Introduction

Readers may wonder why anyone would want to write a book about museums, let alone read one. Those who are interested in pictures or insects or engines might want to read a book about them, but not one about the organisations that keep them. But museums are not just passive receptacles; they are institutions with a long and complex history, imbued with all sorts of peculiar, ingrown practices, many of which date back hundreds of years. Most importantly, museums select what they collect and therefore influence what we think about the past. Had the first curators of the British Museum, for example, valued Persian carpets more than the Parthenon Frieze, the development of British culture might have been different. John Ruskin's promotion of Byzantine Gothic could have been central, not eccentric, and modern English buildings might then have been richly decorated, not plain and embellished only with a free-standing, monumental Henry Moore. After all, the great pattern traditions of Islam are close, in many ways, to both Celtic and Gothic art, which many consider more native to England than the figurative art of Greece and Rome. Had it not been for the Victoria & Albert Museum, which showed Islamic alongside medieval art, we might never have had the wallpaper designs of William Morris, who was greatly inspired by the collections of that museum. Museums are not fixtures but creations; they influence, often subliminally, our whole view of culture.

The common view is that, once established, museums cannot be changed, which is another reason for not reading a book about them. But museums are changing all the time. When it opened 250 years ago, the British Museum was first and foremost a library illustrated with collections that included as many stuffed animals as marble statues. The creations of nature, then generally held to be the work of God, were considered just as important as the productions of humanity, so much so that enthusiasts eventually persuaded the government to build a magnificent new museum in South Kensington devoted to this branch of knowledge – the British Museum of Natural History, now the Natural History Museum. The British Museum did not lose its library function until over a century later. Now its remaining task is to illuminate world cultures through artefacts, a depleted product of the Enlightenment. And, over the last century, the Natural History Museum has changed, too. It used to be packed with hundreds of thousands of specimens

arranged in rows in glass cases, but if one visits it today it is teeming with children, and there is hardly a specimen in sight.

The Natural History Museum has maintained its research role, collecting and identifying specimens from around the world, but a visitor to its galleries would never know it. It has, in effect, become two institutions, a research academy behind the scenes and a popular theme park out front. This book is an attempt to reverse this general trend in museums. If this is not done, it will not be long before the Egyptian sculptures in the British Museum are replaced with interactive displays and reproductions. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington has announced that 'Old Glory', the original Star-Spangled Banner, is too fragile to be suspended and will have to be removed from view until they can find a way of showing it safely. Why can they not work out how to do this before they take it down, or devise a way to show it while it is being conserved? After all it is *the* icon of America. If we can send a probe to Saturn and operate on an eye, we can certainly find a way of displaying an old flag so that people can see it while ensuring it survives for posterity. But there is, at present, no guarantee that this wonderful relic will be put back on show. Why was there no public outcry about this? Have we ceased to value artefacts from the past? If so, we could be witnessing the end of museums as we have known them. If this happens, museums will have themselves to blame, for not making sure their collections are still treasured in the hearts and minds of the people.

There is no law that says museums have to continue to exist. Many of the museums we know best today were founded before the invention of photography, sound recording, colour printing and film, let alone computers, virtual reality and jet aircraft, yet many curators still act and collect as if these inventions had never been made. They do so partly because their ideas are rooted in the Enlightenment, when the world about us was still full of uncharted territories. But a stuffed kangaroo or a Japanese print or a dinosaur bone will no longer automatically draw crowds filled with amazement. Nor, perhaps, would those visitors who thronged museums a couple of hundred years ago have attended in such numbers had they been able to hop on a plane to see a kangaroo for themselves, or buy a book of colour reproductions of Japanese prints, or watch, in the comfort of their own homes, a computer simulation of a predatory dinosaur sinking its teeth into its latest victim. Today, museums have to survive among all these competing attractions, when no corner of the world remains unexplored and there is widespread acceptance of the concept of extinction.

