Our enlightenment

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The opening of the Enlightenment Gallery at the British Museum in 2003 is doubly welcome: first, because it opens up to visitors the debates about the history and purpose of museums; and, secondly, because it puts philosophy and political theory back at the centre of our work. The British Museum has made a major statement about the place of museums in society and should be warmly congratulated for this.

My main purpose in this paper is to expand the intellectual space the British Museum has opened up for us, and in particular to make a case for the value in our work of distinctive – and often neglected – traditions of thought from different nations and regions across the world.

Sir Neil MacGregor, in his speech at the Museums Association Conference in the UK in September 2003 and in a subsequent article in the London *Guardian*¹, described the British Museum as “a machine to generate tolerance” and “a machine to generate controlled dissent”. He believes that the creation of the British Museum in 1753 was an act of intellectual idealism and, potentially, profound political radicalism. Despite the questionable financial arrangements surrounding the Museum’s foundation, what the Members of Parliament and grandees who presided over its birth had done (whether they realised it or not) was, says Sir Neil, to create a public space for intellectual enquiry and dissent. The Museum reflected the Enlightenment conviction that

knowledge and understanding were indispensable ingredients of civil society and the best remedies against intolerance and bigotry – the dreaded “enthusiasm” of religious certainties that led to conflict, oppression and civil war.

Sir Neil also notes as significant the fact that it was called the British Museum, not the Royal Museum. In the wake of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, which he believes had threatened the country with a return to an authoritarian state on something like the French model, the creation of the British Museum was a symbol of Britain’s commitment to a different model of political authority and intellectual freedom. It was the intellectual equivalent of the idea of Her Majesty’s loyal opposition, he says, an exercise in controlled subversion and contained dissent, a recognition that society could move forward only if disagreement was fostered and channelled.

From its origins, argues Sir Neil, the Museum was a monument to civic humanism, designed to generate useful truth, or rather, truths and out of those different truths tolerance. Ex-

120 ceptionally, the Museum was international in its intended audience, its objects being held “for the use of learned and studious men, both native and foreign.” The aim was to allow the public to inform itself about the world in many different ways, but principally through the sheer quality and range of objects from other times and other places. What museums of this kind offer us, Sir Neil says, is a chance to forge the arguments that can hope to defeat the simplifying brutalities which disfigure politics all round the world. Where else, he asks, can the world see so clearly that it is one? It is the memory of mankind, a place for dialogue between civilisations.

Interestingly, the case made here by the British Museum is based on the intended social impact of its collections, rather than on their intrinsic value. This is the kind of argument that many traditional museums have in the past rejected, on the grounds that museums should not or cannot be instruments of social engineering.

That the British Museum and similar museums are Enlightenment institutions is incontrovertible. They were, warts and all, of their time. But the related claim made in 2003 on their own behalf by nineteen major American and European arts and historical museums (including the British Museum), that they are Universal Museums is less respectable. The rationale which these museums give for their special status is that they “bring together the different cultural traditions of humanity under one roof...” and “endow the great individual pieces in their collections with a worldwide context within which their full significance is graspable as nowhere else”.²

This assertion of universality has been treated with scorn by many museum professionals. Geoffrey Lewis, Chair of the ICOM Ethics

Committee, believes that the real purpose of the Declaration was “to establish a higher degree of immunity from claims for the repatriation of objects from the collections of these museums”. He adds that, “The presumption that a museum with universally defined objectives may be considered exempt from such demands is specious. The Declaration is a statement of self-interest, made by a group representing some of the world’s richest museums; they do not, as they imply, speak for the ‘international museum community’”. The debate today is not about the desirability of Universal Museums but about the ability of a people to present their cultural heritage in their own territory”.³

For George Abungu, former Director General of the National Museum of Kenya, the issue is equally clear: “I strongly contest the idea that some museums may call themselves Universal Museums. Surely all museums share a common mission and a shared vision. Do Universal Museums claim to be universal on the grounds of their size, their collections, how rich they are? Moreover, each museum should have something special that makes it of universal value for humanity. For example, the National Museums of Kenya, of which I was Director until 2002, is universally known for its work on human origins....Yet the National Museum of Kenya was not asked to join the group of Universal Museums. So what is the basis of their universal value? Are Universal Museums solely in Europe and North America?”⁴ Maurice Davis is even more direct, describing the Declaration as “a George Bush approach to international relations. It is a very crude statement....”⁵

