

# The Renaissance of Museums in Britain

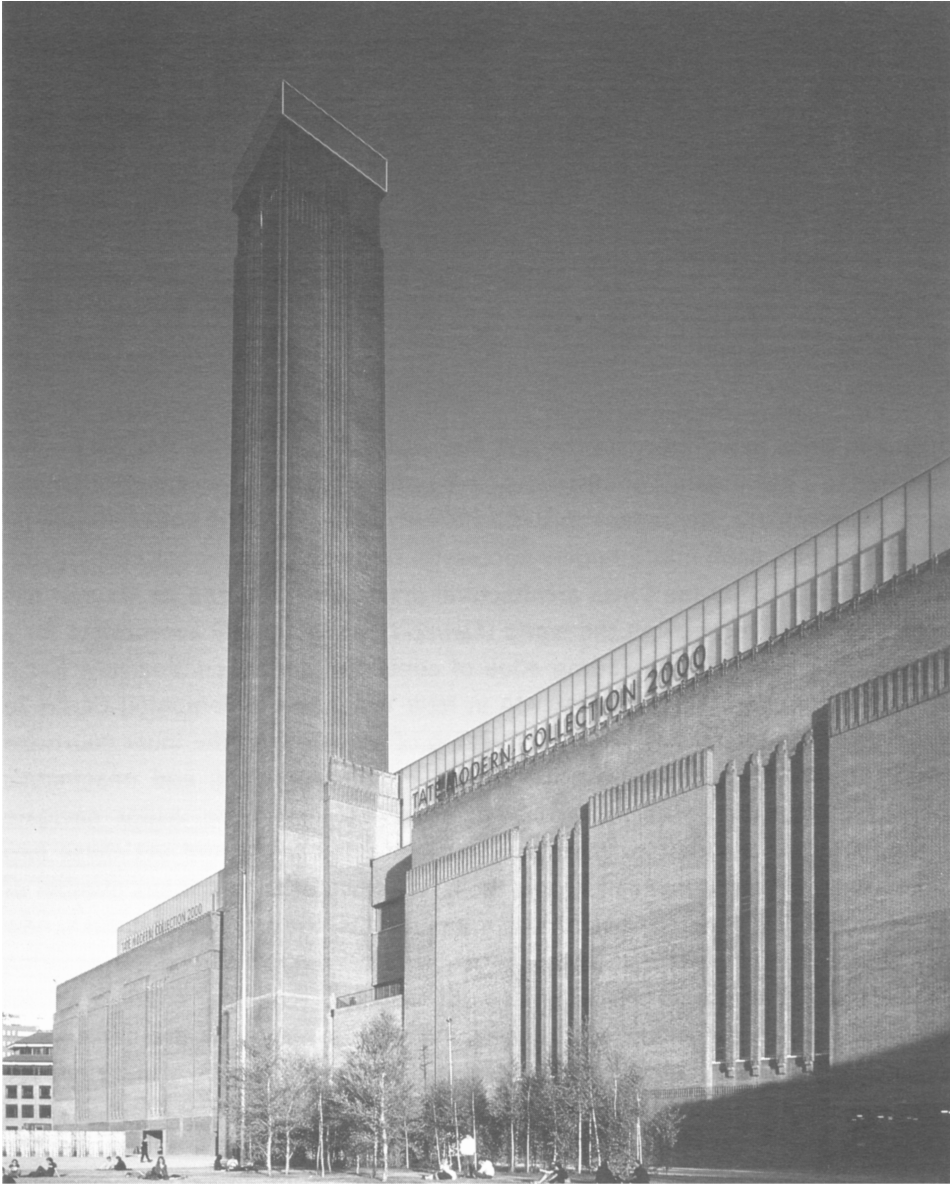
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In this paper – given as a lecture at Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the summer of 2003 – I survey the remarkable renaissance of museums – national and regional, public and private – in Britain in recent years, largely made possible with the financial support of the Heritage Lottery Fund. I look in detail at four non-national museum projects of particular interest: the Horniman Museum in South London, a remarkable and idiosyncratic collection of anthropological, natural history and musical material which has recently been re-housed and redisplayed; secondly, the nearby Dulwich Picture Gallery, famous for its 17th- and 18th-century Old Master paintings, a masterpiece of 19th-century architecture by Sir John Soane, which has been restored, and modern museum services provided. The third is the New Art Gallery, Walsall, where the Garman Ryan collection of early 20th-century painting and sculpture form the centrepiece of a new building with fine galleries and the forum is the Manchester Art Gallery, where the former City Art Gallery and the Athenaeum have been combined in a single building in which to display the city's rich art collections. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, of which I am Director, is the most important museum of art and archaeology in England outside London and the greatest University Museum in the world. Its astonishingly rich collections are introduced and the transformational plan for the museum is described. In July 2005 the Heritage Lottery Fund announced a grant of £15 million and the renovation of the Museum is now underway.