Modern technology and its current use in contemporary entertainments might, at first sight, look as though it will supersede most of the recording and communicating functions of museums but, in fact, it opens up exciting

new possibilities for both collecting and interpretation. Had digital cameras existed, people in earlier times would surely have used them to record the first night of *King Lear* or the last day of the dodo. Museums can now document in vivid ways the formative events in our own times. They have, however, been remarkably slow to take up this challenge. If they have gone on collecting, they have tended to add to what they already have rather than branch out in new directions. Art museums around the world are full of paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures because that is what they have always collected, but remarkably few have photographs, let alone modern graphics or computer art. When museums do venture into new fields, their efforts often seem idiosyncratic. It is not immediately obvious to an outsider why the British Museum, the resting home for great sculptures of antiquity, is acquiring examples of credit cards. Faced with the plethora of modern production, many museums have simply thrown in the towel. Collections are being frozen or, worse, abandoned. Museums either resign themselves to becoming period pieces and put as much of their collections as they can out in displays that emulate their appearance a century earlier, or they turn themselves into high-tech, interactive theme parks and put most of their collections into storage.

This book makes the case that collections are at the heart of museums, not just because they contain wonderful things that can be a joy to look at and learn from, but also because we need museums to go on collecting. There can be no substitute for the experience of seeing with your own eyes the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, the beaks of the finches that gave Darwin his first inkling of the theory of evolution, or the worn shoes that victims of the Holocaust took off before they entered the gas chamber. Once seen and felt and, as far as one is able, comprehended, such sights can be unforgettable. Creating such flowers of feeling and understanding in the minds of each visitor is the challenge facing museums in the 21st century. I envisage, in this book, a new age of museums. I have called them 'poetic' because they will not be categorical or didactic, but will draw out the profounder, more elusive meanings inherent in so many artefacts from our past. There are countless different ways in which this can be done, but museums have barely begun to realise their potential as storytellers and communicators. They contain many of the most remarkable things in the world, yet many visitors traipse through them as if they were in a railway station, barely engaging with what is around them. People leave Disneyland knowing exactly what has been on offer, with smiles on their faces, talking about their favourite experiences. What expressions does one see on the faces of visitors as they leave the world's great museums? More often than not a look of weariness

mixed with relief, and a roving eye searching for somewhere to sit down, and have a nice cup of tea.

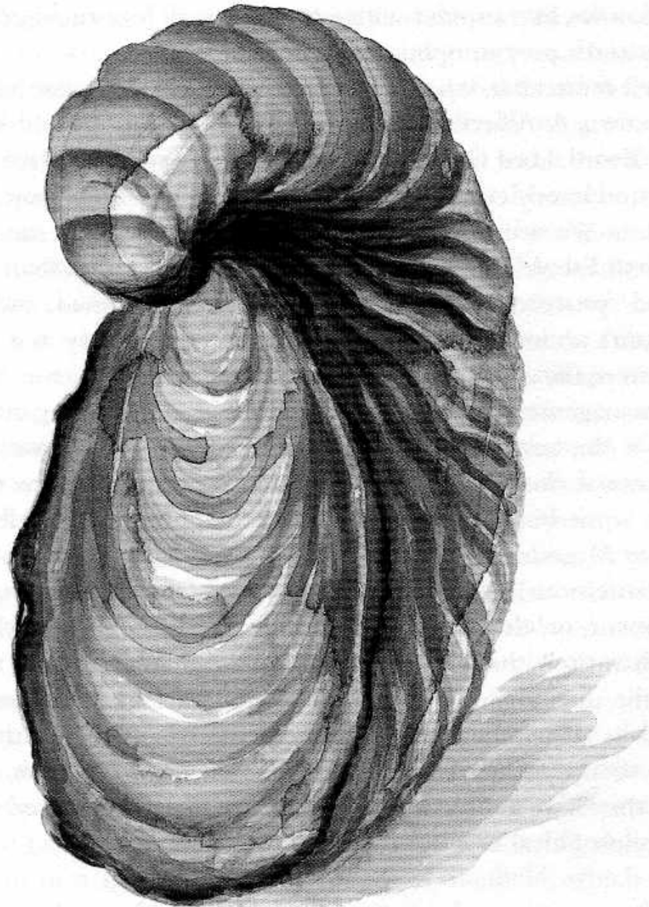
This book is written for the users of museums, both those who want an enjoyable and rewarding visit, and those who want to research subjects in depth. My aim is to explore why museums are the way they are, and how they could be changed so that they could serve all their users much better. I want society itself to become more ambitious for its museums, because 30 years of working in them has taught me how often they fail to tell the world about the wonders they contain. Brought up on a public-housing estate on the southern outskirts of London, museums offered me wider horizons. I would save up my pocket money for the train fare to central London to visit the great museums, which were then all free. I might not have gone at all, and certainly not as often, had there been a charge to go in. My background has taught me to be particularly sensitive to the advantages that education, class, wealth, race and where you live can bring, as far as access to culture is concerned. This is not just a question of packaging. People will go to museums if they are interested in what they contain. Not long into my career, I realised that the contents of museums would have to be changed if they wanted to reach a wider public. But this does not mean that museums have to limit themselves to areas of culture already categorised as popular, and put on a diet of dinosaur shows interleaved with Royal wedding dresses. It proved perfectly possible, for example, to triple attendances at Manchester City Art Gallery by expanding, not contracting, its intellectual and aesthetic ambitions, despite the building's tomb-like presence, with its blank windows and relentless, brooding classicism.

