives. Asian, indigenous American, and African cultures (excluding stone age artifacts and items from Egypt) are displayed in galleries located outside of the "central square of civilization," that displays Greek, Roman and European artifacts, and are therefore external to progress and by extension uncivilized. A visitor to the upper floor of the British Museum for example can walk continuously from 1500 BC Mesopotamia to early modern Europe, tracing the advance of Western civilization. The Japanese Gallery, the only Asian collection located on an upper floor, is physically separated from the history of civilization by a back staircase. The division is further highlighted in the different origin stories assigned to the two types of objects. Western galleries look back to Townley as their founder, and all other collections are implicitly related to the other figure, Joseph Banks, even though he had very little contact with most cultures displayed throughout the museum.

The museum has come to pride itself on an identity as a universal museum of all human history. Yet the architecture of the museum building itself is in the style of an ancient Greek temple, and the most fitting way to honor its founders is to aesthetically associate them with Ancient Greece. This memorial reveals a bias toward the western classics that the museum has been struggling with for the last half century as it has attempted to navigate its identity in a shifting post-colonial world. It also functions to claim the heritage of the classical tradition for Britain. In turn this identification with ancient Greece, the accepted birthplace of western civilization, legitimizes the modern British state, which is the main financial supporter of the museum³¹. It also serves to further otherize objects that lay outside of this tradition, as they are

³¹ Ivan Karp, introduction to *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 3.

disassociated from composite western heritage that includes the classical tradition, the modern British experience, and civilization itself.

All of the men whose portraits stand proudly in the Enlightenment Gallery played a pivotal role in shaping the British Museum during its formative years in the last half of the 18th century. However Banks is an anomaly in this group. As a naturalist, most of his collections were given away to the Museum of Natural History when it formally separated from the British Museum in 1963³². It is also an important side note that during Bank's lifetime, while the importance of his role within the wider museum structure was understood, his ethnographic material especially was devalued, not well preserved, and was hardly considered to be his most important contribution.³³ For example the assistant keeper of natural history during Bank's tenure described his ethnographic material as the "vilest trash" and kept much of it in the basement out of visitor's sight.³⁴ Yet two hundred years later it is this "vile trash" that the museum most publicly celebrates him for.

Over the past half century his role in the foundation mythology of the British Museum has shifted to fit the institutions' changing identity and goals. On the British Museum's website, which is a virtual extension of the museum, and is aimed at visitors, Joseph Banks is linked to the history of the current department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. The website identifies Bank's voyage with Captain James Cook as the impetus for creating an independent ethnographic collection; as previously ethnographic materials were stored unorganized in

³² Ellen Adams, "Timeline (Focus on British Museum)." Syllabus compiled for Classics 5AACAR14: Museums of London: A Cultural History, Kings College London, Spring 2011.

³³R. G. W. Anderson, "Joseph Banks and the British Museum. The World of Collecting, 1770-1830," *Journal of the History of Collections* Vol 2. Issue 1 (2008): 152.

³⁴ Ibid.

cabinets for miscellaneous objects³⁵. This statement is undeniably true. However in order to achieve its effect it distorts the context of Banks' life and wider work in order to create an institutional history more reflective of the present than the past.

There is increasing pressure to examine the way their collections create imbalances of power, and also to experiment with how to most effectively deal with their, at least passive support for the violence perpetrated during colonization. The British Museum is of course no exception. Yet its efforts are complicated by the fact that Banks, one of the founders of the museum, used his influence and the institution's in order to actively promote colonization. It is perhaps even more problematic that Banks' legacy is now attached to the closest thing the museum has to an anthropological department, as it grounds the foundation of that part of the museum directly in the shadow of conquest. The initial anthropological donations that Banks made also set the tone for the treatment and storage of non-western artifacts that continues to the present day.

The return of Joseph Banks and Captain Cook to England and the introduction of their materials into the British Museum's collections obviously had a huge impact on the history of ethnography in the British Museum. However this approach distorts the relationship of Joseph Banks and the British Museum, and orients Joseph Banks as a proto-anthropologist, a title that he would not have claimed for himself. It is true that Banks contributed many artifacts to the museum that were manmade, which he collected from the regions he traveled to. He did so

³⁵ "History of the Collection and Department," Trustees of the British Museum, accessed October 8, 2011, http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/departments/africa,_oceania,_americas/history_of_the_collection.aspx

because of the late 18th and early 19th century it was a commonly accepted notion in museum theory, and in wider scientific circles, that non-western cultures should be studied as a form of natural history, instead of looking at them through the same frameworks as western history or art. This philosophy arises from, and reinforces, the derogatory notion that non-western societies, and especially non-Caucasian ethnic groups either do not share a common ancestry with “white” humans, or are more closely related to animals than they are to Europeans. The eminent British naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace articulated an example of this widespread theory as late as 1869 in his article “Museum for the People.” Wallace wrote that the best way to display ethnographic material would be alongside skeletons of the “lower races and those animals which most nearly approach them.”³⁶

