

The Universal Museum

by Dr. Tom Flynn
London, 2012

Well, you should be ashamed of yourselves, assembling here in a sinister conspiracy to dismantle our Universal Museums, to rob us of the cultural treasures that have contributed so much to the legacy of the European Enlightenment. Just think for a moment of the implications of what you're doing — if you have your way the great cultural institutions of Europe and North America — the British Museum, the Louvre in Paris, The Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago — these noble collections will be dispersed to the far corners of the earth, delivered into the hands of nations and cultures driven by rabid nationalism who lack the curatorial skills and the museological expertise to care for their material heritage. If you succeed, our classical temples to world culture will stand empty or will be turned into multiplex cinemas, football stadiums or basketball courts. The reputation of this once proud nation will be damaged beyond repair, tourism will cease, and as a people we will be forever impoverished.

It's ridiculous isn't it? I'm exaggerating to make a point, but that is essentially the message that is being circulated by those striving to resist the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles. If the British Museum were to accede to the calls for return, the fabled floodgates would open, leading to a veritable deluge of repatriation requests. It would be a slippery slope that would lead inexorably to a mass exodus of objects, a wholesale denuding, a great emptying, a hollowing out. Or would it?

I used to compose satirical news reports on cultural heritage but I was never able to rise to the heights of absurdity that this kind of scaremongering rhetoric achieves. But this is why, since I first met Eleni Cubitt many years ago, I have tried to focus not on the arguments for return of the Marbles — which, speaking as an art historian, have always seemed to me compelling and irrefutable — but on the museums that hold these objects, and particularly on the concept of the Universal Museum so vigorously promulgated by the directors of these institutions. I proceed on the basis that it's always a good idea to try and see the world from the perspective of one's adversary. My thinking has led me to conclude that even were the Marbles issue *never* to be resolved, the deep structural and philosophical problems confronting Universal Museums are not going to go away but will merely get more critical as time goes by and as globalisation gathers pace. We see that process accelerating every week as more and more developing nations seek to recover works taken from them during earlier eras.

Now I hardly need rehearse the main reason why the idea of the Universal Museum sprang to centre stage in this controversy. The infamous 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums' speaks for itself. (This year is its tenth anniversary, incidentally — so "Happy Birthday Declaration!") The Declaration was not so much a case of the Universal Museum shooting itself in the foot, but rather of it severing its foot altogether and taking most of the leg with it. Such was the adverse reaction that the Bizot Group of museum directors who issued it quickly limped towards a correction. All of a sudden, it was no longer referred to as the Universal Museum, but had become the Encyclopaedic Museum. The encyclopaedia is, of course, one of the great achievements of the eighteenth century, so this new way of referring to the museum helped to maintain the genealogical connection between the museum and the European Enlightenment.

Universality is another core Enlightenment principle, building on the idea of universal human aspirations and shared goals. That aspect of 'Universality' opposes any claims to regional specificity or to ancient lineage (important aspects of many requests for return of cultural property), which are now dismissed by museum directors as evidence of a dangerous nationalism.

Now this is not the place to engage in a protracted critique of the concept of the encyclopaedic museum, nor indeed to outline a counter-Enlightenment position. Suffice to summarise that these institutions — more than 80 per cent of whose collections languish in basement stores, a good deal of which has never been catalogued, never mind exhibited, since acquisition — are unsustainable on both practical and funding grounds. This is an objective fact of museum culture widely acknowledged.

They are also, in my view, *philosophically* unsustainable. That is to say that the poetic notion of "enclosing the whole world beneath one roof"— an idea inherited from the princely Cabinets of the sixteenth century and which survives in the prevailing dogma promulgated by the Universal Museum today — is anachronistic and unrealisable. It nevertheless survives as a frequently cited tenet of the British Museum's core purpose.

So let me emphasise once again, I am not advocating the dismantling of the Encyclopaedic Museum. Not even the most rabid counter-Enlightenment thinker would take such a position. For all their faults and rambling incoherence, I love these places and I endeavour to nurture a similar passion for them in my children. What I want is a more equitable sharing of cultural property. One way to achieve that is to look again and more creatively at those objects that were originally acquired under circumstances that were either manifestly unethical or blatantly inhuman. The Parthenon Marbles are the signal instance of the former. Because of the circumstances of their acquisition the Parthenon Marbles should be easy to mark out as worthy of special attention without setting a precedent. Arguing that to do so would open the floodgates to similar claims is tantamount to admitting that the majority of our collections were unethically or inhumanly acquired. We have to assume that that is not the case.

But let me keep these comments tightly focused. One of the most muscular responses to calls for Reunification of the Marbles has been that put forward by James Cuno, formerly director of the Art Institute of Chicago and now president of the Getty. Mr Cuno has been countering criticism of the Universal or Encyclopaedic Museum by advocating the establishment of Encyclopaedic Museums everywhere. "These are not evil institutions," cries Dr Cuno, "they are beneficent and culturally fructifying; they promote learning and respect; they foster connectivity and mutual understanding between peoples and nations. Don't dismantle ours! Build your own Encyclopaedic Museum!" he tells the world, (I'm paraphrasing).