I also discovered, early in my career, the writings of John Ruskin, the Victorian art critic and social commentator, who anticipated many positive aspects of the modern museum, such as handling and travelling collections. He designed little carts for these so that they could be easily wheeled about. He created a little gem of a museum for the cutlers of Sheffield, which contained mineral specimens and old master paintings, bird engravings and illuminated missals, photographs and plaster casts, to demonstrate that Darwin was wrong in believing that creation was a product of self-interest. Ruskin believed that creation was the manifestation of a divine moral order. For him, museums were essentially educational institutions for the general public, but more about ideas and feelings than categories of learning. So the seeds of the poetic museum were sown in my mind. The subsequent successes, as I groped towards realising my ideas, were almost as frustrating as the failures, because I never seemed to achieve the sustained development I dreamed of, with everyone in the museum learning through a process of

creative discovery. Partly this was due to cutbacks in public funding, but the failure of museums to shield themselves from some of the worst of these was, to some extent, an indication of their failure to prove their worth. Museums have difficulty making their case because they lack a unifying purpose. They are riven with internal disputes, as anyone who has worked in them or with them knows, like a spider with a brain in each leg, straddled by impotent directors and a prey to opinionated boards.

I well remember, when I was first interviewed for the post of Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, being greeted by the Chairman of the Board, Lord Carrington, who was also running Nato at the time, with the introductory comment, 'We don't want any ideas, you know. We've got the ideas. We want someone to carry them out.' The successful candidate, Elizabeth Esteve Coll, who came from a library rather than a museum background, proceeded to do what the Board wanted and sacked all the Museum's senior curatorial staff. It was seen by many as a watershed in the profession: the end of traditional curatorship. It was true that the V&A did have management problems, but getting rid of its leading curatorial expertise was not the answer. What the V&A needed was professional direction, not professional cleansing. Now the role of the museum director itself is under threat. Some boards have decided not to appoint one at all: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, one of the biggest in the United States, now has a non-professional as its chief executive; and Glasgow, after years of radical development, on the whim of a new political leadership, decided in 1998 to abolish entirely the post of museum director, which I held at the time, along with the directorships of Libraries, Theatres, Parks and Recreation, and replaced us all with a leisure management-style system. This book is written partly to make the case that museums do need directors, quite simply because they have a direction to take. What I have attempted to articulate here is a philosophical basis for that new direction.

Julian Spalding
Edinburgh, January 2002



A 'Devil's Toenail', or a fossil of the extinct oyster, *Gryphaea Arcuata*.
National Museums of Scotland

CHAPTER ONE

Old Things and Old Thoughts

Museums are not just packed with things from the past; they are riddled with past thoughts. Everything in them has a reason for being there and not necessarily one that would interest us, or even occur to us today. It is tempting to think that museums do not change because their collections stay the same. In fact, they are changing invisibly all the time because, though the specimens might be pinned down, our thoughts about them cannot be. The original collectors of ladies' fashions, prehistoric burials or microscopic moths would surely have been surprised to learn that people in the future would be studying them avidly for evidence of sexual oppression, their DNA structure and declining biological diversity. Visitors today are increasingly beginning to wonder why they should look at rows of glasses or guns, fossils or fire engines, and many simply do not bother. Some museums, in response, are putting their collections into storage and replacing them with theatrical and interactive displays in an attempt to keep their public. This is almost invariably a waste, because it is always possible to inspire interest in even the most commonplace object by looking at it from a fresh perspective. Mystery is at one's elbow, and wells deep within museums. The challenge for museums today is to find ways to revive interest in their historic collections. But they can only begin to do this if they find out why their collections are there in the first place.