To its credit the British Museum never institutionalized the connection between non-western people and the natural sciences. As the collections increased in size and more demands were made on the limited space in the museum’s original building, the organic natural history specimens were moved to a separate location. When the natural history collections separated from the British Museum, the anthropological collections stayed in the main building, the museum’s original sight in the London neighborhood of Bloomsbury. This upheld the humanity of the creators of these collections and gave them greater importance by associating them with the museum’s renowned classical collection, as well as leaving them in the more prestigious, older location.

³⁶Alfred Russel Wallace. “Museum for the People,” in *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy*, ed. Hugh H Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 205.

A Classical education was considered an important status symbol for 19th century gentlemen and was necessary for admission to Cambridge and Oxford. Therefore the British Museum's Classical collections increased in prestige alongside the advent of the discipline as a whole, and became an important research tool for scholars. As a result the British Museum building in Bloomsbury over the 19th century began to take on a symbolic role as a center of scholarship and learning on a global scale. This image was reinforced by the temple design of the new building completed in 1852³⁷. Over time the Bloomsbury building itself took on a ritual and symbolic significance within the academy that granted legitimacy to the ethnographic materials housed there.

Even though the British Museum and the Natural History museum were not formally separated into two institutions until 1963, the initial movement of the physical collection from Bloomsbury to the newly acquired natural history building in South Kensington took place in 1881. The South Kensington area was already associated with natural history research, as the Royal Botanical Gardens had already been established in the area. This means that the decision to preserve the Bloomsbury location as a museum for human artifacts from around the globe took place against the intellectual backdrop that considered non-western historical artifacts research objects for biologists not historians. The British Museum's choice in organizing its collections was surprisingly forward thinking. However this legacy of linking anthropology to the natural sciences does appear, with complex ethical questions, in the way that Banks collected, and in the collections that he bequeathed to the museum, further complicating his recast role as the founder of British Museum anthropology.

³⁷ "Quadrangle Building," Trustees of the British Museum, Accessed Dec 1, 2011, http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/history/architecture.aspx

Banks was primarily a botanist, and he saw indigenous peoples as another species native to the area that he was exploring in the same way as he saw kangaroos, rather than as a human culture. In fact Banks was a key advocate for the colonization of Australia, using his authority as not only as an explorer and scientist, but also as a trustee of the British Museum to give weight to his opinions regarding settlement. Therefore Banks complicates the museum's role within the wider framework of the British Colonial project. Not only did the museum benefit from the violence and oppression of colonization by gaining beautiful and valuable objects from throughout the world, but also in at least the specific case of Australian colonization, they actively participated in the process of conquest because of Banks' influence as a representative of the museum as well as a key patron of the colonial enterprise.

In 1783 James Matra, who had sailed with Banks on his voyages with Captain Cook, wrote an offer to the British Government, outlining a plan to colonize Australia as a homeland for American loyalists who still wanted to be colonists under English rule³⁸. While Matra is the author of the proposal, he constantly invokes Banks as a higher scientific authority in order to promote his plan. He concludes his letter by stating "Sir Joseph Banks' high approbation of the Scheme which I have here proposed, deserves the most respectful attention of every sensible, liberal & spirited individual...³⁹" No other member of the voyage, or scientific person is referenced in the letter. His choice of allies becomes obvious when the letter is considered in the wider context of the late 18th century scientific revolution in Great Britain. Joseph Banks was the most famous member of the expedition when it set off and his presence alone greatly

³⁸Neil Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768-1820 Volume 2 Letters 1783-1789* (London Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 26.

³⁹ *Ibid* 29.

enhanced the scientific credibility of the voyage⁴⁰. Even though Matra himself was on the voyage he appeals to the knowledge of Banks the scientist and by doing so, also appeals to the influence of British Museum, as their authorities were so closely linked.

The early 19th century was the period when Bank's reputation was at its height. He had just returned from his voyages with Captain Cook, and arrived back in England to find a period of transition for the role of science in English society. Previously science had been a gentlemanly pursuit. Scientists had been talented and generally wealthy amateurs who were often equally interested in art, classics and other intellectual activities, making the boundaries between science and other disciplines deceptively fluid. However as the Enlightenment period progressed and the experimental method was introduced, science became professionalized. The scientific method, and the establishment of a professional scientific elite with specialized knowledge about scientific methods and theories led to more accurate results, but also fundamentally changed the relationship between science and the state.