This is a 'good news' story. In the last five years in Britain there has been what amounts to a Renaissance of museums. The Tate Modern – the remarkable transformation of a disused power station on London's South Bank into a hugely successful museum of 20th-century and contemporary art by the Swiss architectural practice Herzog and de Meuron – has been applauded throughout the world (Figure 1). As is entirely appropriate for a city that today is at the cutting



**Figure 1.** Tate Modern, London

edge of contemporary art, London now has a museum of modern art to rival MOMA in New York and the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Equally admired has been the building of a dome over the inner courtyard of the British Museum by Norman Foster, a hugely exciting and imaginative structure which has a very practical purpose – to assist the visitor to navigate successfully around that extraordinary museum (Figure 2). And yet these two expensive and bold schemes are only the



**Figure 2.** View of the Great Court, British Museum, London

best-known of an enormous number of museum projects – renovations of existing museums, the creation of entirely new museums, new wings of museums – which have been transforming the situation of museums in Britain. I want to look at a number of lesser-known but transformational schemes, to think about the display and presentation of collections and then introduce the plans that I have for my own museum, the oldest public museum in Europe, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Almost all the museums I shall look at are free. The five million people who visit the British Museum each year enter free, as do the four million who go into Tate Modern, as do the 400,000 who visit the Ashmolean. Free entry to museums is a policy that has recently been reaffirmed by the present government and those museums, like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which had begun to charge a few years ago, are now free again. This is a noble and important tradition in Britain and says a great deal about the role that museums have always played and continue to play in public education. It is quite clear if one looks at the intentions expressed in the foundation statements of British museums that they have always been thought to serve in the first place the local community: they date after all from an age before tourism. This also applies, though to a lesser extent, to the national museums, which have naturally always been intended to address a national audience: it is very striking that in the Parliamentary Enquiry into the

National Gallery in 1853 the use of the Gallery by those living and working close to Trafalgar Square was a matter of central concern. The great nineteenth-century museums in Britain were set up explicitly as institutes of public education and we can only honour that laudable intention if they are free.

However, a plea for free museums is not my main business. I want to look at a number of particular projects and the benefits they have brought.

Why has this Renaissance, as I have called it, taken place? Has this government or its predecessor suddenly and uncharacteristically decided to lavish huge sums of public money on museums because of a conversion on the road to Damascus? The answer I am afraid is more prosaic. It comes about as a direct consequence of the creation of a National Lottery in 1993. There have been national lotteries in most Continental countries for many years – in Germany, for example, such lotteries are organized by Land – but, despite the popularity of gambling on horse racing and football in Britain, there has in the past been a puritanical distaste for the idea of a national lottery. However, when it was realized that as a consequence of European legislation, any European lottery could set up a similar operation in Britain, a National Lottery was created. There was, however, a strongly held view expressed by individuals and organizations that such a Lottery was, in effect, a tax on the poor – because it is, of course, widely recognized throughout the world that Lottery ticket buyers tend to be the less well off. A consequence of this discussion was that the profits generated by the Lottery should not be used to replace existing government spending – this is known as the principle of additionality – but to benefit six ‘good causes’. These causes were: Arts, Charities, Heritage, Sports, New Opportunities, and the Millennium. The Millennium Fund was wound up in 2000 and the five other categories remain, although their precise parameters have been defined and redefined. In the event, the Lottery has been an astonishing success and has generated enormous sums of money for distribution to the ‘good causes’. Each of these causes has a body that distributes grants. In the case of the Arts, this is the Arts Council, which distributes to the performing arts and contemporary art. Its increased revenues have benefited museums through their support for contemporary artists: the new Baltic Mills in Newcastle, the transformation of an industrial building – a grain mill on the banks of the River Tyne – into a space for the display of contemporary art, receives support for many of its activities from the Arts Council. However, the ‘good cause’ that has principally benefited museums, because it deals with buildings and collections, is Heritage and the relevant distributing body is the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Since 1997, the HLF has distributed no less than £2.3 billion, of which £760 million has gone to museums. Some of this money has gone to vast capital projects that have transformed entire institutions, others to comparatively small schemes to make better use of established collections, reinvigorating them and improving access. Since 1997, there have been 16 grants of above £10 million

(the largest is the £31 million for the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside; that is, the great collections of art and archaeology in Liverpool) and 110 between £1 million and £10 million.

