

INTERVIEW

Interview with Dr. Robert Anderson, Director of the British Museum

Conducted 15/6/00, by Andrew Gardner and Cornelia Kleinitz

Could you give us a brief outline of your career so far, and of your job at the British Museum?

I went into museums immediately after I left university, having studied Natural Science at Oxford and taken a doctorate in Chemistry. In October 1970 I took up a post at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh, as a curator in the history of science; I was there for 5 years. Then I went down to the Science Museum, in the Department of Chemistry. I became interested in the history of medicine, and helped transfer the Wellcome Collection from Euston Road to South Kensington and put it on display. I then became Keeper of the Department of Chemistry. During this period I studied for a Diploma in British Archaeology. In 1984, I left to go back up to Scotland as the Director of the Royal Scottish Museum, then a year later became the Director of the National Museums of Scotland, because the Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland - the archaeological and antiquities museum - were combined. I was there until 1991, and then I came down to the British Museum as the Director. My job was to do everything that was needed as head of the Museum - to present it to the public; to ensure a sensible acquisition programme, adequate storage and conservation, and a research and publication policy; and in recent years to develop ideas for the new Great Court, and ensure that funds were raised for it. So really, the whole thing, although of course there are many senior people within the Museum who have particular responsibilities over the range of activities.

There has obviously been considerable discussion about the creation of a managing director position at the British Museum last year. Do you feel that the splitting of the job is helpful and should be taken up by more museums in the UK, or do you think that directors themselves should broaden their management skills?

I think in the British Museum at the moment there is a particular issue, which is the great change which the Museum is going through with the creation of the Great Court. On top of everything else - keeping the Museum open to the public, ensuring that there is a continuing, scholarly curatorial programme - the Great Court project and the raising of over 100 million pounds has put a great deal of strain on the organization, perhaps not surprisingly. I think that each museum might look at the possibility of dealing with its administrative operations separately from curatorial, research and education matters, but I think that each museum needs to do that on the basis of what its immediate aims and objectives are, at a particular moment. I wouldn't want to generalize. Other museums have gone along this path, particularly within the United States of America. One thing I do want to say is that I have a feeling that there should be a high level of curatorial knowledge and scholarly interest in people who run the museum. I don't think anyone would want to see a major national museum like the British Museum run by someone who was insensitive to its fundamental purpose.

What do you see as the main mission of the Museum in the future? Will it remain a research institution with a public face, or will it become more of an educational institution?

I think that the British Museum has always been an educational institution. Those who try to suggest that in the past it was only concerned with research and didn't really take account of the public are wrong. One needs to look carefully at the history of the Museum, and to be carefully analytical about how one regards its past, not simply see it from a present-day viewpoint. That's a simple thing to do and you get the wrong answer quite often. I think the Museum always has been sensitive to the needs of the public who have come to it. But those needs are changing. They always have changed, and I think that we have to be very conscious of what those changing needs are. But there is no doubt that the British Museum will remain a major scholarly institution in the future, in the way it has been in the past.

More and more applicants for jobs in museums have taken Masters degrees in Museums Studies and related courses. Has this increase in formal training changed the way in which curators work?

I think that the Masters degrees, diplomas and so forth which are increasingly offered by universities, are of great value in the museum world, but they are of more value in some kinds of jobs than others. It's wrong to see the museum sector as a homogeneous set of institutions. We have the advantage in the British Museum, because we are so large, of being able to recruit people with specific qualifications and to benefit from their experience. I think that many of the postgraduate qualifications in museum-based subjects which are available are probably of greater value to curators in museums which have small staffs, who have to understand a very wide variety of things, and who do not have colleagues who are specialists. You will know that within the British Museum, many of the curators have higher qualifications in their curatorial specialism, rather than Masters degrees in museology. Conservationists will have postgraduate qualifications in conservation, librarians in librarianship and finance officers in accountancy. Curators form only a relatively small proportion of staff in the Museum. Your question did not ask about the training of existing staff, which for us is an important matter.

Do you think that the need for curators to pay greater attention to their public, which the Museum's managing director Suzanna Taverne has highlighted [1], is a lesson that archaeologists working in universities should also learn?

I think the answer is almost certainly yes. I think that can be done in the right kind of way. One does not have to become a major media figure to be able to present one's subject to the public, but archaeology is a public matter, a public issue; it can have a very significant effect on the lives of ordinary people - therefore I think you're absolutely right that archaeologists as well as everybody else have to regard the public who might be interested or who are affected by their activities. The Treasure Act is of great interest to many people - there are a very significant number of people who are metal-detectorists at the present time. Some are very responsible people, others are very irresponsible. I think that some members of the academic community are unaware of interests of the public, perhaps uninterested, and that archaeologists should be able, and should wish to, address issues which can be of surprisingly widespread fascination. Ultimately, archaeology will benefit if this is done.

Is there a divide between university-based academic research and that carried on at the British Museum? If so how can we make academic archaeological research relevant to the Museum?

Yes, I think there has been, over quite a period of time, a moving away of object-based research and other kinds of research - and this is not only in archaeology, but has also happened in natural history, fine art, and the history of science. In the past, the community was more united in what it was interested in and the approach it took, I think there has been a division. About ten years ago, I was involved in a House of Lords Select Committee investigation into taxonomic research in natural history, in museums and universities. There was a concern that if museums turned away from such research, then perhaps very little would be conducted throughout the country, because universities by and large didn't do this kind of thing themselves. I think that in archaeology there has also possibly, or probably been a move away from the study and understanding of objects. There are fashions in all kinds of academic fields and I don't think the present position is something which won't change. But I do think that museums and universities should work closely together and they have not done so sufficiently in the past. The British Museum, together with other museums, colleges and universities will shortly be establishing a centre for the study of visual and material culture, which would be based in our new Study Centre. Discussions have been going on between the Museum and departments in London University, to see whether in fact there is a common interest in the establishment of such a new body.