Science had always been an elite practice, however, the narrowing of the field that occurred as professional scientists began to appear created a distinct scientific community. At the same time that this revolution in the field of science was occurring other changes were happening that altered the role of the state and its relationship to the scientific community. For the first time the concept of a "nation" in which a state governed an imagined community of people who shared common linguistic and cultural traits was emerging⁴¹. Science became an

⁴⁰ John Gascoigne, *Captain Cook: Voyager Between Worlds* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 29.

⁴¹ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 130.

important part of the nationalist project, as it allowed state powers to appeal to the special authority that these emerging scientific professionals commanded in order to create prestige for the nation but also to back state led nation-building plans such as exploration and colonization.

The state's use of science as in imperialist tool is further reflected in Banks' own role in later life when he simultaneously served as scientific, and imperial advisor to the British Government⁴². In this context it becomes easy to see why Matra, a man who had personal experience with Australia, but did not have scientific training, needed to invoke the authority of his shipmate. The observations Matra makes, which are endorsed by Banks, are those of conquerors, and not in any way that of anthropologists. They specifically refer to the native Australians as "a few black inhabitants... in the rudest state of society."⁴³ Eighteenth-century England was never known for its cultural pluralism, however considering the disconnect between other parts of their testimony and the eventual state of the Australian colonies it is clear that both Banks and Matra calculated their remarks to make the Australian project seem both more profitable and also more manageable. For example Banks testified that the soil of Botany Bay would be able to sustain agriculture for any colonists who went⁴⁴. Yet we know from the starvation faced by the settlers eventually sent to Australia that this was not actuate⁴⁵.

⁴² John Gascoigne, "Joseph Banks and the Expansion of Empire," in *Science and Exploration in the Pacific: European Voyages to the Southern Oceans in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Margarete Lincoln. (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998), 39.

⁴³ Neil Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768-1820 Volume 2 Letters 1783-1789* (London Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid 93.

⁴⁵ Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing With Strangers: Europeans and Australians at First Contact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 199.

Beyond simply agreeing to the plan for colonization Banks actively testified before parliament as to the viability of the endeavor. The transcript from this interview is notable because Banks serves purely as a witness, not as a scientific expert regarding the region. The majority of the questions put to Banks are about the indigenous inhabitants of the area around Botany Bay that Joseph Banks visited on his voyage. It is clear however; both from the wording of the questions and the answers he offered that the interview was meant to help assemble an invasion of the area, and was not interested in gathering scientific information or general knowledge. The questions revolved around what type of weapons the aboriginal people carried, how hostile they were, and what size groups did they most often travel in⁴⁶. This interview was clearly being conducted as part of the formation of a tactical plan. The most blatant indication that Banks is suggesting an invasion of the area is in his response to the question “Are they (the natives) of a peaceable or hostile Disposition?” Banks’ answer that “ though they seemed inclined to Hostilities they did not appear...to be feared⁴⁷,” sends a chill through time to any modern reader familiar with the violence that occurred during the colonization of Australia, and the continuing silencing of this violence. Despite the fact that the questions put to Joseph Banks were not really scientific questions, they all related to the flora and fauna of the Australian continent (if indigenous people are included in that category, as they clearly were for Banks and his contemporaries.) He was consulted, explicitly or not, because of his area of scientific expertise. Once again Banks wields great respect and authority as a scientist, but also as a trustee of the British Museum. We see here how science and the institutional backing of the

⁴⁶ Neil Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768-1820 Volume 2 Letters 1783-1789* (London Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 93-94.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

museum is invoked in order to support the state's political goals in colonizing Australia, demonstrating the ways that the new scientific elite can function as an arm of state authority.

Object 2 of 2

Replica of a Maori Hand Club

Metal

London, England, AD 1772

An imitation of a blunt short-range Maori weapon, traditionally used for fighting. The date and Sir Joseph Banks' coat of arms engraved on the front. Made in preparation of Banks' abortive second Pacific Voyage

Who are the Maori?

The Maori are an indigenous culture of New Zealand. During first contact with Europeans in the 18th century they were associated by the British with aggression and cannibalism.

What is happening across the world?

February 1772

Russia and Prussia partition Poland leading to its dissolution

November 1772

First comities of correspondence form in Britain's American colonies, challenging imperial rule

Western museums are filled with objects stolen from other cultures. This is a common sentiment and nothing new. However questions of how these thefts operated and what their role was in the wider projects of colonization and cultural conquest are often hidden. As long as objects collected under the violent and oppressive process of colonization remain on display for public consumption continuing research and analysis is required to understand the context and roles of collecting and specific objects in the wider process of conquest.