The system for distributing these large sums of money is, as it should be, rigorous and careful. It seems to me to be well thought out in three important respects. First, it requires matching funding from other bodies. The HLF will never give more than 75% of the funding of any scheme, and in practice often gives substantially less. The museum must therefore find other funds, whether from private or corporate supporters, from local city or county councils, or other sources of funding. I believe that the discipline of being forced to work hard to find additional funding is good for such institutions – but often it is not easy, and it should be noted that at the present time there is a substantial backlog of schemes that have been approved for Lottery support but have not been able to find the matching funding. Secondly, there is an entirely proper emphasis on public access. There must be demonstrable public benefit if these schemes are to obtain Lottery support and this seems to me to have had an entirely salutary effect in the way that museums view their role. We have all visited museums that have poorly lit, poorly labelled, poorly designed displays and which convey the sense that the museum exists for the benefit of the curator rather than to delight and instruct the visitor. Such museums have to reform their ways if they are to be eligible for Lottery support. Thirdly, there has been a real determination that the money should not all be spent in the national museums in London: there have been major beneficiaries in London, Tate Modern and Tate Britain, the National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert and The Wallace Collection, but there have been three major grants (that is, more than £10 million) since 1997 to Manchester, and grants to Glasgow, Falmouth, Sheffield and Liverpool, which, as I noted earlier, has received the largest single grant ever awarded.

Let me now take some case studies. I have chosen these from personal interest and so somewhat at random, but I have not chosen any of the great national collections in central London and have tried instead to introduce museums you may not know and which you should certainly visit.

My first two examples are from South London, largely because I have lived there for many years but also because both museums in my view display an exemplary attitude towards their local communities. South London has areas of great social deprivation, substantial first-generation immigrant communities and relatively modest cultural resources when compared with other parts of the city. It therefore presents special challenges to museums that are intent on playing a key role in the local community.

The Horniman Museum in Forest Hill has recently been transformed by a scheme that involved a substantial Heritage Lottery Fund element (Figure 3).

The museum's remarkable holdings are a very special combination of



**Figure 3.** Horniman Museum, London, showing new extension

anthropology, natural history and musical instruments based on a collection formed, with characteristic Victorian enthusiasm and inclusiveness, by the Horniman family, who were wealthy tea importers. The Horniman Free Museum, housed in a custom-made building designed by the celebrated Arts and Crafts architect Charles Harrison Townsend, was opened to the public in 1901, a gift to the people of London from Frederick Horniman for their ‘recreation, instruction and enjoyment’. In its new Centenary Gallery the Museum confronts head-on the ethical difficulties presented by the display of ethnographic collections – it prefers the term ‘anthropological’ – substantially assembled within the British Empire, to visitors many of whom are first- or second-generation immigrants from former countries of the Empire. Its Music Gallery shows 1600 of its collection of 7000 musical instruments in a particularly original and exciting fashion: they are laid out in visually striking groups by date and place of origin: a selection can be listened to by pressing a button and the displays are interspersed with flat screens

showing performances using the particular instruments. Also included in the new development is an Education Centre, a Hands-on Base in which the Horniman's handling collection can be used and a Temporary Exhibitions Gallery. There is the African Worlds Gallery, the Aquarium and Vivarium and the Natural History Gallery, which very effectively has been retained in its original Victorian layout. The work also improved physical access to the Museum, especially for the disabled, as well as environmental control. Designed by the architectural practice Allies and Morrison, the scheme cost £13.5 million, of which almost £10 million came from the HLF and the rest from individuals, charitable trusts, companies and the Friends of the Horniman, the Museum's lively supporters' club. The new presentations of the collections do not stand alone; there is, as there must be in any museum, a vigorous programme of talks, performances, study days. There is also an outreach programme that takes the museum to the community and addresses those audiences, and there are many of them, who would not normally visit a museum. The Horniman and its Conservatory are set in a park, which has been re-landscaped and, following its transformation, is well visited by people living locally. Visitor figures have increased by about 100,000 to 280,000 a year. It is a real model of a museum that has come to play a key role in the educational provision of its local community. It is, I scarcely need to add, free.