We should be clear that, whatever the Universal Museum in its Enlightenment version was about, it was not democracy. In 1848, the

Chartists (a great popular movement in Great Britain) marched across England to demand universal suffrage from Parliament in London. The Trustees of the British Museum feared that the Chartists would attack the Museum, and took extraordinary steps to defend the institution. It was given a garrison of staff (who were sworn in as special constables), troops and retired soldiers, all of whom were armed and provisioned for a long campaign behind special fortifications.⁶ This reaction was characteristic of the attitude of most museums in the United Kingdom at that time, of mingled fear of and distaste for their fellow citizens. When Parliament had passed the Act which first established the British Museum, a century earlier, it had explicitly directed that “the said museum or collection be maintained, not only for the Inspection and Entertainment of the learned and the curious, but for the general use and benefit of the Public.” This directive was rapidly blocked by the Trustees. One of their first actions was to decide that the public did not include the lower orders, but rather “the learned and those of polite behaviour and superior degree.”⁷

A significant practical and philosophical problem for museums which have chosen to define themselves as “Enlightenment” and “Universal” institutions is the extraordinary lack of academic interest they generally show in the societies of which they are part. Their focus for study and collection is almost always “the other” – objects and cultures which are removed by time or geography and usually both. These institutions usually do not get to grips with issues of their own contemporary society in any systematic way except, just occasionally, through the mediation of a temporary artistic initiative. Critical self-examination of society is avoided.

For example, no museum in England devotes any significant space to analysis and debate of the history of that country’s relationship over the last 400 years with Ireland, Scotland or Wales. My father’s family lived for centuries in County Down, Northern Ireland, which was at the epicentre of the 1798 rebellion by both Protestant and Catholic Irish against the English and their supporters among the Irish who remained loyal to the Crown. This was a significant event that shook the whole of the United Kingdom, and one that was a direct product of Enlightenment thought and the revolution in France. Why in 1998 did no museum in England stage an exhibition on this rebellion and its bloody repression, a landmark in the political and intellectual development of these islands?

Issues such as this, of direct relevance to contemporary events, may be uncomfortable and controversial, but it should be part of the role of a museum to address them with intelligence. It should in particular be the role of Universal or Enlightenment museums to do so.

A small group of major museums – led by the British Museum – has responded to the current crisis in Iraq. With exemplary commitment, they have given practical support to curators and conservators in Iraq, who work daily in conditions of personal risk. By doing so, they have shown that museums can serve contemporary societies even in time of war. But for those who oppose the war in Iraq – a majority of the UK population it seems – where was the controlled dissent from museums on Iraq when they needed it most? The time for these challenges to political and social orthodoxy is during such events, and also generation in and generation out thereafter, so that they become part of the consciousness of the nation. The consequences of this past lack of

122 reflective analysis, it could be argued, are being played out now in Baghdad. You cannot know others if you do not first know yourself.

The lack of intellectual curiosity of many Enlightenment museums about their own societies is a social and political failure. It has also been a critical scholarly weakness. It has led them to ignore the need to research whether they have actually achieved the greater tolerance in society that they claim. As a result, we don't know whether this assertion can be substantiated.

If there ever was radicalism in this version of the eighteenth century model of museums, it seems to have disappeared at an early stage. If Enlightenment museums became engines for controlled dissent then it can only be in the same sense as the Monarchy in Britain is an engine for controlled republicanism; it might be true, but only indirectly, by the principle of irritation. The fear in 1848 that the Chartists would storm the British Museum and destroy its collections was unfounded – the marchers for democracy ignored this bastion of the Establishment entirely – but the incident reveals the contradictions of this particular product of Enlightenment philosophy.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was time for another model, and this was provided in England by the Great Exhibition of 1851, which attracted six million visitors in a year, and demonstrated that the masses could visit exhibitions in numbers, with serious intellectual engagement and without rioting. The United Kingdom Government in consequence recognised that museums could be a major instrument of public educational policy, and could help the country achieve its social and economic goals.

