History of museums : an essay, read to the Ashmolean Society, Feb. 12, 1830.


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HISTORY OF MUSEUMS;

AN ESSAY,

READ TO THE ASHMOLEAN SOCIETY,

FEB. 12, 1830.

THE term Museum, which literally signifies a place dedicated to the Muses, that is, to study, is said to have been applied originally to that part of the royal palace of Alexandria appropriated for the use of learned men, and the reception of the literary works then extant. According to ancient writers, it was formed into classes or colleges, each of which had a competent sum assigned for their support; and we are further informed, that the establishment was founded by Ptolemy Philadelphus, who added a most extensive library [a].

The history of Museums is involved in much obscurity. The most celebrated of modern date, if the term be applied to repositories of ancient art, are those of the Vatican in Rome, of Florence, and of Paris. The first is distinguished as exhibiting by

[a] The word Museum is *now* generally used to convey the idea of a mixed repository for works of nature and of ancient art; or for the former only, as the word Gallery is always used for the place in which specimens of sculpture or painting are exhibited. We say a Museum of birds, beasts, and fossils; but not a Museum of sculpture or of paintings.

far the most extensive and valuable specimens of ancient art, but does not contain any zoological specimens. The Gallery of Florence, which contains also many valuable works of ancient art, is a detached building, distinct from the Muséo-Fisico, dedicated to anatomical preparations and models, &c. We talk of the Leverian, of the Hunterian, and of Brooks's, and the Anatomical Museum, but not of the Museum of paintings in the Bodleian or Somerset House. The French, however, applied this term to the collection in the Louvre gallery, calling it the Musée Napoleon, at least in the splendid work of engravings from this collection: though they would now probably confine that term to their zoological collection in the *Jardin des Plantes*. They use the word *école*, as applied to their collection of minerals, *Ecole des Mines*. The word Cabinet is applied to one of medals. One cannot doubt about the propriety of the word Museum when applied to an assemblage of the varieties of nature and art[b].

It is agreed on by all our antiquarians, that the Tradescant collection, which was the foundation of the Ashmolean Museum, was the earliest exhibited in Great Britain.

The next was one made by a Mr. Thoresby of York, which consisted of coins, medals, manuscripts, autographs, and some specimens of natural history, one of the most valued of which was the leaf of a pineapple.

Much about the same time Dr. Grew's collection

[b] All the capitals on the continent of Europe, and I believe most of the larger towns, can boast of Museums of greater or less value and interest.

The Museum of Seba at Amsterdam was of a later date. Tradescant died 1638 Seba 1736.

was formed, which was left to Gresham college. A catalogue of it is published, by which one can judge of the progress that was made in the accumulation of objects of natural history.

The next of any note that is mentioned is that of Mr. Courtin's, or Charleton's, (for he took the latter name,) near London, I believe at Chelsea.

The most extensive that had ever been made in Great Britain was that of Sir Hans Sloane, at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This, it is well known, was the foundation of the present British Museum, and was the first purchased for the use of the public by Government.

The project of a public establishment of this nature was first suggested by the Will of Sir Hans Sloane, who during a long period of eminent practice in physic, had accumulated a very large collection of natural and artificial curiosities, together with a numerous library of printed books as well as manuscripts, and who being well aware how much science is benefited by the opportunity which large aggregates of objects presented for comparing them together, and marking their less obvious differences, was very solicitous that his sumptuous Museum, which he declared in his last Will had cost him upwards of fifty thousand pounds, should, if possible, be preserved entire, and permanently dedicated to public utility.

With this view he directed that the whole of his Museum should be offered to the British Parliament for the moderate sum of twenty thousand pounds.

Sir Hans Sloane having died in the beginning of the year 1753, the offer in his Will was immediately

made to Parliament, and was accepted without hesitation.

Before the expiration of that year an act was passed which ordered the payment of the stipulated sum to his executors, and vested the property of the Museum in trustees for the use of the public. As it may afford some gratification of curiosity to know the contents, I subjoin the following list:

	Number.
Books, prints, and drawings	50,000
Antique idols and utensils	1,125
Coins and medals	23,000
Cameos, intaglios, seals	1,500
Vessels and utensils	542
Anatomical preparations	706
Quadrupeds and their parts	8,186
Birds, eggs, and nests	1,172
Fishes	1,555
Amphibia	521
Crustacea	1,436
Shells, echini	5,845
Corals, sponges, &c.	1,421
Stones, ores, bitumens, &c.	9,942
Dried plants	334
Mathematical instruments	55
Miscellanea	2,098
	109,388

Many valuable additions have been added to Sir Hans Sloane's collection from year to year; and if the Government will continue its support in the way it has done lately, the British Museum will be the most valuable collection of specimens of ancient art and works of nature, in the most splendid apart-

ments, under the management of some of the most scientific persons in Great Britain.

