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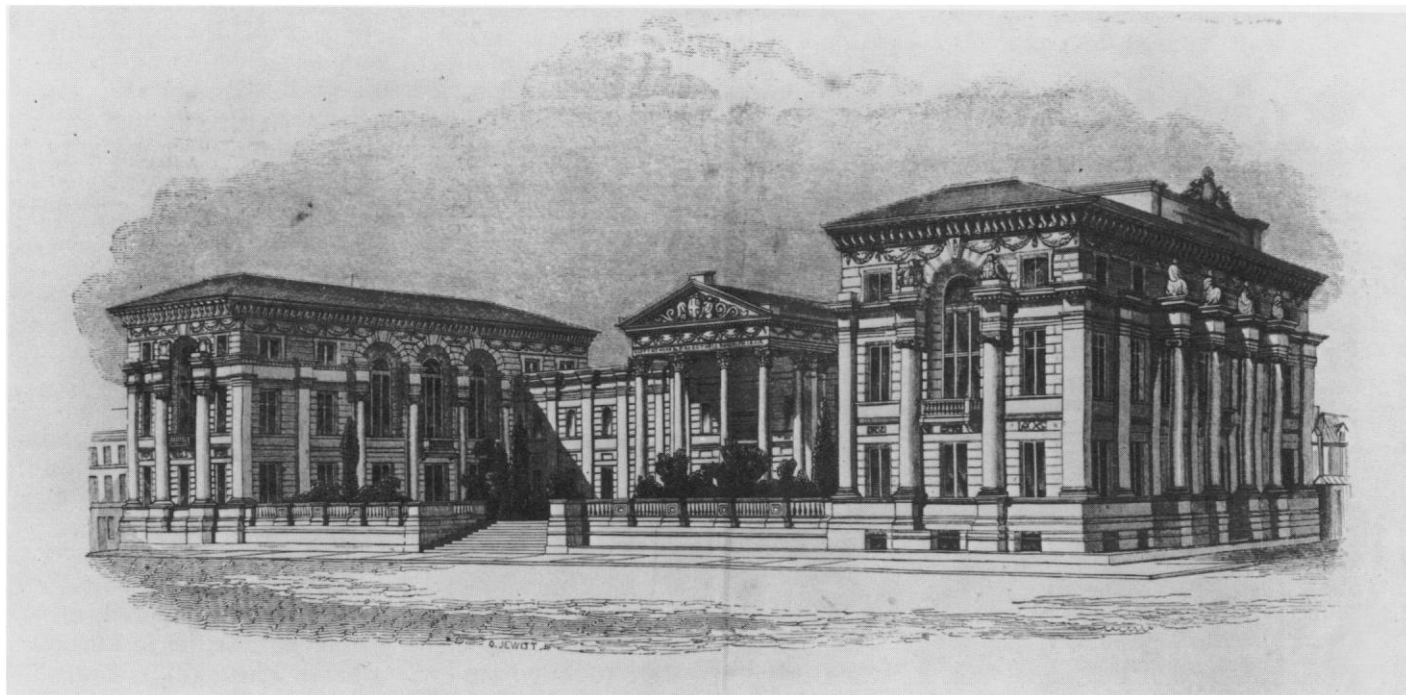


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# Reflections on the Ashmolean Museum

CHRISTOPHER LLOYD



*A woodcut of the Taylor Building and the University Galleries by Orlando Jewitt, after a drawing by C.R. Cockerell for his first project, 1839. [Ashmolean].*