One result was the South Kensington Museum – which has now become two institu-

tions: the V&A and the Science Museum. The contrast with the British Museum of 1848 was immediately evident when Henry Cole, Director of the new Government Department of Science and Art and Director of the Museum, declared in his inaugural address in 1857 that “this museum will be like a book with its pages open, and not shut”. It is clear from this and other writings and speeches that Henry Cole was engaged on a massive experiment in public education. His most important objective was to attract large numbers of visitors from the working classes and in this, in part at least, he succeeded. He established a national programme of circulating exhibitions, fostered the growth of local museums, supported new colleges of science and art in towns and cities across the country, and sent curators from South Kensington to every corner of the nation to lead the development of adult education programmes. An analysis of students at such courses reveals the diversity of their backgrounds – from jappanners to governesses among females, and from shoe-makers to surgeons among males. Most students were aged 15 to 30 years.⁸

Yet, by the time Henry Cole retired in 1873, connoisseurship had become the dominant objective of an institution which he had, thirty years earlier, tried to establish predominantly for public benefit. “Unless museums are turned to the purposes of education”, Cole predicted, “they dwindle into very sleepy affairs”, and so it turned out.⁹ William Morris, a key figure in the development of the V&A's collections in the early days, was by the 1880s deeply disillusioned by museums in general and the South Kensington Museum in particular. Their disappearance from his utopian London of the future in *News from Nowhere* seems deliberate and pointed.

"Build a Crystal Palace" activity in the V&A's new British Galleries, which were designed to encourage critical and creative thinking

The rigidities of Cole's system of art education – which required unbending adherence to a programme of study of approved examples – had in any case been criticised by many influential commentators, from Ruskin to Dickens. The Victorian model of the didactic museum had failed, as surely as the Enlightenment model of a century earlier had done, with consequences lamented by some of the most visionary and influential thinkers and social reformers of the day.

It was Professor Per-Uno Ågren who, many years ago, first drew my attention to the scale of this dissent from the late Victoria museum orthodoxy, and in particular the work of the great Scottish urban planner, Patrick Geddes. In 1903, the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie presented the city of Dunfermline with an estate and the sum of £500,000. In his instructions to the Trustees, he urged them to address the problem of "what can be done in the town for the benefit of the masses". He reminded them to "remember you are pioneers, and do

not be afraid to make mistakes. Not what other cities have is your standard. It is something beyond this that they lack." The Trustees appointed Patrick Geddes to write a report to guide the project. Geddes wanted the town to create new kinds of museums, ones integral to their environment. "I have no faith in the educational value of the common place art museum with its metal masterpieces in a glass case, and the smithy nowhere", he wrote. "This whole museum tradition, though still too largely in power, answers but to stamp or scalp-collecting".¹⁰

In the twentieth century, in the absence of any great vision of their place in society, it was evident that museums had lost their way intellectually. New disciplines and theories of sociology, psychology, education and anthropology emerged. They had a major impact upon (for example) schooling and health provision, but until recently almost none upon museological theory and practice. Museums had in their hands evidence of an exciting and different way

124 of thinking, based on learning through authentic experience and creative use of objects and works of art – but throughout the twentieth century they were rarely curious enough to research what these experiences actually consist of. Despite their very different philosophical origins, the professional practice of the V&A and the British Museum, for example, became almost identical. They both lacked a distinctive intellectual narrative, rooted in their origins and unique purpose, to drive them forward.

Why do so few museums engage – through research – with their impact on society? It cannot be because the social disciplines and the arts and humanities cannot be combined – artists, scientists and historians are doing exactly this every day; it is part of the spirit of our age. Nor is it because visitors don't come to study, learn, enjoy or even change their lives. They want more opportunities for learning, not less, from museums, as extensive summative evaluation of the V&A's British Galleries has demonstrated.¹¹

The argument against museums engaging with audiences that should be most despised is the claim that it undermines scholarship. Whoever believes this will need to think about the nature of scholarship. It requires a willingness to be open to all evidence from all relevant disciplines – whether or not it supports one's chosen theories. The body of research evidence on the nature of learning and on how it can be applied to museums is substantial and respectable. Yet it is widely ignored, particularly by many of the great European art museums. What happened to the Enlightenment's commitment to critical enquiry in all fields of human activity, and to applying the findings of one discipline to the practices of another? Public museums are called such because they are there for people and, therefore, it is the hu-

man sciences which provide their core intellectual foundations – as much as art history, the history of science and technology, the natural sciences and other disciplines, which are collections-specific and have varying relevance to each individual institution.