Now let's leave on one side the extent to which the British Museum's retention of the Parthenon Marbles continues to fail miserably in fostering deep connectivity between nations. If these museums really believed in generating goodwill and cultural understanding they would take respectful notice of the overwhelming majority of respondents to surveys and public debates who continue to argue for return of the Marbles. Now *that* would garner more goodwill and global respect than a thousand trustees could ever dream of. Instead, their stubborn refusal to do so encourages the growing suspicion that their real agenda is not cross-cultural connectivity but revenue generation from cultural tourism and sustaining the reassuring fictions of a long-gone empire. The weight of tradition and authority are hard to resist.

Quite how the British Museum tolerates year after year the embarrassment created by the Marbles controversy in what must rank as one of the longest-running public relations disasters in museum history is a mystery.

But what happens when a developing nation takes Dr Cuno up on his idea and seeks to establish its own Universal Museum? You won't be surprised to discover that the supply of museum-quality objects from the distant past are somewhat thin on the ground, the vast majority having long ago been appropriated by the imperial nations of Europe and North America and deposited into the basements of their Universal Museums.

This may be what Dr Kavita Singh of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi meant when she wrote in *The Art Newspaper* that western museums were regarded by people in developing nations as "terrifying places with insatiable appetites for works of art." Now I don't wish to quote Dr Singh out of context so in the interests of balance I should add that she went on to say "The universal museum is worth preserving, not because this kind of museum is essential for us to get to know one another, but because it is a significant cultural phenomenon in itself. If we dismantle these museums we will never again be able to make museums of this sort."

And there's the rub. We cannot make museums like this any more. We cannot rebuild the empire to which these museums represent a grandiose monument. Only super-wealthy emerging nations such as Qatar can turn to their cheque books to stock their new museums. In doing so they are propelling the art market into a separate reality where few others can compete.

Some nations who have embarked upon the construction of their own museums of cultural heritage — Egypt and Turkey spring to mind — are now looking to recover key objects taken from their lands that are still held in Western museums. It is hardly surprising that these developments are now being seen as evidence of a new "culture war". It is a conflict that is intensifying almost by the week as subscribers to the Museum Security Network mailing list will be aware.

There is one other fiction that needs addressing and that is that the Encyclopaedic Museum as it is presently constituted presents a legible and coherent body of objects. So deeply imprinted is the concept of the museum on our shared cultural imagination that we rarely question its underlying purpose or the extent to which it succeeds in doing anything more than delight us. Delight is a marvellous thing — it is actually what coaxes me to museums on a regular basis. One can enter a dream-like state in museums that is deeply pleasurable. But that is not always a rational state of mind. In fact it perhaps has more in common with a Romantic counter-Enlightenment imagination. But to argue, as the British Museum does, that the juxtaposition in its cavernous rooms in Bloomsbury of randomly acquired objects from diverse ancient cultures represents a coherent narrative about the progression of style from one culture to another and by extension is representative of universal human creative development — is either delusional or wilfully misleading, or both. At least Henri Loyrette, director of the Louvre, had the candour to tell a conference at the British Museum in 2003: "Most of our displays mean nothing to people." Indeed a survey of Louvre visitors revealed that 67 percent of those questioned in the Archaic Greece room could not identify a personality or event connected with the period. It goes without saying in the present company that the Parthenon Marbles as they are presently displayed in London make a mockery of the

British Museum's claim to coherent educational purpose. The contrast between the Duveen Galleries and the Parthenon Gallery in the New Acropolis Museum in Athens is enough to reduce one to tears.

Now I just want to make one final comment. Don't assume that criticism of the Universal or Encyclopaedic Museum is pointless. It is not. Museums are occasionally responsive, albeit more often to minor low-level requests for changes in presentation than to major calls for the return of objects. But returns are happening, albeit more often in the case of human remains. I'll leave the legal intricacies to other speakers more qualified to comment on them, but I do believe museums will increasingly have to listen to what their public say and act upon it. Changes in thinking and approach are also happening. One of my major criticisms of the British Museum's custodianship of the Parthenon Marbles has been directed at its wilful re-writing of the Marbles' architectural and thus cultural significance.

As late as 1928, three leading classical archaeologists, John Beazley, Donald Robertson and Bernard Ashmole, had pronounced the Parthenon Marbles as primarily works of art rather than as architectural elements: "Their former decorative function as architectural ornaments, and their present educational use as illustrations of mythical and historical events in ancient Greece, are by comparison accidental and trivial interests" they pronounced.

That this statement was designed to foreclose any future requests for restitution seems obvious enough, but it also illustrates the lengths to which even some archaeologists and curators have been prepared to go in order to consolidate their proprietorial claim over objects in their care.

The way they are disposed in the Duveen Galleries seems to have been designed specifically to reinforce the attempts made by Beazley, Ashmole and Robertson to divest the Marbles of any remaining connection to the Parthenon. That approach was only relatively recently reinforced by Neil MacGregor who said, "The life of these objects as part of the story of the Parthenon is over. They can't go back to the Parthenon. They are now part of another story."

I for one don't believe that story. And nor, it seems do the vast majority of the British public and, I daresay, most visitors to the British Museum. Mr MacGregor you and your trustees can put an end to this embarrassment. Do the right thing. Heed the words of Christopher Hitchens. Cover yourself in glory, Neil. Reunify the Marbles... now.

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