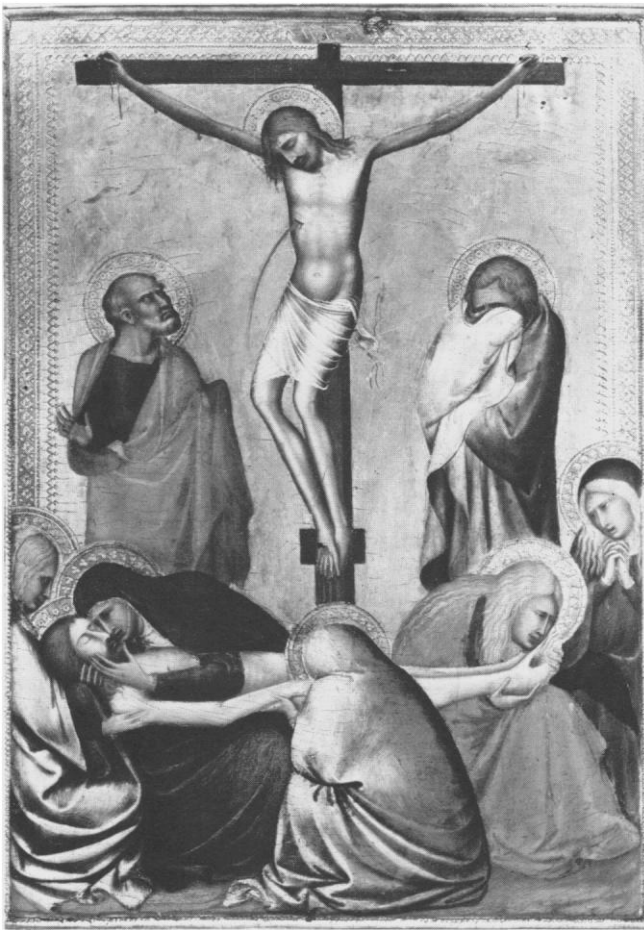
The Ashmolean holds an important place in the history of the museum as a cultural phenomenon. It was the first museum in Britain, and one of the earliest in Europe, to which the public was granted access. The present building, however, is not the original structure which opened its portals to the public in 1683. The Old Ashmolean, in Broad Street, now the Museum of the History of Science, was built by Thomas Wood to house the collection formed by the founder of the museum, Elias Ashmole. The regulations for the museum, known as the 'Instituta Ashmoleana', printed in 1714, give a detailed account of how the Museum was run, what hours it was to be open, and what duties the Keepers were expected to perform. The public had to pay and it was stipulated that "If anyone stays in the Museum for two hours, he shall pay a double fee to the Keeper".

Elias Ashmole's collection was notable for its variety. Ashmole was the son of a saddler from Lichfield and rose to become Comptroller of Excise under Charles II. He involved himself in the study of astrology, alchemy, heraldry and antiquities, wrote a history of the Order of the Garter, and was a founding member of The Royal Society in 1662. His rather orthodox personal taste is reflected in the coins, medals, and portraits that he owned, but in 1674 he had obtained possession of the collection formed by John Tradescant. Tradescant was famous for his duties as gardener to many of the foremost aristocrats of the day, including Robert Cecil, the

Duke of Buckingham, Sir Edward Wotton, and finally, to the King himself, Charles I.

His collection, which Ashmole had helped to catalogue in 1656 (*Musaeum Tradescantianum*), was a conglomeration of objects broadly related to the study of the natural sciences. It was known affectionately as 'The Closet of Rarities'. One finds there, for instance, an ivory chessman, Powhatan's mantle, a Russian abacus, beads, stuffed animals, pieces of bone, shells — anything of curiosity value together with many items of aesthetic consequence. History, alchemy, and ethnography are combined in a way that perfectly mirrors the seventeenth-century mind. To collect these items, John Tradescant the elder had travelled great distances, even as far as Archangel in 1618 and North Africa in 1621, ostensibly in search of exotic fruits and plants. The collection was famed throughout Europe, and it is understandable that Ashmole was eager to acquire it. In 1683, therefore, the contents that now form the nucleus of the present Ashmolean Museum were dispatched to Oxford in twelve carts from Ashmole's house in Lambeth.

It is a pleasure to be able to record that honour has now been done to the Founder's Collection by the planning and opening of a new gallery at the top of the main staircase in the Museum. Responsibility for uniting the collections, as far as was practically feasible, has fallen upon the Department of Antiquities. The new gallery comprises a panelled



*'The Crucifixion and Lamentation', a panel attributed to Barna da Siena, ca. 1340. One of the Italian Primitive paintings presented to the Museum in 1850 by the Hon. W.T.H. Fox-Strangways, another being Paolo Uccello's celebrated 'Hunt'. [Ashmolean].*

room with lattice windows, and cases around the walls in which the numerous and diverse objects have been properly displayed with supplementary material. This new gallery sets a high standard for the Museum, both visually and practically. Great care has been taken to display the objects to good effect, with due attention being paid to their preservation after a long period of neglect in the nineteenth-century.

These two concerns — the display and the preservation of objects — are central aspects in the world of museums today. This has not always been the case. These were not, for instance, matters that particularly concerned the Tradescants in 'The Closet of Rarities', where classification was the principal interest. Today, museums are supremely conscious of the need to set out the objects in their care in a way that is both visually exciting and informative. Occasionally, this is done without proper regard for the function or even the aesthetic qualities of the object itself, as though the method of display alone is of paramount importance. This, however, is not such a new development in museum consciousness as might easily be imagined. For instance, the present building which houses the Ashmolean Museum was opened in 1845, at a time when these matters were already being hotly discussed, and for a while the museum was one of the most controversial buildings in the country. The architect, Charles Robert Cockerell, was a man of

multifarious interests. He was chosen to design a museum for Oxford as a result of a competition in 1839-40. His main source of inspiration was the Temple of Apollo at Bassae: hence the friezes, the pediment, and the striking statue of Apollo that one notices on entering. In more ways than one, Apollo still presides over the Ashmolean Museum, as opposed to his counterpart, Dionysus.