The largest private collections in Museums, which have been made and exhibited to the public of late days, have been those of Sir Ashton Lever, (the delight of my younger years,) which displayed a larger assemblage of the works of nature than had ever been before seen in England, and more extensive probably than any previous to that in the Museum of the Zoological Society. William Hunter's, which is now at Glasgow, was formed between 1770. and 1800. John Hunter's Museum, now at the College of Surgeons, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Donovan exhibited in his Museum, about thirty years ago, a very interesting collection of specimens of British zoology; Sowerby of minerals and insects; Brookes of the skeletons of animals; and Bullock of the most brilliant specimens of birds, shells, and animals of South America. The Linnæan Society Museum now boasts of a very choice collection of the stuffed animals of New Holland. The India House, of those found in our dominions in the East Indies; and, lastly, the Zoological Society Museum promises fair to eclipse them all by more copious funds, and a combination of active zeal, talent, and industry for the accumulation and arrangement of zoological specimens from every quarter of the globe.

What we possess in this Museum will serve to inspire a taste and lay a foundation for more extensive knowledge, which may be gained in the metropolis. I will now proceed to give you the history of the origin and progress of our Ashmolean Museum.

HISTORY

AND

ARRANGEMENT

OF THE

ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM.

IT is well known that the first collection of the curiosities, natural and artificial, which now form but a small part of the contents of the Ashmolean Museum, was made by John Tradescant, by birth a Dutchman, who is supposed to have come to England about the end of queen Elizabeth's, or the beginning of James the First's reign.

He was a considerable time in the service of lord treasurer Salisbury and lord Wootton. He travelled in various parts of Europe as far as Russia; was in a fleet sent against the Algerines, and collected plants in Barbary and the isles of the Mediterranean. He had a garden at Lambeth, and in the reign of Charles the First, in 1629, bore the title of the king's gardener. He was a man of extraordinary curiosity, and was the first who in this country made any considerable collection of the subjects of natural history. His son, of the same name, went to Virginia, and imported many new plants from

thence. His Museum, called Tradescant's Ark, attracted the curiosity of the age, and was much frequented by the great, by whose means it was also considerably enlarged, as appears by the list of his benefactors, printed at the end of his Museum Tradescantianum; amongst whom, after the names of the king and queen, are found those of many of the first nobility, the duke and duchess of Buckingham, archbishop Laud, the earls of Salisbury and Carlisle.

In what year the elder Tradescant died is uncertain, though it appears most probably to have happened in 1638[c].

The son inherited his collection, and bequeathed it by a deed of gift to Elias Ashmole[d], who lodged in Tradescant's house. It afterwards becoming a part of the Ashmolean Museum, the name of Tradescant was sunk. John Tradescant, the son, died in 1662; his widow erected a monument to the family in Lambeth churchyard, which having been much injured by time, was repaired by a public subscription in 1773. The quaint epitaph inscribed on it is as follows: the date is 1662.

Know, stranger, ere thou pass, beneath this stone
Lie John Tradescant, grandsire, father, son;
The last dy'd in his spring; the other two
Liv'd till they had travell'd art and nature thro',

[c] *Tradescant.* MSS. Twyne. Archiv. Univ. Ox. p. 286, 287. Physic Garden. "He (Lord Danby) came to some reasonably "good terms of agreement with John Tradescant of West "Lambeth, designed for the gardener, viz. for a yearly stipend "of fifty pounds or thereabouts; and not long after, viz. in "1638, about Easter, the said John Tradescant died."

[d] Ashmole was not knighted, although occasionally styled *Sir Elias* Ashmole.

As by their choice Collections may appear,
Of what is rare, in land, in sea, in air;
Whilst they (as Homer's Iliad in a nut)
A world of wonders in one closet shut:
These famous Antiquarians that had been
Both Gardiners to the Rose and Lily Queen,
Transplanted now themselves, sleep here; and when
Angels shall with their trumpets waken men,
And fire shall purge the world, these hence shall rise,
And change their Garden for a Paradise.

Elias Ashmole, (whom Wood styles "the greatest "virtuoso and curioso that was ever known or read "of in England,") to whom the Tradescant collection was left, gives us this minute statement of that bequest in the very strange diary of his own life.