The visitors who first entered the British Museum's doors had a very different world picture in their minds than those who walk around it today. The museum was founded in 1753, two centuries after Copernicus had proposed that the earth went around the sun, but a hundred years before Charles Darwin realised we shared an ancestry with apes. Though enquiring minds from Leonardo da Vinci onwards considered fossils to be petrified living matter, they had no idea how old they were. They thought that the shells and plants found buried in rocks had been turned to stone sometime during the process of creation or, most probably, at the time of the Flood, for which they gave current proof, for fossils of sea creatures could be found on mountain tops. Less enquiring minds thought that fossils were evidence of Satan's work, just as it was widely believed that jewels were chips off the walls of the heavenly city of God. It was not until the fourth year of the French Republic, in September 1796, that Georges Cuvier demonstrated to his fellow scientists in Paris that there had been other revolutions in the

past, and that some fossils were of creatures that had become extinct, thereby undermining, at a stroke, the concept of the perfection of God's creation. Forty years earlier, visitors to the British Museum had no inkling of this. They would have dismissed as incredible the idea that the fossil illustrated at the beginning of this chapter was the petrified remains of an extinct oyster, just as readily and confidently as we dismiss their popularly held belief that it was a devil's toenail. The things in museums might not change, but our ideas about them can, and often do.

The British Museum's rapidly accumulating collections were a by-product of the birth of modern science, when exploration led to revelations in whatever direction it took. Ephraim Chambers, an apprentice globe-maker from Kendal, compiled the first modern encyclopaedia in 1728. Diderot transformed this into his great *Encyclopédie,* which appeared in France, in 35 volumes, from 1751 to 1776. Diderot thought religion was the enemy of knowledge. No wonder the Church and the State were alarmed. One of his books, *Pensées Philosophiques,* was burned at the order of the Parliament of Paris in 1746, and in 1749 he was imprisoned for three months. Undaunted, he continued his studies, arguing that we do not have to accept our lot but can improve it. He proposed, for example, that blind people could learn to read through their sense of touch, a century before Louis Braille developed the means for them to do so. Knowledge, he believed, could conquer the world. Museums, as a vehicle for popular education, were to become a priority of the French Revolution.

The Early Years of the Louvre

The Louvre was for centuries the major palace of the French Royal Family, based upon a much altered and extended fortress built in 1200. Though the picture collection had been open to the public for decades, the whole building was appropriated during the Revolution and the major public spaces turned into a museum. The transformation was remarkably rapid. On 10 August 1792, the Bourbon monarchy collapsed. Nine days later, the decree to create the National Museum of France was declared. In October, the Minister of the Interior, Jean-Marie Rolard, wrote to the painter Jacques-Louis David defining the aims of the new museum: 'This museum must demonstrate the nation's great riches ... France must extend its glory through the ages and to all peoples. The National Museum will embrace knowledge in all its manifold beauty and will be the admiration of the Universe. By embodying these

good ideas, worthy of a free people ... the museum ... will become among the most powerful illustrations of the French Republic.'

Napoleon Bonaparte made it one of his objectives to realise this ambition. His military campaign in Egypt was well equipped with scholars, archaeologists and artists. It was Napoleon's soldiers who discovered the Rosetta stone and, realising its significance, sent it to Cairo, where it was seized by the British along with other Egyptian treasures. It now resides in the British Museum and not the Louvre, for which it was destined. (Many of the treasures in museums are essentially loot. Lord Gowrie, when Minister of Arts, rejected the Greek government's request for the return of the Elgin Marbles, with the remark, 'I know it's loot, but it's our loot'.) Napoleon marched through Italy seizing all the treasures he could in his aim to make the Louvre the greatest museum the world has ever seen. In 1798 the *Laocoön*, the *Horses of St Mark's* and the *Apollo Belvedere* were exhibited in the Louvre under a banner which read, 'Monuments of Ancient Sculpture. Greece gave them up. Rome lost them. Their fate has changed twice. It will not change again.' After Napoleon's fall Italy clamoured for their restitution. The famous sculptor, Antonio Canova, personally headed the mission sent by Pope Pius VII in 1815 to bring the treasures back, in which he was largely successful. Many had been ripped from churches, but the Pope did not return them all to their original locations. He appropriated Raphael's *Transfiguration* and Caravaggio's *Deposition*, for example, for his own Vatican museums, where the *Laocoön* also now resides. The Louvre demonstrates vividly in its early years the double-headed motivation behind many museums at that time as a vehicle for both popular education and personal and political ambition.