Not far away, in Dulwich, is the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the first custom-built picture gallery in London, opened to the public in 1811 (Figure 4). In 1790, a French art dealer living in London, Noel Desenfans, was commissioned by Stanislaus Augustus, King of Poland, to create a collection of Old Master Paintings to form the basis of a National Gallery in Warsaw. It was a particularly good moment for such an activity as, following the Revolution, French collections were being dispersed, many being sent to London for sale. Desenfans made an impressive collection of 17th- and 18th-century paintings – which include outstanding paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Poussin, Claude, Guercino, Reni and Tiepolo – but in 1795 Stanislaus was forced to abdicate and Desenfans found himself with a large collection without a home. How it happened that the collection came to be given to a school in South London is a story for another day, but suffice it to say that the paintings and enough money to build an art gallery and an associated almshouse were given to Dulwich College. The architect chosen was Sir John Soane, who produced a building which is of the greatest architectural significance, admired by architects and studied by architectural historians ever since. Since the Second World War the College had struggled to maintain the building and its collections satisfactorily, and there had even been a sale of a painting at a low point in the early 1970s. A charitable trust was set up, the College made over both the building and the collection to the Trust and the Trust, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, who himself made a substantial donation to an endowment fund for the running of the Gallery, made the Lottery application. It was



**Figure 4.** Dulwich Picture Gallery, London: Soane building with café and cloister in right foreground

successful, a total of £9 million was raised, and the Gallery has been transformed. The central problem, as so often in Britain, was the provision of modern museum services – education department, lecture theatre, shop and café – to a historic building protected, quite properly, by rigorous heritage legislation. This was particularly acute in the case of Dulwich, which is a key early 19th-century building by an architect whose stock has never been higher. The architect, Rick Mather, solved this problem brilliantly by creating a glass cloister in front and to the right of the Gallery as one approaches it and putting all the modern services except the shop in buildings that lead off this cloister. It is here, for example, that the Education service, which has a nationwide reputation for its imaginative programmes for local people, including the unemployed and the disabled, is housed. There is a lecture theatre and a large studio for practical work by many different groups from the local community. The original Soane building has been reinstated with historical accuracy – it had been damaged during the War by bombing and inaccurately restored afterwards, but modern lighting and environmental controls have been installed. As at the Horniman, visitor figures have increased substantially since the renovation, which cost £9 million with a



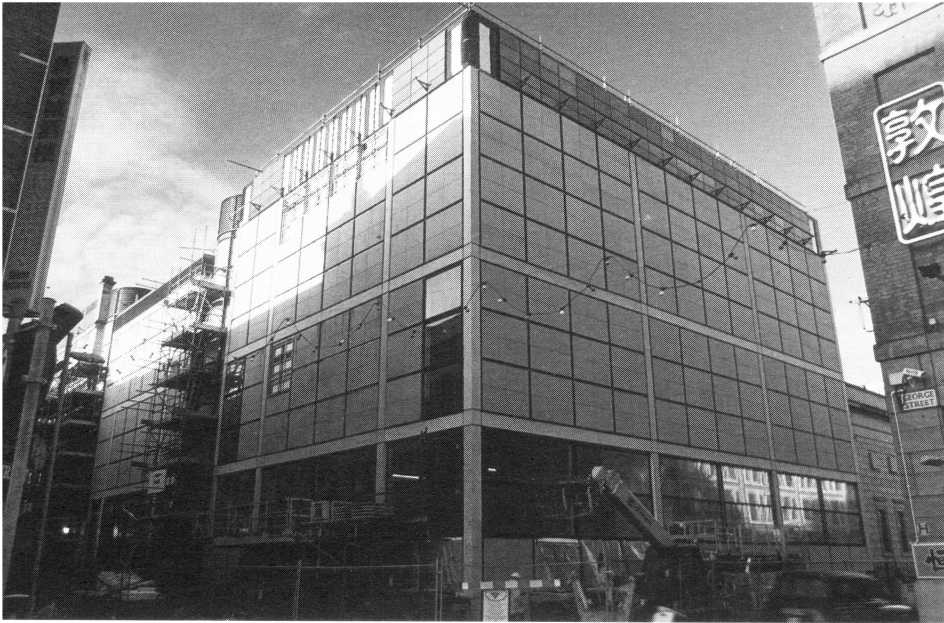
contribution of £5 million from the Lottery. Visitor figures have risen from under 80,000 to over 100,000 a year since the reopening of the museum in May 2000. It is worth stressing that the Dulwich Picture Gallery in its formal constitution is a private museum run by a charitable trust: the object of that Trust is, of course, the preservation of the building and its collections and their presentation to the public. It is a private rather than a public or state-run museum, but as long as such a Trust is able to demonstrate its financial sustainability to the HLF, it is eligible for as large a grant as any state-run body. In my view, this diversity in the nature of museums has been an important factor in the Renaissance I have been describing. Different solutions suit different institutions and this diversity has been recognized, and indeed encouraged.