One object owned by Joseph Banks is located in the Enlightenment Galley of the British Museum, in the section labeled Trade and Discovery. Much of this section is dedicated to Joseph Bank's Pacific voyage. The object in question is a hand club. What makes this particular specimen unique is that it is in fact, not a hand club made by an indigenous tribe; rather it was made in London on a commission from Joseph Banks himself. Banks commissioned replicas of

Maori hand clubs bearing his name and coat of arms as preparation in case he chose to make a second Pacific voyage⁴⁸. In the end he pulled out of the second voyage with Captain Cook at the last minute. Banks insisted on bringing a full compliment of scientific instruments as well as a complete entourage of drafters and other assistants that he felt would improve the quality of scientific observation conducted on board. In gathering up the equipment he felt was necessary for the voyage he spent 5000 pounds sterling in 1772 currency⁴⁹. There was not enough room on board the ship to accommodate all of these additions, so rather than paring down his load, Banks chose to forgo the voyage altogether. Such was the single mindedness with which Banks approached his scientific observations.

This hand club was probably part of that 5000-pound expenditure. It is important to note that while the replica clubs were meant for trade, they were only prepared for the second voyage, not for the first. Establishing trade relations was a primary goal of *The Endeavour* voyage, as trade in Tahiti established around this time became very profitable for British exploration. Therefore Captain Cook and his crew would have been well stocked during their first voyage with objects to trade. From the large amount of objects that Banks brought back to England with him and deposited in the British Museum it would seem that efforts at trade had been successful. However there are a number of indicators that this was not entirely the case and that there is more to the story of these objects' acquisition than meets the eye. The first indication is that Banks commissioned the metal club after his return to London. If the trading that had occurred

⁴⁸ "Replica of a Mori Hand Club" (British Museum Catalog Entry), Trustees of the British Museum, accessed November 5, 2011, http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/r/replica_of_a_maori_h_and_club.aspx.

⁴⁹ Warren R. Dawson, ed., *The Banks Letters: A Calendar of the Manuscript Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks Preserved in the British Museum, The British Museum (Natural History) and Other Collections in Great Britain* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1958), 616.

previously on the first voyage had been entirely satisfactory, Banks would not have gone to the trouble and expense of commissioning new specially designed trade items. He wanted to improve his power within the balance of trade for the next expedition he was planning. As demonstrated later, there are also clues in Banks' journal that indicates that the Europeans were disadvantaged while trying to forge trade relations in New Zealand. If this disadvantage did exist, than Banks must have amassed his collection of artifacts by other means aside from trade. Therefore at least a portion of the collection must have been obtained through looting and theft.

Banks, as a man of science, kept a careful journal during his voyage on *The Endeavour* with Captain James Cook. He recorded detailed observations, especially about his plant and animal specimens. However his descriptions of indigenous life are disjointed and often contradictory. This is perhaps a symbol of the confusion Banks felt interacting for the first time with a group whose customs and language were so different from his own as to be almost indecipherable. In his testimony before the British Parliament regarding the Colonization of Australia he reported that he knew nothing of indigenous language or government⁵⁰. There is no reason to doubt this is true, (although it is perhaps another reason to doubt his anthropological credentials). However the vague details regarding trade between the English explorers and the indigenous people, specifically the Maori of New Zealand, indicate that details are being explicitly left out, as Banks has no excuse for misunderstanding the language of his own men. Therefore, in the context of trade between the Europeans and indigenous groups, he should have been able to access at least half the story. At one point in his journal Banks mentions visiting

⁵⁰ Neil Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768-1820 Volume 2 Letters 1783-1789* (London Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 94.

some indigenous people who he refers to as his friends. To quote Joseph Banks they gave him “Bones of men the flesh of which they had eat, which are now become a kind of article of trade among our people who constantly ask for and purchase them for whatever trifles they have⁵¹.” The “our people” that Banks is referring to can only be the other European on his voyage. He would never identify so closely with the Maori as to refer to them with a first person plural pronoun.

After this sentence he changes subjects entirely, switching to a description of a Maori tomb monument, which he was pleased to note resembled a crucifix. This abrupt jump leaves a number of questions. It is clear that the English were trading in human bones with the Maori, but it impossible to tell how they used these bones. From the statement that they have “become a kind of article of trade” it is clear however, that bones were in high demand. It also seems from the language Banks used, that the Europeans were willing to trade “whatever trifles they have” for these bones, meaning that the “explorers” were at a distinct disadvantage in this trade relationship. This disadvantage reignites the questions surrounding how Banks and Cook gathered so much ethnographic material to necessitate the creation of a separate display room when the Europeans seem, from Banks’ journal to be so poor in the objects of trade that counted as currency for the region. This episode highlights how completely unprepared the Europeans were for trading and interacting with the peoples they found. It is also interesting to note that the hand clubs Banks commissioned in preparation for the second voyage were specifically based on a Maori design. These preparations were then at least partially aimed at creating a more

⁵¹ Joseph Banks, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768-1771*, ed., J.C. Beaglehole (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 458.

favorable balance of trade in Maori territories. What effect Banks hoped to create by inscribing his name in English script, which the Maori could not read, on the hand clubs remains completely unclear.