Museums proliferated in the 19th century to enable a wide public to see the latest, exciting discoveries, as the natural and cultural history of the world came into focus. The perfect expressions of this are the two great pairs of almost identical museums that flank the Maria-Theresian-Platz in the centre of Vienna: one, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, charts the history of Empire; the other, the Natural History Museum, contains virtually every species of animal, stuffed or bottled, known to man in displays that have not changed since it was founded in 1889. In 1846, James Smithson, a modest Englishman, gave the then celestial sum of half-a-million dollars to the American Government to found a museum for 'the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men'. So the Smithsonian Institution in Washington was

founded, later to become the most comprehensive museum service in the world. The British Museum was, by then, a century old, and already suffering space problems. In 1860, Richard Owen, the Superintendent of the natural history collections at the museum, complained to a Parliamentary Committee that 'the whole intellectual world this year has been excited by a book on the origin of species; and what is the consequence? Visitors come to the British Museum, and they say, "Let us see all these varieties of pigeons: where is the tumbler, where is the pouter?", and I am obliged with shame to say, "I can show you none of them."... As to showing you the varieties of those species, or any of those phenomena that would aid one at getting at that mysteries of mysteries, the origin of species, our space does not permit.' More recently, the queues that formed to see specimens of moon rock brought back after the first landing, when they were toured on exhibition around Britain, give one some idea of what public interest must have been like in the 19th century, as discovery after discovery was put out on display. In the Age of Enlightenment, new animals were continually being discovered, along with new peoples and cultures, vistas undreamt of were opening up at the end of microscopes and telescopes, and the past was a daring new book whose pages people had only just begun to turn. The world was full of wonder, and museums were its portal.

New museums were opening all the time. Richard Owen achieved his wish before he died. In 1878, all the specimens belonging to the departments of botany, zoology, palaeontology and mineralogy were transferred to South Kensington to create the new British Museum of Natural History. Unencumbered by stuffed animals and pressed flowers, the British Museum could become, as its greatest director, Sir Antonio Panizzi, had envisaged, 'an institution for the diffusion of culture', and culture alone. This, above all, for Panizzi, meant books, as he was first and foremost a great librarian. He created the famous Reading Room during the time he was a director there from 1856 to 1866 although, sadly, he failed to persuade the government to provide the money to make it a lending library, too. As a young man, he had escaped from Italy to Britain to avoid imprisonment for allegedly killing a chief constable in a revolutionary fracas – his career, if nothing else, a tribute to the entrepreneurial spirit of those times. Once a revolutionary always a revolutionary, and Panizzi remained a dedicated egalitarian until the end. His aim was to ensure that anyone, however poor, could 'have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming the most intimate enquiry as the richest man in the country'.

Culture was now becoming as interesting a field for exploration as nature. After Darwin, many saw evolution at work in the progress of civilisation.

Museums had previously collected 'primitive' cultural artefacts as curios, and as illustrations of the errors of the heathen. Now these items were avidly collected to show the progress of mankind. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is a perfect example of this approach, preserved virtually intact from Victorian times. In the decade after the publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, General Pitt Rivers collected everything he could that showed what he called 'the living scroll of human progress'. So one case in the museum details the history of fire-making, another the evolution of the firearm. He invented the word 'typology' to describe the sequence of gradual improvements that he hoped to discover in everything man had made and done. New ideas like this even began to influence the bastion of learning at the British Museum, now a century old.

Before Darwin, the British Museum had no doubts about the order of human culture. There was the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, and all other cultures were lumped together as 'Oriental'. This included not just Chinese and Indian artefacts, as one would expect, but also all the Ancient Egyptian, Assyrian, ethnographic, North and South American material as well as, more surprisingly, the European medieval Christian collections, and finally, thrown in for good measure, anything British. Up until the mid-19th century, Britain was regarded as barbarous and simply not worthy of study. But the idea that culture could have evolved began to take hold during the 19th century, and a new hierarchy emerged. Greece and Rome were still on top but, in 1866, the first British Department was formed, although it still encompassed European medieval antiquities and all ethnography. Britain might by then have been the largest Empire the world had ever seen, but culturally speaking, in comparison with the Greeks, it had, according to the intellectuals who ran the British Museum, achieved little more than medieval monks or the tribes of the Amazon or Borneo.