From South London, we travel to Walsall, a 19th-century industrial town just north west of Birmingham, whose prosperity rested on textiles. With the decline of the textile industry in the face of competition from India and the Far East, Walsall has been in steady decline since the Second World War. It had a small Victorian Gallery in the same building as the Public Library, to which, in the 1950s, two remarkable women – Kathleen Garman, lover and later wife of the sculptor Jacob Epstein, and her life-long friend, Sally Ryan, a talented sculptor – presented their joint collection. It reflects their eclectic and adventurous taste. Works by well-known artists, including Monet, Constable, Van Gogh and Picasso are present, but the focus of the collection is work by Epstein, charting his long, productive and often controversial career, and by artists of his circle, including Augustus John, Modigliani, Gaudier-Brezeska and Epstein's son-in-law, Lucien Freud. It was the existence of this collection that was the inspiration for the creation of a new building, the New Art Gallery Walsall (Figure 5). The building does not only have fine new galleries for the presentation of the Garman Ryan collection and for temporary exhibitions but has an especially imaginative Discovery Gallery, which provides access for young visitors to contemporary art by interactive means. If that sounds worthy and dull, believe me it is not: the programmes have a particular emphasis on making, and processes of creation. The Education programme is ambitious and far-reaching: a full range of workshops, talks, performances, storytelling, lectures, artists-in-residence and teacher placements. Of the total cost of £21 million the Lottery provided £16 million. Since its opening in May 2000 the Museum has received 610,000 visitors. The principle is, of course, the same as the far better-known museum by Frank Gehry in Bilbao, another 19th-century industrial town in need of reinventing itself in the new millennium. There are, however, two significant differences: the Walsall museum is built on a collection whereas the Bilbao Museum is a Kunsthalle, a space for exhibitions, and the Bilbao Museum is essentially a tourist attraction, whereas the Walsall Museum is a cultural resource for the people of Walsall and the West Midlands. And the Walsall Museum is free.



**Figure 5.** The New Art Gallery, Walsall

From Walsall I want to take you up the M6 to Manchester, a city that has seen an astonishing cultural Renaissance in recent years. There has been a whole series of new and improved museums and galleries that have opened in Manchester in the last few years: the Imperial War Museum North, a building by Daniel Libeskind; the Manchester Museum, the Museum housing the natural history, anthropological and archaeological collections of the University of Manchester, which is currently undergoing a transformation; the Lowry at Salford, an industrial suburb where the artist L.S. Lowry lived and worked, which is both a gallery and a music centre with auditoria and rehearsal spaces. I would like, however, to concentrate on the Manchester City Art Gallery which, after substantial rebuilding and expansion, has just reopened its doors to the public (Figure 6). In the collection are good Old Master paintings – there is an especially impressive group of Dutch 17th-century paintings, the Assheton-Bennett collection – but its real strength, as one would expect in a great 19th-century industrial city like Manchester, is in Victorian painting. It has one of the greatest collections of Pre-Raphaelite painting, for example. The Art Gallery has been housed in two adjacent buildings: the City Art Gallery acquired the Athenaeum in 1938 but the plan for an expansion had been first discussed in 1898 when a block at the rear of the Gallery was



**Figure 6.** Manchester Art Gallery: New Extension

purchased. It was 100 years later in 1998 that Michael Hopkins and Partners created a new building on that site, which uses a glass atrium to link the new wing with the former City Art Gallery and the Athenaeum. The result, in a striking new building, is to triple the exhibition space (from 900 to 2500 square metres) and incorporate within it the fine Victorian interiors of the Athenaeum. The result is the transformation of one of England's greatest municipal galleries and the redisplay of its outstanding collections.