Why is it acceptable, from an academic perspective, to deny not just particular applications of research – such as investigations into how people learn in a new gallery, for example – but the wholesale relevance of major academic disciplines? Anyone who has ever attempted to conduct research on how to support learning through the design of galleries will – if they are honest – acknowledge that this is one of the toughest intellectual challenges one can face, precisely because it requires you to operate at a theoretical level through not one but several disciplines. With what conceivable justification can this process be described as “dumbing down”? Are the people who describe it as such not able to recognise the intellectual challenge? No single group of museum specialists can claim institutional scholarship as their own exclusive preserve. Any who do so stand in the way of scholarly research, and are the true anti-intellectuals.

For visitors to learn to be creative, it is essential that they should have opportunities for genuine participation and to be able to act upon their ideas. Yet this still happens all too rarely. Museums exist to make a difference in society. If we believe that culture is a property of inanimate objects, rather than being created by each person – each museum visitor – for themselves, then this is an aberration, a denial of the nature of humanity, a black mass of cultural practice as more widely researched and understood over this last century.

Where, then, should we look for an intellectual framework? As the British Museum pro-

poses, we can look once more to the Enlightenment. Not the accumulative, encyclopaedic version selected by the Universal Museums, but those more democratic models that were particularly characteristic of elements of the Scottish (rather than the English) Enlightenment.

As Alexander Broadie, an historian of the Scottish Enlightenment, has noted, "one of the features of the debates conducted in eighteenth century Scotland is the fact that they were conducted by thinkers who were, each of them, able to draw on a wide range of disciplines and who did in fact use their wide ranging knowledge in the course of developing their positions, and attacking alternatives".¹² Many participants in the Scottish Enlightenment also engaged with, and were informed by, the social and political issues of the day. According to Roger Emerson, "The consequences for the Scottish Enlightenment [of the clearances of people from the Highlands, and the consequent accelerated destruction of traditional Gaelic society in the eighteenth century] was much theorising about social change and the nature of freedom".¹³ It is also important to emphasise that many Scottish thinkers, such as John Hume, undermined the traditional concept of disembodied reason by arguing that all our judgements are based on belief, and that even reason is based on imagination and feeling.¹⁴

The contemporary Scottish philosopher George Davie, in *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*, argues for a common intellectual culture to which both specialists and non-specialists in the community contribute. The alternative, is, he says, "a society split between overspecialised boffins on the one hand and untinking proles on the other". Concerned by the stress on technical competence in industrial societies, he goes on to say that, "it seems rea-

sonable for the Scots to regard their complicated system of spiritual participation as a necessary component of economic advance ... a science-based society can maintain the intellectual standards necessary to material progress only by making it possible for each party to keep the other up to scratch by mutual criticism, in much the same way as, under their religious system, the minister's theological supervision of the congregation was checked and balanced by the congregation's common sense scrutiny of the minister".¹⁵ Elements of Davie's analysis have been criticised but it provides a useful starting point for discussion.

"Common sense", according to the adult educators David Alexander and Ian Martin, can be understood to mean, "a shared, critical and interdisciplinary understanding based on the capacity for both inward reflective analysis and public debate.... The principle of common sense, as a public property, is the basis for a democratic and critical culture".¹⁶ In the traditional Scottish degree course, the shared understanding of general principles was seen as a precondition for a democratic critical culture in which, "professors and students, specialists and laity can meet on more or less equal terms, and the unlearned no less than the learned have a contribution to make".¹⁷

Alexander and Martin stress that, in the Scottish tradition of democratic intellectualism, "the personal is in a fundamental way the political",¹⁸ and "one can only think for oneself if one does not think by oneself".¹⁹ They argue that the Scottish philosophy of common sense, and the idea of the educated public, which have origins in part in the Scottish Enlightenment, can be deployed to counter the undemocratic effects of occupational specialisation.