The concept of a hierarchy of human culture seems strange to us today. Few, for example, would consider the Lindisfarne Gospels 'inferior' to a Roman mosaic. The idea that a 'savage' could be 'noble' was not new in the 19th century, but we would not now use the term 'savage' at all. Nor would we automatically assume that a society with no technical aids was necessarily less 'advanced' than ourselves, and we would certainly hesitate to call it 'primitive'. We are no longer nearly so sanguine about the possibility of human progress, nor even of the benefit of scientific discoveries. Nuclear physics and genetic engineering have taught us that these can expose dangers as well as save us from them. And the genocides of the 20th century have made us painfully aware of the limitations of the civilising process. We no longer regard ourselves as central to creation, but as minute particles on an

isolated planet. Over and above all that, we have ceased, in the last half-century, to have a confident and easy relationship with our natural surroundings. For the first time in human history, we have come to regard ourselves as a disease on the surface of the planet. Many even question the value of scientific study, the very basis on which all our major museums were founded. The battle that led to Galileo's enforced recantation of his 'suspicion' that the earth went round the sun, still rages. In 1987, the Supreme Court of America overturned a Louisiana Statute by ruling that creation science, which that state wanted to be taught in its schools, was a religious belief and therefore could not be taught as a science. The Roman Catholic Church did not revoke their condemnation of Galileo until 1992. A recent survey showed that 47 per cent of all Americans, and a quarter of college graduates, believe that we did not evolve but were created by God a few thousand years ago. Museums still have an important role to play in spreading enlightenment, but they cannot do so blindly, in the name of scientific progress, sweeping aside all other interpretations of experience as manifestations of ignorance. What is needed, today, is the post-Enlightenment museum – one that can be equally revealing to the poet and the scientist.

Since museums are about increasing understanding, any consideration of their future has to ask the fundamental question: is understanding important to us today? If so, the understanding of what? Knowledge, as we have seen, has a short history. Mankind has existed as a species for possibly 200,000 years, no one knows for sure. Up until as recently as 30,000 years ago, we lived alongside another species of mankind. But we only discovered that we did a mere 150 years ago, when the bones of Neanderthal man were found. The idea that every living creature has a common ancestry and is continually evolving, including ourselves today, came as much of a shock to us as did the notion that the earth was not static but turning. It is now a truism to say that nothing is permanent, but museums still fondly cling to the belief that they are fixtures, bastions even, against change. The British Museum is no exception; it reiterates the mantra of its founders, claiming that 'its collections are held together and in perpetuity in their entirety'. Yet in 1878, they lost all their natural history specimens and, in 1997, all their books. Both of these sections were originally thought to be central to the museum's purpose, and constituted by far the largest part of its holdings, numerically at least. Now they are regarded as irrelevant to its main function. Since its foundation, it is true that the British Museum has gone on getting bigger, but only physically. As far as its intellectual ambitions are concerned, it has shrunk considerably. It began as a repository of all knowledge, and believed in the unity of knowledge. Visitors in the 18th century

would have seen more stuffed giraffes than Egyptian mummies, and they would have been able to read virtually any book in the world. Today, the British Museum 'diffuses culture' through artefacts alone.

The British Museum was originally modelled on a concept of a museum that dates back to antiquity. The first museum we know of existed in Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE. It appears to have been part of an attempt, under the auspices of Ptolomy I Soter, to bring all fields of human knowledge together in one place. The library was its most famous feature. The Greek historian, Strabo, left an account of its complex of buildings, banqueting halls, gardens and covered walkways. As a whole, it sounds more like a monastery or university than a museum. It had a priest at its head and was not a public institution in any way that we would understand the term. The idea that one institution can encompass all knowledge is now not just impractical but redundant. Collections do not have to be all in one place for people to access them. It does not matter where they are or even who administers them, as they are becoming increasingly accessible through the computer. How Diderot would have loved the computer – all those facts, all those cross references, all those interconnections at the tips of one's fingers! Compass, the British Museum's new interactive database, will enable the public to explore its collections in both conventional and interdisciplinary, thematic ways. But you do not need to go to the British Museum to see it; Compass is on the web. You only need to go to the British Museum if you want to see the real things for yourself, and millions do. The British Museum attracts 6 million visits a year. By 2007, it calculates that there will be 7 million. By 2020, there could be as many as 10 million. Sir Antonio Panizzi once remarked that a museum is not a show. But the British Museum is left being just that, now that the library has gone and people can access information about its collections through the web. Why should anyone visit it but to see what is on show? And all it has left to show is its collection of cultural artefacts – the British Museum's unique asset and the sole carrier of its message.