I have chosen these projects almost at random. They are certainly not the most expensive or the most ambitious recent museum schemes in Britain. Three are concerned with the transformation of an existing building by a distinguished architect in order to provide modern museum services to the visitor: all place the conservation of collections and their presentation at the heart of the endeavour. The fourth, at Walsall, is an entirely new museum to present a great but little known and under-valued collection to the best possible advantage. All received substantial support from the Lottery, indeed it is doubtful whether any of these schemes would have gone ahead – at least in the ambitious form in which they have – without Lottery support. I could have chosen any one of more than a hundred other schemes elsewhere in the UK, which have been funded in part by the Lottery. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the Heritage Lottery Fund's three principal aims: (1) to encourage people to be involved and make decisions about their heritage; (2) to conserve and enhance the UK's diverse



**Figure 7.** Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

heritage; (3) to ensure that everyone can learn about, have access to and enjoy their heritage. All the four projects I have briefly described seem to me to have met those aims. They have something else in common as well. They are all essentially community schemes which seek to make existing cultural resources in their particular areas count for more, and be placed more at the heart of the local community. To me this seems an impressive and highly laudable aim.

I now want to take this opportunity to introduce my own Museum, the Ashmolean in Oxford, which is planning to play its part in this Museum Renaissance based on service to the community. The Ashmolean Museum houses the collections of art and archaeology of the University of Oxford (Figure 7). It plays a key role in teaching and research in the University but essentially it is a great public museum and always has been. The starting-point must be that the collections of the Ashmolean, in archaeology and numismatics, in Western and Eastern art, make it the single most important museum in England outside London. The Ashmolean possesses, for example, the most important collection of pre-Dynastic Egyptian material outside Cairo, the only great collection of Minoan antiquities outside Heraklion, the largest and most important collection of Raphael



**Figure 8.** Raphael (1483–1520) Studies of the Heads and Hands of two Apostles, black chalk on paper, 49.9 × 36.4 cm, c. 1518–19, preparatory study for the Transfiguration, Ashmolean Museum

drawings in the world (Figure 8) and the greatest Anglo-Saxon holdings outside the British Museum. It has enormously rich collections of British and European prehistoric artefacts, Greek pottery, Japanese ceramics, antiquities from the Ancient Near East, Cycladic sculptures, drawings by Michelangelo, Watteau and Turner, Renaissance bronzes, English silver, medieval British metalwork and ceramics, Chinese bronzes, jade and paintings, Indian sculpture, Cypriot antiquities, Etruscan metalwork, Byzantine jewellery, early Renaissance paintings, Pre-Raphaelite paintings and drawings, one of the finest of all groups of Dutch still-life paintings, and much more.

The founding collections were amassed by John Tradescant the Elder and the Younger, father and son, both gardeners and eventually royal gardeners. John the Elder began in about 1610 to assemble an immense collection of natural history, antiquities and curiosities in the manner of many early 17th-century collectors – an abacus from Russia, horses' skulls, snakeskins, a Doge's hat, and so on – and his son augmented the collection, particularly interestingly on his trips to America where he obtained Powhatan's Mantle in Virginia. What was remarkable however, was that they were gardeners not princes and that they created in their house in Lambeth, South London, a Museum – it was known as the Ark, not because everything went in two by two but because everything was there – that was open to the public. One of their early visitors was the lawyer and antiquarian Elias Ashmole who helped them to write the first catalogue of the collection – the first comprehensive museum catalogue – and on his death, John the Younger bequeathed the collection to Ashmole. Ashmole presented the collection to the University of Oxford in 1677 on the condition that a building would be erected to house it. That building, the Old Ashmolean on Broad Street in Oxford, which today houses the Museum of the History of Science, was opened to the general public in 1683. It is clear that from the very first moment the general public did visit. There was never any question of reserving the collection for members of the University. This is apparent from the account of a visit in 1710 by a young and priggish German traveller, Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach: 'The specimens in the museum', he wrote, 'might be much better arranged and preserved. It is surprising that things are preserved even as well as they are, since the people impetuously handle everything in the usual English fashion and even the woman are allowed up here for sixpence; they run here and there, grabbing at everything and taking no rebuff from the sub-custos'. Records from the period confirm that, in addition to its scholarly and genteel visitors, the Museum was popular with a wide section of ordinary people including servants, farmers and bargees passing along the Thames, just the kind of people whose presence so upset Von Uffenbach.

The University's collections grew with the arrival of the collection of antique marbles assembled by the Earl of Arundel, a great antiquarian whose agents in Italy, Greece and Asia Minor had been voraciously buying sculpture and



**Figure 9.** The Alfred Jewel, gold, enamel and rock crystal, probably part of an aestel, a pointer for reading manuscripts, commissioned by King Alfred in about AD890, Ashmolean Museum

inscriptions for him in the 1620s and 1630s. The Arundel marbles arrived in Oxford in a series of gifts from the family, the first from the Earl's grandson in 1677. They joined the shawabti and coins presented by Archbishop Laud to the University in 1635.