In the same journal entry, after returning to the ship, Banks explains how while he was gone some of his officers “accidentally” fired on these same Maori he counted as his friends. This further complicates the picture Banks paints of the relationship between his crew and the people they encounter in New Zealand. Banks refers to the Maori as his friends, yet it seems that his men do not universally share this sentiment, otherwise they would not be so aggressive and guarded. Banks’ journal is meant to be a scientific document. However due to comparisons between Banks’ journal and other, less detailed journals kept by other voyagers on *The Endeavour*, some scholars believe that Banks outright fabricated parts of his journal, especially sections that would reflect negatively on his men⁵². This is especially likely if Banks knew that he would be sharing his journal with others in the scientific community. In the case of this trade in human remains, it seems that his diary turns a blind eye to the motives and feelings of the other Englishmen on board *The Endeavor*, indicating that in other places, Banks’ misunderstandings of the people he encountered were at least somewhat willful and that his observations were less than dispassionate scientific documents.

Bank’s testimony before parliament was related to Botany Bay, not the area where the Maori lived. However because the two areas are geographically close together, their fates are linked. In Matra’s plan, he specifically refers to New Zealand as a region to be exploited for

⁵² Nicholas Thomas, *Cook: The Extraordinary Voyages of Captain James Cook* (New York: Walker & Company, 2003), 59.

lumber once Britain established its new colony in Australia, as New Zealand would become so easily accessible. Therefore information from Banks' experiences in New Zealand is relevant for the question of Australian settlement. The savagery of the trip, however, is never expressed at any point in the testimony he offers. If the explorers on this trip became so "un-British" as to trade in human bones, this is relevant information, or at least colors the experience presented to the parliamentary committee.

This club then, stands testimony, but also silences the violence that occurred during the initial British exploratory mission in Australia and New Zealand. Behind glass in the Museum it looks innocuous. The description of the item that is featured on the British Museum's website explains that Banks organized "items to trade with the peoples he would meet on his voyage"⁵³. It does not explain the violence that often accompanied these meetings. A museum, and the objects in it are a type of text. However, museum literacy is much less widespread than book literacy. The potential for museums to abuse the fact that museum literacy is so unusual, and much less widespread than museum access, is a fear that dates back to the 19th century. William Stanley Jevons, a 19th century economist explained the problem succinctly by saying, "It may be assumed as a general rule that when a person reads a book, he understands it... it is somewhat otherwise with public museum"⁵⁴. This particular display can have two very different meanings.

⁵³ "Replica of a Mori Hand Club" (British Museum Catalog Entry), Trustees of the British Museum, accessed November 5, 2011, http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/r/replica_of_a_maori_h_and_club.aspx.

⁵⁴ W. Stanley Jevons, "The Use and Abuse of Museums," in *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy*, ed. Hugh H Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 100.

On the surface written labels accompanying the object indicate that it was a way to cement good will by fusing British manufacturing methods with Maori design. On another level the item is a weapon masked by the diplomatic rituals of trade. This dynamic is representative of wider patterns of British Imperialism and of how it continues to be displayed in the museum.

The point of this close reading of Banks' own journals and letters is not to prove that he was racist, or a colonizer. Clearly he did not colonize Australia on his own, and Matra, among many others also supported and worked to put this plan into action. Instead of condemning Banks, this study seeks to place him back in the historical context of a shifting world, where science was emerging, and there was no intellectual framework for dealing with products from non-western cultures. Banks was a man of his time and in many ways not unusual. James Cook, Sir Joseph Banks' captain in his journal mentioned that his crew's practices of collecting were common practice and their collection was unremarkable amongst scientific collections of the time⁵⁵. While this might not be strictly accurate, it serves as an important reminder that Banks' actions were acceptable and admired within the political and scientific mores of his day.

It is easy, and necessary to look back at this period, and condemn the violence and conquest that eventually stemmed from it. However it is important to avoid looking at the period within the framework of 21st century values. The Joseph Banks that emerges from his journals and letters is a varied individual, at times funny, sarcastic, anxious and affectionate. On the other hand the marble face that stares blankly at Enlightenment Gallery visitors shows none of those qualities.

⁵⁵ Thomas, Nicholas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 125.