These artefacts used to provide only part of the picture: they were illustrations in a wider search for understanding. The collection of the Danish physician and antiquarian, Ole Worm, which was absorbed into the Royal Kunstkammer in Copenhagen in 1655 and later formed the basis for the National Museum of Denmark, contained fabulous objects such as an agate that happened to look like an image of Christ on the Cross flanked by Mary and St John. But Ole Worm was interested in the truth as well as wonder. He used his collection to prove to the world that straight horns did not come from unicorns, as had been popularly believed, but from a species of

arctic whale, much to the chagrin of many Scandinavian fishermen who had profiteered for years by supplying evidence of the fabled beast.

The natural tendency of museums, if they do not know something, is to hide the fact, in the hope that some time in the future they will be able to declare it. Admissions of ignorance, they fear, will only sully their status as temples of knowledge. An exhibition of Dead Sea Scrolls in Glasgow in 1998 included the only fragment that refers to a 'pierced Messiah', which some scholars believe could be a near-contemporary written reference to the historical Jesus. But the curators from the Israeli Museum who had lent the material insisted that, since its relationship with Jesus had not been proven, only passing reference could be made to this theory, buried at the end of an accurate but boring label. Facts had to come first. So most visitors went round that exhibition unaware of the possible significance of this tiny, brown scrap of parchment, their minds unstirred by the wonder of what we do not know about the past. Museums in the future will need to promote doubt with delight. There are good scientific reasons why they should do so, because there is still a surprising amount that we do not know about the past.

The Parthenon Frieze in the British Museum

Visitors to the British Museum today are informed, as an undisputed fact, that the Parthenon frieze represents one of the great ceremonial processions of Ancient Athens. Every four years, the gigantic gold and ivory statue of the goddess, which stood in the inner sanctum of the Parthenon, was dressed in a new robe. The frieze shows a folded cloth being handed over to a man. So everything seems to fit. But it does not. Contemporary accounts indicate that cavalry did not take part in this procession, but there are 192 horsemen on the Parthenon frieze, which has led some scholars to assert that it celebrates the famous Battle of Marathon, when thousands of Persians were slain, but only 192 Greeks died. And there are other interpretations of the frieze as well. Could it show King Erecheus, who sacrificed one of his daughters to ensure an Athenian victory over Thrace? If so, the robe being presented is not Athena's, but the garment in which the young girl will be led to the altar. The British Museum favours the most mundane interpretation (even though it is unusual for sculptures on sacred buildings to repre-

sent contemporary events), but they are wrong to present this as the only interpretation. The truth is that we do not know what this world-famous sculptural frieze represents, or even what it looked like originally when it was brightly painted. It is in a museum's interest to emphasise what it does not know, because one looks at something all the harder if one does not know what it is. Objects can be especially intriguing if no one knows what they are, and one is invited to participate in interpreting the evidence.

Our origins are still extremely obscure, and only tantalising fragments remain of the earliest cultures. Confident in our scientific age, we tend to dismiss cultures that were built on uncertainties about the world around them, even though these contained much that was profoundly poetic and intensely human. Museums are full of wonderful things, from the pediment sculptures on the Parthenon to the golden jewellery of the Aztecs, which were made by people *because* they did not know the earth went round the sun. No artist today could carve the sun's chariot rising in the east, or mould the gold raft that would carry the sun back to the dawn after it had set, with the same profundity of feeling as sculptors did in Ancient Greece or Mexico, simply because, for us, the dawn no longer brings with it a daily, magnificent mystery. The Australian traditional Aborigines, by far the oldest living culture in the world, still believe that the red glow at sunset is the light cast by the souls of the dead as they leave and return to the underworld. Fifty years ago, Aboriginal skulls were still being exhibited in European museums in displays illustrating early stages of human evolution. What do we accept today that our successors will find unbelievable? There will always be something new to find out. The development of computers, instead of replacing the brain, has actually revealed how remarkably little we know about it. One reason why museums have to exhibit uncertainties is to enable them to keep pace with discovery. Most museums have what they call 'permanent' displays. These contain their permanent collections and are, nowadays, often installed in such a way as to make them difficult to change. But permanence can be the wrong starting point, even when a museum is apparently 'eternal' in its values.