Gifts continued in the 18th century. The remarkable piece of Anglo-Saxon jewellery known as the *Alfred Jewel* was given in 1718 (Figure 9); the marble bust of Sir Christopher Wren by the English sculptor Edward Pierce was presented by Wren's son in 1737. In the early nineteenth century there was pressure to re-house the collections, especially the Arundel marbles, which stood unprotected from boisterous undergraduates in the Examination Schools. After various vicissitudes they were moved to a new building in Beaumont Street, one of the finest Greek Revival buildings in the country, by the architect and archaeologist Charles Cockerell. The University Galleries, as this new building was first known, opened

to the public in 1845 and quickly attracted new gifts; indeed within a year of its opening the Museum received an astonishing collection of no fewer than 270 drawings by Raphael and Michelangelo from the collection of Sir Thomas Lawrence, perhaps the finest collection of Old Master drawings ever assembled. In 1850, William Fox-Strangways gave 41 early Italian paintings, including Paolo Uccello's *Hunt in the Forest*. Chambers Hall gave a superb group of painted and drawn landscapes in 1855 and, shortly afterwards, John Ruskin, Slade Professor in the University, gave drawings by his great hero Turner and by himself. In 1894 the Museum received the gift of the University Printer, Thomas Combe, a friend and patron of the pre-Raphaelites.

A key moment in the history of the Ashmolean was the appointment in 1894 of Arthur Evans as Keeper of the Old Ashmolean. He was the son of John Evans, a successful paper manufacturer but, in the manner of the High Victorians, also a distinguished numismatist, geologist and archaeologist. He made a large collection of Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age implements, which his son gave to the Ashmolean. Arthur Evans found the old Museum neglected and attacked the University in a public lecture for its poor stewardship. During his 24 years in office he not only raised the level of curatorship but also finally brought together the collections of the Old Ashmolean and the University Galleries. With the help of his friend Fortnum, to whom I shall return, he built new galleries – though always intended to be temporary, they still stand – at the back of Cockerell's building, the University Galleries, and within ten years the collections in the Old Ashmolean had been moved: art and archaeology to Beaumont Street, natural history to the new University Museum in South Parks Road, a superb building in the new Victorian Gothic style championed by Ruskin, and the manuscripts to the Bodleian Library. In 1908 this was formally recognized by the creation of the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. Evans, was, of course, an active, almost a hyperactive, archaeologist, best known for his excavations at Knossos and, as a consequence, the Ashmolean has the most important Minoan collections outside Crete.

In 1899, Charles Drury Edward Fortnum gave such a rich and large gift of Renaissance bronzes, majolica, sculpture and finger-rings that his obituary justly described him as the second founder of the Ashmolean. He was encouraged to leave his collection – which he had first intended for the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert – by Evans and persevered despite the difficulties presented by 'the pig-headed parsons' (as he wrote in a letter to Evans) who ran the University.

It was also in the 1890s that the Museum received the bequest of the Egyptian antiquities of the Reverend G.J. Chester, who retired from his living as a clergyman on the grounds of ill-health and went to live in Egypt where for many years he collected antiquities and sold them to museums and collectors. In old



guidebooks, advice was offered to would-be purchasers of artefacts to consult Chester at the Luxor Hotel where he could be found every day at teatime. The Egyptian collections were also enhanced by gifts of prehistoric material excavated by Sir Flinders Petrie on behalf of the Egypt Excavation Fund in the 1890s. These finds had been declined by the British Museum on the grounds that they were not so much prehistoric as 'unhistoric', although Petrie suspected the professional jealousy of the Keeper of the Egyptian collections. One of the most remarkable gifts of Petrie and the Egypt Exploration Fund was the Princesses fresco, a fragment from the Amarna period noted for its naturalistic style, showing scenes from domestic life, a style encouraged by Akhenaten.

Gifts and bequests continued throughout the 20th century. Among major paintings presented in the early part of the century is the late Claude of Ascanius shooting the stag of Sylvia (which joined the preparatory drawing which had been given by Chambers Hall) and Picasso's *Blue Roofs* of 1901. Sir John Beazley, the great historian of Greek vase painting, gave his own immensely important collection in 1970 and in 1978 the Museum received an enormous gift of Islamic works from Gerald Reitlinger. This is just the smallest part of a constant stream of works of art and archaeological artefacts presented to the Museum.