"1659. Dec. 12. Mr. Tradescant and his wife "told me they had been long considering upon "whom to bestow their closet of curiosities when "they died, and at last had resolved to give it unto "me."

"Dec. 14. This afternoon they gave their scri-"vener instructions to draw a deed of gift of the "same to me."

"Dec. 16. 1659. 5h. 30″ p.m. Mr. Tradescant "and his wife sealed and delivered to me the gift "of all his rarities."

The next notice we find in the diary respecting the Museum is dated 1662, May 30.

"This Easter term I preferred a bill in Chancery "against Mrs. Tradescant for the rarities her hus-"band had settled on me."

On the 26th of Nov. 1674. he records that "Mrs. Tradescant being willing to deliver up the

" rarities to me, I carried several of them to my " house."

" Dec. 1. I began to remove the rest of the rari- " ties to South Lambeth."

Elias Ashmole having given this collection to the University in 1677, on condition of their erecting a suitable building to receive it, he mentions in the diary, with his usual exact notice of time,

" 1682. Aug. 16. I went towards Oxford, to see " the building prepared to receive my rarities, " where I arrived about seven o'clock in the even- " ing."

" 17th ditto. Between eight and nine I first saw " the said building. I was invited by the Vice- " Chancellor, and dined with him at Queen's col- " lege."

" 1683. Feb. 2. My picture (after sent to Ox- " ford) came home 3h. p. m. I acquainted Mr. " Woolrich in part with a secret of raising flowers " from virgin earth."

" 15th ditto. I began to put up my rarities in " cases to send to Oxford."

" March 14. The last load of my rarities were " sent to the barge."

This is the last notice I find respecting the Museum in the diary.

Ashmole, amongst his various pursuits, had at one time studied botany, which first probably led him to form an intimacy with the Tradescants, at whose house he is said at one time to have lodged; and to this circumstance he was probably indebted for the gift of their collection.

He was the son of a saddler in Litchfield, and

was born, as he states with his accustomed punctuality, at near half an hour after 3 o'clock in the morning, on the 23d of May, 1617. He was successively a solicitor in Chancery, an attorney in the Common Pleas, a gentleman in the ordnance, when Oxford was garrisoned by the royal army[c], an exciseman, a comptroller of the ordnance, a freemason, astrologer, botanist, chemist, anatomist, physician, and, though last not least, a very learned herald.

Heraldry seems to have been his fort, and astrology his foible. It is difficult to reconcile the acquisition of so much dry business-like knowledge with the taste for so much visionary nonsense.

Ashmole enriched the Tradescant collection (which consisted chiefly of the skins and bones of animals) with a collection of medals, coins, and gold chains, which had been presented to him by the elector of Brandenburgh and others; and with manuscripts and printed books on heraldry and astrology, for he had purchased the library of Lilly the celebrated astrologer.

The Museum has since been increased by Sir W. Dugdale's, Anthony Wood's, and the Aubrey manuscripts, which last have furnished much amusing matter for a publication which was printed some years ago by the Rev. J. Walker of New College. It has also been enlarged by Martin Lister's collections of shells and fossils, Lloyd's, Plot's, and Borlase's, and other objects of natural history, and by Mr. Rheinhold Forster's collection of the dresses and various

[c] At this time he also officiated as a clergyman, having, as he states, christened Mr. Fox's son.

instruments of the natives of the South Sea islands, and those of the Esquimaux Indians, presented by captains Lyon and Beechey, Sir Thomas Philips and lieutenant Harding.

It has been from time to time enriched by the valuable donations of many other benefactors, particularly by those of the Alfred gem, the large magnet, the very curious group of figures made with humming-birds' feathers, and lately by a great portion of the antiquities described in the Nænia Britannica, presented by that liberal antiquarian Sir Richard Colt Hoare.

In a pecuniary point of view its most munificent benefactor was Dr. Rawlinson, who bequeathed a salary for the curator, under several exclusive conditions. For many years the Museum had been so much neglected that it attracted but little curiosity, when in the year 1824. it was fortunately intrusted to the care of my much-loved, enlightened, and zealous predecessor. He found that the skins of animals collected by the Tradescants had fallen into total decay, that cabinets for those objects which were liable to injury from time were wholly wanting, and that the apartment dedicated to the exhibition of them had become much dilapidated.

Happily at this time a taste for the study of natural history had been excited in the University by Dr. Paley's very interesting work on Natural Theology, and the very popular lectures of Dr. Kidd on Comparative Anatomy, and Dr. Buckland on Geology.