The British Museum is a dynamic and versatile, internationally renowned research institution. As such, it is obligated to change with the times and stay abreast of new intellectual directions. Its identity then is constantly in flux. Along with each new identity, the museum constructs a history that supports it. Joseph Banks was an important figure in the British Museum, but the British Museum that he served for forty-two years,⁵⁶ would be unrecognizable as the institution occupying the same address today. Equally Banks would not recognize himself in the descriptions of his life that appear in the Museum, especially in the Enlightenment Gallery. Banks has himself become another object in the museum, his legacy and meaning altered, by the wording of a label card, and the organization of his belongings.

Clearly each of the three figures immortalized in the museum as its founders, are constantly reinterpreted, Sloane's religious convictions for the museum have disappeared from his legacy. Townley's inability to identify fakes and propensity to alter priceless ancient works to better fit his 19th century British values (museum experts now claim Townley's favorite statue Clytie, on display beside his bust, was "restored" in the 18th century to make her face more beautiful by contemporary standards⁵⁷, if she is in fact an ancient work at all) among other means, is also missing from the public display label as they would violate present day codes of archeological ethics. However, it is Joseph Banks who has undergone the most radical reinterpretation, as his personal goals of colonization were the least compatible with the contemporary museum's. This project has attempted to restore, at least fragments, of his voice,

⁵⁶ R. G. W. Anderson, "Joseph Banks and the British Museum. The World of Collecting, 1770-1830," *Journal of the History of Collections* Vol 2. Issue 1 (2008): 151.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Penny, "Fakes? London, British Museum," *The Burlington Magazine* Volume 132 No. 1048 (1990): 506.

in order to better study the man as an historic figure, and the role he represents in the present day British Museum.

The legacies left behind by Joseph Banks are complex, and reveal important information about the way opinions are dependent on the historical context in which they were created. Banks' misguided patriotism in trying to help first American loyalists find a new home, and later in protecting the people of England from convicts by sending them to Australia, now can be read as assisting a crime against humanity, leading to the forced relocation and extermination of vast numbers of people based on ethnicity. This leaves a further set of questions about how this legacy should be engaged with, in a public institution such as the museum. It is often considered impossible to deal with such complex themes in an environment that is meant to be accessible to learners of every education level. The British Museum, also has an added layer of complication, because of its age and prestige, it is difficult for the museum to critically analyze its own past without alienating any of its many stakeholders.

Specifically the museum is publicly funded and receives much of its operating budget from the British Parliament. This arrangement makes it clear that the close relationship between science and government control that developed in the late 18th century is still very much in effect. The British Museum arguably still has a financial interest in promoting state agendas, and therefore will hardly have the inclination, or freedom to delve too deeply into the relationship between state sponsored violence and the museum's tacit support for it. Yet Joseph Banks remains on display, masking all of these issues, but also keeping them close to the surface of visitors' consciousness. Perhaps, in the end his bust serves as a subtle subversion, a reminder

of the messiness of history and its malleable character, but only for those who know where to look and how to read beyond the labels.

The Legacy

Ultimately the British Museum is a powerful emblem of several different kinds of authority. It is academically authoritative, few would question a fact or assertion posted in the galleries, or published by the museum's press. Yet where this authority comes from is a complex process that is rooted in several different culturally specific understandings of power. It is important to consider what factors give the museum its power when looking at its history and considering how this power can be most appropriately and effectively wielded to address complex and contested historical questions for a broad audience.

One of the reasons why the British Museum is so important is its age. As one of the first public museums, it had a hand in redefining what a modern museum is, and as such continues to be standard by which other museums are judged. Charles Saumarez Smith has argued that the British museum is the single most important institution in dictating what a museum is in the public consciousness⁵⁸. He further argues that the British Museum created the standard that continues to define a national museum today in Britain as well as in America and other parts of Europe that emulate the British example⁵⁹. Due in part to Britain's colonial past and also due in part to public interest and government support London specifically and Britain has some of the highest concentrations of museums in the world. Britain has over one third of all of the museums in Europe and around one fifth of all the museums in the world⁶⁰. Therefore especially in the museum profession, Britain is a world leader, further underlining the British Museums importance and authoritative influence on an international stage among the museum community.

⁵⁸ Charles Saumarez Smith, "Museums, Artifacts, and Meanings" in *The New Museology*, ed., Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ellen Adams, "Introduction" (lecture, King's College London, London, UK, January 18, 2011).