The building was not to be wholly devoted to the museum, and one wing of it was for the Taylor Institution for Modern Languages. One pre-requisite was a long gallery, suitable for the display of antique sculpture, in this instance the Arundel Marbles. The building that Cockerell designed is by no means an isolated example of its type, for at that period in the nineteenth-century there was an expansion in museum building that began in Europe in such cities as Berlin, Dresden, Leningrad, Munich and London, and finally passed to America. These buildings were intended to house not only sculpture, but also paintings, as many of the large European collections were entering museums at this time. The actual display of works of art in a building which had only a limited supply of natural light posed problems, apart from any consideration of the extent to which it was desirable to admit natural light. Sculpture was not in as much danger from light as were paintings and there was a considerable debate as to how pictures should be lit. The University of Oxford and Cockerell were both aware of this issue and leading authorities in Europe were sounded out — Sir Charles Eastlake, William Dyce, Gustave Waagen, Schnorr von Carolsfeld, and Baron von Friesen. Copies of their replies are still preserved in the Ashmolean Museum (Department of Western Art) and they provide a fascinating insight into opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of top lighting as against illumination from side windows. The English favoured top lighting for the galleries in which paintings were to be hung, so that the light would strike the upper part of a painting and then be filtered downwards. The Germans preferred lighting from the side through tall windows, which would illuminate paintings hung on especially erected screens at right angles to the windows. The English argument prevailed in Oxford and the natural source of light for the picture galleries in the Ashmolean Museum today is still top lighting. Indeed, the present system of lighting for the pictures in the Museum remains a pressing problem and it is still difficult to obtain a correct balance between natural and artificial light. Yet, even while we are experimenting in Oxford with a mixture of the two, the Americans are returning to the principle of viewing pictures in conditions of controlled daylight.

Cockerell's building was commissioned to house the expanding collections of the University, which was soon to acquire strong representations of Italian art in particular. For soon after the opening of the Museum important series of drawings by Raphael and Michelangelo as well as a collection of early paintings were added. At the very end of the nineteenth-century the distinguished connoisseur C.D.E. Fortnum bequeathed his extensive collection of Italian majolica and Renaissance

bronzes, with examples of the highest quality. With so many other departments housed in the same building — the Department of Antiquities, the Department of Eastern Art, the Heberdeen Coin room, and the Griffith Institute all of which have increased their holdings — so space has become more and more of a problem. A museum should not appear to be too empty and neither should it appear to be overcrowded with objects. It is a difficult balance to maintain, and sometimes the Ashmolean appears to be bursting at the very seams. Eventually, it will be necessary to enlarge the building, but the question is in which direction. The answer to this question demands an architect of greater ingenuity than Cockerell.

It must be said, however, that in one sense Cockerell achieved his purpose admirably. He was building at a time when museums were equated with religious temples, as, indeed, his own architectural source implies. Museums contained objects that were to be inspected in silence so that they could induce feelings of great reverence or humility. This is an attitude that modern museum directors have struggled to counteract by various means, but it is nonetheless one that, in this writer's opinion, is central to the appreciation of art. One of the ways in which this reverence or humility can be directly experienced in the Ashmolean is due to the flexibility of the building that Cockerell designed in 1840. The location of a number of departments covering such a wide span of history may not be what Cockerell, or the University, originally envisaged, but the shell of his building has allowed them to coexist so that the Ashmolean's one great virtue has evolved almost unconsciously. This virtue is simply the range and quality of the collections displayed on a scale that does not lead to a state of physical exhaustion, which a visit to the British Museum or to the Louvre inflicts upon the keen museum visitor. Formidable and impressive though Cockerell's building may appear from the exterior the keynote of the interior is its intimacy. It is a public building which in parts retains the atmosphere of a private house. Few other museums in the world can rival



'Pan Listening to Echo', attributed to Andrea Ricci. One of the finest Renaissance bronzes in a public collection and the first bronze acquired by C.D.E. Fortnum, who subsequently became an authority on Italian bronzes. This 'Pan' was bought in Genoa in 1848. [Ashmolean].

this atmosphere: the Poldi-Pezzoli in Milan, the Frick Museum in New York, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, but then all of these had the advantage of beginning as private residences before they were converted into museums.

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783