Availing himself of this spirit, the Curator induced the trustees to sanction a general repair of

the Museum. Their wish was seconded by the liberality of the Vice-Chancellor and Convocation.

When the room had been cleansed, repaired, and put in its present condition, the next step of my predecessor was to fit it up with cabinets, in which he might arrange in proper order what he found in a very disordered state in the Museum, and in which he might place those objects of natural history, antiquities, or curiosities which he himself purchased, or which might be given by benefactors. The Museum now exhibits (principally from his liberality) a well-arranged collection of many of the genera in every department of Zoology, with some beautiful and rare species included in each genus.

This has not been done without considerable expense; but I am very sure he has never regretted that expense, when he considered that it might contribute to the instruction and amusement of the members of an University for which he has always felt the grateful affection and attachment of the most devoted of her sons.

The admirable arrangement he has made of the various specimens of natural history, according to the plan of Dr. Paley's Natural Theology, has given an exalted interest to the collection, such as no exhibition of the kind has hitherto displayed.

He thus very clearly explains the plan of his arrangement of the contents of the Museum:

"The first division proposes to familiarize the eye to those relations of all natural objects which form the basis of argument in Dr. Paley's Natural Theology; to induce a mental habit of associating

" the view of natural phenomena with the convic-
" tion that they are the media of divine manifesta-
" tion; and by such association to give proper dig-
" nity to every branch of natural science.

" The second division exhibits relics of antiquity,
" arranged according to the order of time, with
" some specimens of curious art of uncivilized as
" well as of refined nations.

" In the exhibition of animals the order of Cuvier
" has been generally adopted. The name of every
" specimen is conspicuously affixed, and hand-cata-
" logues explain the general principle of the ar-
" rangement, and the contents of each cabinet to
" which they refer.

" It may be remarked that the quantity of objects
" is less numerous and less splendid than that
" which may be found in many other towns of less
" note than Oxford; but it ought to be noticed that,
" for the purpose of suggesting the important con-
" clusion which alone can sanctify the pursuit of
" any branch of knowledge, the multitude and even
" the elegance, of specimens, is of secondary import-
" ance, the primary being a display of those won-
" derful and strongly marked diversities of organiz-
" ation by which the wise Author of nature has
" adapted various means to various ends; various
" parts to various purposes; various machinery to
" diversity of actions: to differences in the destina-
" tions of instinct to differences of elements."

After the brief account submitted relating to the establishment of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, it may not be out of place to offer a few remarks

which seem closely connected with the subject before us.

The seventeenth century, especially the latter portion of it, was distinguished by an extraordinary activity in the pursuit of useful and philosophical knowledge. Inquiries were now conducted on more rational principles, by careful experiments, by extensive and systematic observations of the phenomena, and by collections in every branch of the productions of nature. In this active scene the University of Oxford was not an idle spectator. It is well known the germ of the Royal Society was fostered here in the dark period preceding the Restoration. Subsequently, when the Society was fully established at Gresham College, the Oxford members were amongst the most zealous and active. Many names might be easily adduced, as Bp. Wilkins, Sir W. Petty, Dr. Willis, President Bathurst, Sir C. Wren, Dr. Plot, Sir T. Millington, Seth Ward, the celebrated mathematician Wallis. Boyle for several years prosecuted here his chemical studies. A branch of the Royal Society was formed in the University, and regular meetings were held here during a considerable time; and such was the character and activity of the academical members, as to excite some alarm and jealousy in the parent society in London.

Thus the *new philosophy*, as it was sometimes called, the new and more satisfactory mode of the investigation of all departments of the knowledge of nature, was evidently cultivated with great zeal in the University.

During all this period Ashmole was much con-

nected with Oxford. In the year 1669. he had the compliment of a Degree. About the year 1682. he announced his intention of becoming a benefactor to the University. His offer was received with general satisfaction. A new building, under the superintendance of Sir C. Wren, was raised at no inconsiderable expense, for the reception of the Tradescantian and Ashmolean collections; an honourable monument of the zeal and liberal spirit of the University of Oxford in the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century indeed forms a brilliant period in the history of the University of Oxford: it was marked by the completion of the Bodleian Library, and of the new Schools, and the Laudian Statutes, and by the foundation of the Botanical Garden, by the Sheldonian Theatre, and the Ashmolean Museum, and by students of the first celebrity in our annals in every department of learning. Our ancient and more important studies were cultivated with ardour and success, and the new philosophy, the physical sciences, were not thought unappropriate, or inconsistent with graver and more essential duties.

The principle thus acted on must be equally true in the nineteenth century, in an era equally, if not more remarkable for intellectual activity and persevering efforts in the diffusion of useful knowledge, and equally liberal in supplying the best means of promoting it.