Its role as a template for British museum foundation immediately casts the British Museum as an authority figure among museum professionals and scholars. However, the British Museum holds an equally powerful authority over casual museum visitors, who know very little about the institution's history. The name of the British Museum holds a certain power in the popular imagination, and for most visitors that power comes not from the institution itself but from the individual items in its collection. The British Museum by almost any definition is enormous. The building itself commands attention and is an obvious landmark. Yet it would not be an institution in the way that it is without its collection. Many of the most famous objects of world heritage, the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon Friezes, the walls from the palace at Ninevah. These are pieces recognized the world over. These items, and countless others ultimately offer the British Museum its final level of authority. They are flawlessly contextualized within the Museum and embedded in its narrative of progress. As such they signal to visitors the import of the museum, their continuing presence creating the atmosphere of authority and scholarship. It is the final accomplishment of the museum and others of its age and prestige such as the Louvre in Paris, that such a context does not look bizarre for these objects. By the 21st century, viewers expect to see objects displayed within the sterile confines of the traditional museum, isolated, well lit and clearly presented with a succinct wall tag.

Museum authority is cyclical. It is ultimately a 18th century western European invention, which in tandem, with 18th century western European ideas about form and written scholarship, to this day dictate the ways in which museum viewers, and expect to see the world. The 18th century obsession with objective, scientific truths fuelled an expectation that authority would be voiceless, and truths once uncovered could reveal themselves. The natural world was rational, and could be explained and so, too could the historical and artistic worlds. These ideas were

encouraged by the faceless but very subjective powers of political necessity and powerful economic motivation. Government and professionalized science are always closely related, through funding and licensing and training bodies that dictate who is qualified as an authority to shape the scientific narrative. As large august museums like the British Museum established themselves, they became independent institutions, with their own image, history and prestige to uphold. Therefore while the British Museum has reinvented itself countless times, most recently by embracing a multicultural approach and highlighting the international breadth of its collections. Yet despite this reinvention, the radical hierarchy of the museum as an unaccountable voice of objective facts remains.

The concept that the British Museum is a site of scholarly authority is not a new concept, but where exactly that authority derives from must be carefully examined before turning to the problem of how that authority functions in the present day and what impact it has on the museum's various stakeholders. The museum's authority gives preference to the voices of certain groups at the expense of others. As museums are western constructs, non-western objects often cannot make sense in the isolated display context of a museum. To start off with objects must be categorized into the western groupings of art vs. artifact, when neither of those concepts may exist in the object's original culture and even if they do neither may be accurate for the items role in its original context.⁶¹ Museums in the last decade or so have increasingly reaching out to groups whose objects and ancestors are on display, for example the British Museum has consulted members of the Maori community when culturally sensitive objects are removed or displayed in a new way. However in some ways because of how museums operate and claim

⁶¹Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object in Our Fashion," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991),195.

power, this is an ineffective and problematic approach. Since museums still implicitly operate under the narrative that objects speak unmediated with visitors, and that truths about these objects are objective, factual and universal. Therefore informing visitors that groups like the Maori are consulted on displays, does not necessarily signify to the viewing audience that the Maori's relationship to their own cultural productions demonstrate a different kind of knowing and way of understanding. Rather it seems that the Maori offer a quaint and superstitious alternative to the objective, secular truths put forward by the scholarly experts and hallowed spaces of the Museum.

Even as the Museum is attempting to move toward plurality, and finding ways to create connections with silenced communities the museum is in many ways reenacting and upholding its colonial heritage. The museum is many things, but one of the foremost pillars of its identity is its collections of objects. The continuing presence in its halls of objects that were purchased, excavated or smuggled into the country under the auspices of racist, Eurocentric and colonialist policies continues to be a painful memory for the institution as a whole and point of discomfort and contention for many of the individuals and groups it serves. The question of what the future holds for these objects, and the ethical considerations of keeping them versus repatriating them and who should get charge of them are complex and not the focus of this essay. Working within the parameters that the objects are located in Britain, within the British Museum and will remain there, at least for the foreseeable future, the important questions that emerge revolve around the most responsible, and honest modes of presentation and display. The isolated decontextualized mode of display favored by traditional museums in its silence and austerity, with nothing but the small "factual" place card it shuts down conversation, and does not accommodate multiple

narratives or history. By silencing other contexts and experiences this type of display supports a celebratory legacy of colonization.

In the 21st century large museums, with their own institutional history, prestigious collections, and standards of scholarship to uphold struggle with the most appropriate way to continue to uphold their institutional missions while staying relevant in an increasingly post-colonial world. The next step is to create a new type of museum space that is transparent about the way that museums operate and create information. The future of museum display should be interactive, not in the sense that displays should feature buttons or videos that audiences can physically press to alter to influence the kind of information they receive, but rather in the sense that museum displays will have to design exhibits that explicitly address the role that visitors have in creating meaning. As objects are culturally closed signs, they implicitly have multiple meanings, and these possible meanings increase exponentially in an institution such as the British Museum in which enjoys an international reputation and therefore attracts visitors from around the world which invite their own culturally specific readings of the objects and displays that the curators and other museum professionals had never considered.