There are sound educational reasons why museums today need to place greater emphasis on what they do not know, rather than what they do. Categorical presentations demonstrating variations in the appearance of frescoes in Florence or butterflies in Borneo can be off-putting, especially to visitors who do not know why they are looking at these displays in the first

place. Museums would have a better chance of captivating the attention of a wider audience if they used as their starting point the ignorance we have all shared, and must share. Awareness of ignorance is essential if we are to begin to understand the thoughts and feelings of those who lived before our scientific age, and whose productions now provide our museums with their chief attractions. As Diderot apocryphally said on his deathbed, 'the first step towards philosophy is incredulity'. Paradoxically, by abandoning certainty, the post-Enlightenment museum can return to its roots.

Science has stripped most of the wonder from the world we can see around us, which may be one reason why we have become so careless about it. We label things and think we know them, ever since we named the beasts, but the more one looks at a drop of water, or a blade of grass, or gazes into someone else's eyes, the more extraordinary what one is looking at becomes. Darwin once confided to a friend that the sight of a peacock's tail feather made him feel sick. How could such an elaborate and beautiful structure have simply evolved through the luck of the draw of natural selection? The fact that it did need not reduce the wonder we feel when looking at a peacock's tail. On the contrary, it can increase it, especially if it leads us to wider speculations, for example about the impact that the evolution of the eye (the peahen's as well as our own) has had on the appearance of nature as a whole. Museums will continue to have a duty to accumulate knowledge, but their authority will be based more in the future on their openness towards and commitment to learning, not on the weight of their knowledge to date. Anyone with access to a computer can claim that. Far from abandoning their collections, museums can only maintain them by continually reassessing their significance, and by freshly questioning their interpretations of them in the light of the larger role they can play within society as a whole.

The Museum of Tolerance

The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles was opened in 1994 as part of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, a leading human-rights organisation that is particularly active in tracking down Nazis. It is a museum essentially of ideas, not things. Originally, the Centre wanted to create a Holocaust Museum, along the lines of that in Washington, telling the story of what happened to the victims of Nazism, but the State of California, one of its sponsors, demanded that the museum have a wider brief, and deal with contemporary issues of racism and prejudice,

particularly in America. To do this the museum found it had to change its displays, and much more rapidly than it had expected.

Upon entering the museum, you are invited to go through either a door marked 'prejudiced' or one marked 'unprejudiced'. If you are cheeky enough to push the one marked 'unprejudiced', you discover it is locked. The guide helpfully reminds you that it is so because we are all prejudiced in one way or another. The introductory display (before a sequence of tableaux leads you inexorably to the door to the gas chamber) explores the origins of prejudice. Much emphasis is given to the power of words, how they can either incite hatred or lead to understanding. So important is vocabulary to this museum that words become, in effect, the artefacts around which the exhibition is built. To make these displays as effective as possible, the museum decided to concentrate on contemporary terms of abuse. It soon discovered, however, after the permanent exhibit had been installed, that abusive slang is changing all the time; a whole new repertoire can be on the streets within six months. Within two years it became clear that substantial alterations had to be made to the displays. To be successful in its mission, this museum has to be capable of change. It has had difficulty keeping up to date.

Museums are living institutions. They have changed a great deal since the Enlightenment. They may never again be at the forefront of knowledge in general, though they can still provide a vital platform where discoveries can be exposed and debated in public. There is still much to be learnt from the treasure-house of the past, but museums can no longer carry out even the lion's share of this research. During the Enlightenment, museums took on an egalitarian educational role. They assumed, quite rightly, the public's interest. This can no longer be taken for granted. But museums still contain what Howard Carter called, when he peered for the first time into Tutankhamun's tomb, 'wonderful things', and they can throw open countless windows onto worlds where the unexplained was the order of the day. By actively doing so, they can help restore the gleam of wonder to our jaded gaze, and reinvigorate our appetite for experiencing life in all its ultimately unfathomable glory. By reviving the open-minded, exploring spirit of their early days, museums can re-enlighten us.