The Museum continues to make acquisitions, both by gift and purchase: since 1998 we have, among many others, bought a portrait drawing of Charles Cockerell by Ingres: a portrait bust of Edward Salter by Michael Rysbrack: a 12th-century Bodhissatva: Turner's watercolour of Christ Church, Oxford; a group of prints by Georg Baselitz, including *Seeadler*; and the *Portrait of Giacomo Doria* by Titian, which we purchased at the Luton Hoo sale in 2000 for £2.8 million with the aid of a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (Figure 10). In satisfaction of capital taxation we have recently received an immensely important oil sketch by Van Dyck of *The Garter Procession*, unique in recording a major unexecuted royal commission; and, by gift, a large collection of Chinese paintings.

I hope that the remarkable quality and range of the Ashmolean collections will now be evident to you, as well as some sense of its unique history. Yet, despite the widely acknowledged importance of the collections, there can be no doubt that in certain respects the Museum fails to meet the standards of display, presentation and educational provision that are expected by the modern museum visitor. There are problems of visitor navigation, poor lighting and display, environmental control and disability access. In order to meet these problems, we have in the last few years been working on an ambitious plan that will transform the Ashmolean into a modern museum that will be able to serve its large present and potential public to a very high standard. We presently have close to 400,000 visitors – a very high figure for a museum outside London – but could receive many more.



**Figure 10.** Titian (c.1487–1576). Portrait of Giacomo Doria, oil on canvas, 115.5 × 97.7 cm, Ashmolean Museum. The acquisition of the painting was made possible through the generosity of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Arts Collections Fund and the Friends of the Ashmolean

The plan envisages the demolition of the galleries erected by Evans in the 1890s and their replacement by modern galleries: it gives us 47% more space (and 100% more public space) on the same footprint (an important consideration, as the Ashmolean is land-locked). The original Cockerell building will be carefully

restored and reinstated. The plan will give us modern Conservation Studios, appropriate to the importance of the collections, an education centre, a facility we have long hoped for, and a substantial temporary exhibition space, which will enable us to mount a far more ambitious programme of exhibitions. It represents no less than the transformation of the greatest museum outside London.

That we can even dream of such a bold and ambitious scheme is because of the Lottery. We have already received two significant grants: one towards the building of a new Gallery for our 20th century collections, the Sands Gallery, which opened in 2001 and a second grant of almost £2 million towards the acquisition of the *Portrait of Giacomo Doria* by Titian, in 2000. The preparation of an application for a major capital grant is a complex matter and the Linbury Trust, one of the Sainsbury family's Charitable Trusts, has helped us to prepare our plans. We hope that the HLF will respond to our vision for a new Ashmolean, which will take its proper place alongside the greatest of our museums and so participate in the remarkable Renaissance of Museums in Britain, which I have introduced to you.

The lecture on which this paper is based was given at the Netherlands Institution for Advanced Study (NIAS) on 13 June 2003. Since then the renaissance of museums in Britain has continued with the invaluable assistance of the Heritage Lottery Fund. In July 2004, the HLF awarded a grant of £15 million to the Ashmolean Museum, which has enabled the museum to proceed with its transformational plan. The HLF has provided one third of the total building cost of the project: the entire cost – with an endowment for future running costs, is £49 million. At the time of writing – July 2005 – the campaign has raised 70% of the cost. Demolition and rebuilding of the museum are due to begin early in 2006 and the renovated museum will reopen late in 2008.

### **Further Information**

Heritage Lottery Fund: [www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk)

Tate Modern: [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

British Museum: [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk)

Horniman Museum: [www.horniman.ac.uk](http://www.horniman.ac.uk)

Dulwich Picture Gallery: [www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk](http://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk)

The New Art Gallery, Walsall: [www.artatwalsall.org.uk](http://www.artatwalsall.org.uk)

Manchester Art Gallery: [www.manchestergalleries.org](http://www.manchestergalleries.org)

Ashmolean Museum: The Ashmolean Museum: a brief history of the Institution and its collections, Arthur MacGregor  
[www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk](http://www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk)

### About The Author

**Christopher Brown** has been Director of the Ashmolean Museum since 1998. Previously, he was Chief Curator of the National Gallery, London. He has lectured and published widely on 17th-century Dutch and Flemish painting, and is particularly interested in contacts and exchanges between Northern and Southern Europe in the 17th century and the social history of art in the Dutch Golden Age. He has organized exhibitions on Dutch landscape art, Dutch history painting, Rembrandt, Rubens' landscapes, Carel Fabritius, and Van Dyck. His numerous publications on the last artist include the catalogue of the Van Dyck exhibition held at the Royal Academy in 1999, and he is currently preparing a new edition of Van Dyck's *Italian Sketchbook*.