It is obviously impossible and in some cases perhaps irresponsible to present every possible interpretation of an object. However displays can be more forthcoming about how museums are created. Museums are public institutions in the sense that there are no particular qualifications, especially in the case of the British Museum which is free of charge, that would bar any individual from entry, in this case they are much more accessible than peer reviewed journals or institutions of higher learning. Yet the fact that museums are physically accessible, does not always translate to their being intellectually accessible. Illiteracy is widely recognized as a serious problem, but museum literacy, which requires a unique but specific type of

knowledge, is not widely talked about or even considered. Written texts are widely produced enough so that the average reader can reasonably expect to understand enough about the constructions of language and logical argumentation to have some basic knowledge about how written texts are created. Furthermore readers can use this knowledge to independently evaluate which claims are verifiable. While readers will not always choose to do so, the ability to read the letters and words on the page form a baseline of background information that readers share, which allows them to access the work in a specific way.

With museums, this is not true. Museums operate on the illusion of transparency, offering the false temptation of unmediated access to world treasures that will personally offer their secrets and cultural insights unto every attentive visitor with a discerning eye. Yet visitors who are interested in a complex or enlightening museum experience, which may not be every visitor, but certainly a large part of them, the most important information they can access within the frame of the exhibition space is information on how exhibits function. Presenting the changeability and subjective voice of museum exhibitions within the exhibition spaces allows each individual to choose is integrate this information into their viewing experience, or to ignore it and continue to embrace the traditional museum experience. However for visitors that choose to engage with biases and points of view inherent in the museum displays, they will have more maneuverability to embrace and even consider, alternative narratives and experience.

This call for openness and a restructuring of the power dynamic implicit in traditional museum displays has radical implications for how institutions function but is not a completely new idea. Susan Pearce has advocated that the only way for museums to enter into the post-modern world is to be more open about their role as active producers of knowledge rather than passive vessels of knowledge, and to embrace ironic or subversive reactions and interpretations

as part of museum displays⁶². If museum theorists and to some extent museum professionals are embracing the proposition that an ironic, postmodern museum is desirable, questions remain about what this museum is going to look like. Susan Pearce locates many recent innovations embraced by the British Museum, among other institutions, that are designed in increase access, as movements in this direction. For example the British Museum now offers touch tours for the vision impaired, and hands on programs in which members of the general public can handle items in the collection, allowing a level of access that has often been restricted to privileged groups with specific educational and social qualifications. These are all examples of the ways that the museum is working to break down the colonial era power dynamics that can be too easily reenacted in the museum experience.

There is another element that I put forward as an essential element increasing an ironic post-modern museum. This is a reflexive display that not only undermines the colonial legacy but also actively engages and grapples with the colonial history of the institutions. The British Museum has one gallery that arguably does just this. The Enlightenment gallery, the home of Joseph Bank's bust, is a particularly complex room. While it offers potentially problematic memories of anthropology in the museum, it also allows for a more critical relationship to other facets of the colonial project in the historical and current museum. The room itself is designed to mimic an 18th century cabinet of curiosities, and invokes the sensationalistic embryonic beginnings of the modern museum. By acknowledging, and performing such an extreme shift in museum display and practices, the display itself subverts the convention of the omniscient a neutral museum display. The average museumgoer will not know about the origins of the museum, but by demonstrating that museums were not always the sites of authority we are

⁶² Susan Pearce, "A New Way of Looking at Old Things," *Museum International* no 202 vol 51 no 2 (1999): 16.

familiar with today the gallery is inviting critique of the museum project as a whole. The gallery also explicitly contextualizes the museum in the progressive and rationalist ideologies of the enlightenment, exposing the teleological perspective that continues to underpin most survey museums narratives. While this gallery does send mixed messages, it offers a unique example for ways that a museum can understand its own role within a specific historical moment and communicate to a non-specialist audience the conflicts inherent in that role.

In many ways the British Museum is a mass of contradictions. On the one hand it exemplifies what a traditional museum is, most of its galleries have not changed for decades and presents an essentially progressive narrative of civilization that privileges the Classical tradition as well as the western European experience. At the same time, the museum has embraced access schemes and created at least one post-modern gallery. The British Museum has flaws, but over the past 250 years it has managed to continually reinvent itself, while within the political and scholastic structures that circumscribe it. In the future it will undoubtedly continue to do so. I hope that its next cycle of redefinition pushes back harder against the clear legacy of colonialism that continues to haunt the museum and sees the installation of even more radically transparent and ironic galleries emulating and surpassing the Enlightenment gallery.

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Figures

Figure 1: *The Progression of Man* (right side), Marble, The British Museum, London.

Figure 2: *The Progression of Man* (center), Marble, The British Museum, London.

Figure 3: *The Progression of Man* (left side), Marble, The British Museum, London.