It would be strange were Oxford not animated with the same spirit. In a period of universal excitement, we cannot remain stationary: every species of knowledge of useful application, and not in-

compatible with our legitimate studies, ought to find here an establishment adequate to the age in which we live.

This seems to be the sentiment prevailing in the University of Cambridge. Our present meeting is a sufficient demonstration of a corresponding feeling in this place.

In such a corporation as the University, comprising so large a number of enlightened members, and annually increasing in magnitude, it would seem not difficult to provide the means wanting for the adequate support of the establishment in view, by a Museum of more extensive accommodations. A fund (Dr. Randolph's) already in existence, might probably be made available in aid of this subscription.

Some designs have been already suggested, including the appropriation of a part of the Clarendon Press; and they seem much entitled to consideration, from the facility with which they may be executed, and the singular convenience and elegance in the accommodation and arrangement they would afford. The object is of great importance; it seems highly desirable that the desideratum should be supplied, and in a manner consistent with the value of the object, and becoming the general splendour of the University of Oxford. It would be in conformity, it may be added, with the example of our predecessors, and with the spirit of the times, and of some recent royal appointments.

We might then justly congratulate ourselves that every species of sound and useful knowledge was embraced by our institutions, and adequately encouraged. Every portion of the circle of human

science has its respective value, and it need scarcely be added, may be morally as well as practically useful. No substantial reason can be adduced, why, in a place of general education, our ancient Schools, our moral, classical, and mathematical studies, of primary importance, may not be preserved in their due precedence, in conjunction with some attention to the treasures of natural history in the Ashmolean and Clarendon Museums, and the Library of Dr. Radcliffe [f].

I have thus given a short account of the origin, progress, and present state of this Museum. How much it has been improved by the late Curator, those who remember its former state can well appreciate; how far its present arrangement deserves the praise

[f] Never were there greater facilities for the study of natural history offered to those in the University who wish to pursue this science than at present.

In aid of the Zoological specimens in this Museum, the Radcliffe Library possesses a valuable collection of books in every department of natural science, owing to the indefatigable zeal and extensive knowledge of its amiable and enlightened librarian, Dr. Williams, our Professor of Botany, who is always willing to permit students to consult the books in this Library, and to whom I am under many obligations for this permission, and for much valuable and interesting information communicated in the most agreeable and friendly manner.

I must not omit to mention with gratitude the names of the late Bishop of Durham, the Hon. and Rev. C. Percival, R. Barclay, Esq. of Bury Hill, Sir John Franklyn, Sir Edward Parry, W. Burchell, Esq., Major Stacy of Calcutta, Dr. Such of London, Dr. Prattinton, Mrs. Buckland, and the Rev. R. Walker of Magdalen College, as munificent contributors to the Zoological department of this Museum.

I have bestowed on it, any one can easily judge on a slight examination.

Nothing more now remains to be done in the Museum than to prepare and place the donations which may arrive, or the new articles which may be purchased, according to the present order of arrangement, and to give an accurate Catalogue of all it contains.

It is much to be hoped that the more minute detail of our printed books and manuscripts will induce some antiquarians to bestow more time than has been hitherto given to an investigation of the historical and other treasures of literature we possess, and to communicate such of them to the public as may be particularly worthy of the attention of the studious.

No friend to science but would grieve to see a collection raised with such cost, care, and judgment, and which is displayed in such good order, neglected, and suffered to perish from want of an adequate fund for its support. Frequent presents of the skins of birds and quadrupeds have lately been received from visitors who have been gratified by an inspection of the Museum. To stuff these, and preserve what we already have, will require an annual expense, upon a moderate computation, of at least one hundred pounds. The Curator's salary is seventy pounds per annum. The sub-curator is paid from the money received at the door: this does not always supply an adequate allowance; the deficiency must be supplied by the Curator, who in the present state of affairs must pay much more than *his* salary for the wants of the Museum. Now it is not to be

expected that any Curator but one who feels a strong interest in its support and improvement will make such a sacrifice for this purpose.

It is therefore highly desirable that the Trustees and those Members of the University who take an interest in its success, should maturely deliberate on the best means to effect that object. I do not say this from any motive of saving my own money, (for I shall always dedicate more than my salary to its support and completion,) but with the hope of seeing some permanent security for its preservation. Whether this can be best done by any private subscription, new fees for admission, or university assessment, I will leave you to consider, with the sincere assurance that I shall never be wanting in any service that I can render for its prosperity.