Common sense, rooted in the philosophical tradition of 'reflective analysis' is, they say, "ul-

126 timately the guarantor of the democratic right to critical autonomy and shared understanding". "Common" in this sense refers to social distribution of knowledge and understanding as well as their intellectual quality. Common sense is a precondition of democracy.

The social significance of the Scottish school of common sense philosophy as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century was that, "Knowledge serves a social purpose, especially in breaking down the social divisions that the Scottish eighteenth century thinkers saw as a consequence of industrialism".²⁰ As David Alexander and Ian Martin point out, the inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition in Scotland were concerned to create a wider educated public in order to prevent revolutions on the French or North American model, but this kind of humane and civic incorporation may be more conducive to social liberation than the systematic exclusion and oppression evident in England. "It can also be argued," they say, "that the Enlightenment traditions as they developed in Scotland ultimately encouraged dissent".²¹ And they did so and still do so more credibly, one might add, than the Universal Museum model with its faith in the power of objects, relatively unmediated, to work upon a passive public.

The implications of this strand of Scottish Enlightenment thought for museums should be clear enough. If we are not making every effort, actively and purposefully, not merely to display objects but to develop the skills and cultural understanding and learning capabilities of our audiences, we are not fulfilling our primary task in a democratic society. The Scottish philosophy of common sense provides strong practical and theoretical foundations for this approach.

For much of their history, museums in Scot-

land have been in thrall to English and other museological models. Now that Scotland has greater control of its own educational and cultural policy, it will be inexplicable if its museums do not return to their intellectual roots and develop a rationality based on reflection, debate, belief, imagination and feeling. But the Enlightenment was a European as well as national phenomenon, and other museums throughout Europe have a responsibility to foster cultural citizenship, based on their region's own distinctive intellectual traditions.

This is the pool into which the self-styled Universal Museums have cast their pebble. But their philosophical model failed before, and will fail again, if they refuse to acknowledge that "we" are as important a focus for research as "the other" in any definition of knowledge in society. This model ignores the intellectual contribution that the wider public can make, and the research that is needed to guide museums in creating a meaningful critical dialogue between their staff and their audiences. It can be argued that the democratic strands of the Scottish Enlightenment, on the other hand, speak eloquently to all museums in contemporary society.

There are, however, risks in justifying contemporary intellectual positions by claiming precedence in ideas from the past. Those who cloak the British Museum and similar institutions with a mantle of Enlightenment radicalism are, arguably, guilty of selecting evidence that suits their interpretation and ignoring that which does not. Those who dispute the claims of the British Museum must, then, be prepared to open themselves to critical debate if they are to avoid the charge that they are unhistorical and unscholarly.

Professor Jean Barr of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the Uni-

versity of Glasgow acknowledges that the Scottish Enlightenment had potentially very radical elements within it. But she also warns against romanticising this period in Scotland's intellectual development or seeing it as a unified body of ideas. In particular, she is critical of George Davie for limiting his concept of intellectual democracy principally to higher education (thereby not giving attention to the popular roots of knowledge) and for his failure to notice the absence of women in his narrative, as well as his nationalist and Presbyterian slant on the Scottish Enlightenment.²²

Debates of this kind are a healthy feature of all worthwhile intellectual movements. The different strands of thought on the Scottish Enlightenment remind us that there are significant regional, national and social traditions of philosophy. Indeed, material culture has no meaning unless we are prepared also to embrace this intellectual cultural diversity. Philosophy is as much part of our cultural inheritance as is a eighteenth century steam engine – and they are connected.

Alexander Broadie in his book, *Why Scottish Philosophy Matters*²³, makes a powerful case for recognition of the importance and continuity of a distinctively Scottish philosophical tradition, from John Duns Scotus (c1266 – 1308) onwards. This book is worth reading whether you are Scottish or not. If you read it, you may then also want to consider the distinctive intellectual traditions of your own country or region. Does it, too, have something valuable to offer to our collective vision for the future of museums? Almost certainly, it does.

NOTES

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- 128
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