More broadly, do curatorial staff in the Museum have the opportunity to pursue joint research with academics based in universities?

The fact is, that there is quite a lot of collaboration which goes on between museums and universities at the moment. Perhaps that's not always on a particularly formal basis, but I'm absolutely convinced that there is a great deal of common interest. We have frequent conferences and seminars in the British Museum, which include papers from people within museums and from within universities, and clearly they're talking to each other about the same things.

How are research excavations selected, administered and published?

They are selected on the basis of information which we need to know, and obviously also on the practicalities of being able to work at a particular site in a particular country. Occasionally there are considerations on whether the material excavated can be acquired for the Museum collections; that's by no means always the case, but sometimes we are concerned about that. For example, we have been excavating recently in Sudan and Jordan where partage is still a possibility. We are either the directors of excavations ourselves, or sometimes co-directors with other museums, with universities or with antiquities departments in other countries. Sometimes the British Museum simply supplies a relatively modest sum of money to the archaeological work performed by another body, and doesn't play a personal role at all. As far as publication is concerned, this is by a wide variety of means. Very often we publish our own archaeological research; sometimes it's published in journals, or in the publications of other bodies. The British Museum has a long tradition of publication and we have our own press, the British Museum Press, which does it. I should go on from there to say that we do feel that publications should be produced within a reasonably short time after the work has been completed. There has

unfortunately been a tradition, not recently but in the past, of very long gaps stretching out between when the last spade was pushed into the soil and when the manuscript is complete, and when the book appears on the bookstalls. That is something we want to avoid in future.

To what extent are the Museum's reserve collections available for study and publication? Will the situation be dramatically improved with the new off-site Study Centre?

The collections are all available, and anybody can come and ask to see them. We have twelve study-rooms dotted around the British Museum, which are open on every weekday, and anyone can come in and ask to see something. It may take a bit of time at the moment to actually produce that object, but the point of setting up the Study Centre is that the whole British Museum collection will either be in this main building in Bloomsbury, or just down the road, 200 yards away. From the time when the Centre is fully operational, which will probably be 2004, we should be able to produce things very quickly indeed. But I must emphasize that we don't particularly like to differentiate between what is on display and what is in store. We like to feel that all parts of the collection are active and available. We currently put on between 20 and 30 exhibitions every year. Many of the objects within those exhibitions are things which are not usually on display in the Museum in the formal sense, but are from our stores.

Do you see a fragmentation of the British Museum into zones for different users, such as the traditional galleries, the Study Centre and the Great Court?

No, I think it's very important that the Museum is seen as a whole, and that people use it as a whole. Clearly, there are people who come to the Museum with particular purposes, and they will naturally migrate to, shall we say, one of the student rooms, and they will study a group of cuneiform tablets, for example, and that will be their principal purpose. But I would very much hope that even those people who come for particular purposes, in walking through to the student rooms are in some way diverted by what they see *en route*. Likewise, I think people who come for rather quick visits - we get a proportion of people of course who don't have a lot of time - will come back again, and be stimulated by something different next time. We're opening the new Hamlyn Library in the Round Reading Room in December, which is a library of 25,000 volumes relating to objects in the Museum and the cultures that produced them. Some of the people using it will then develop interests which will lead them on to other things. So I don't think we should have preconceptions about the reasons why people come to the Museum. I think we should be optimistic about how the Museum is going to change them, and I always think that the ultimate performance indicator - and we talk a lot in terms of performance indicators these days - is how someone leaving the Museum is different from the person who goes in. Though how exactly you measure that I don't know!

Would you agree that the departmental structure of the Museum is somewhat outdated - for example Romano-British archaeology is separate from Greek and Roman, and Coins and Medals is separate from any more culture-specific departments. Is there any possibility of changing this?

I think you can argue about departmental structures until the cows come home, and incidentally that goes for universities as well as museums. They're a matter of practicality. What is important is that the boundaries between departments are not barriers - the important thing is that curators interact with one another and do things jointly, and increasingly over the last few years that's happened in the British Museum. One way of seeing how this is happening is through the exhibitions we've done in recent years which have not been the product of one department but rather of two or several. 'Ancient Faces', for example, an exhibition about the painted mummy portraits from the second and third centuries A.D., was produced both by the Department of Egyptian Antiquities and the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities. Our first exhibition in the new Joseph Hotung Exhibition Gallery in the Great Court is going to be called 'Human Image' and this considers images from all ten curatorial departments of the British Museum. There will be more thematic exhibitions in the future. Yes, I think probably departments are necessary and they have grown up not by accident, but are there for good, sound reasons. But the important thing is that people don't consider them to be the boundary of their world.

Is it possible to justify the imbalance between the individual departments dealing with specific Old World cultures and a single Department of Ethnography which encompasses Africa, the Pacific and the Americas?

It's very difficult, again, to produce a perfect departmental system. It is partly the result of the history of collecting by the Museum. Departments have frequently changed their coverage, and Ethnography once found itself bound in with British and Medieval, and Oriental Antiquities. Ethnography overlaps with most departments and the boundaries are somewhat blurred. I think that's no bad thing. For example, the Department of Ethnography collects in Asia, as does the Department of Oriental Antiquities, and so the question obviously is asked: what is an Oriental antiquity and what is an ethnographic object from the Far East. What's important is that the curators responsible for collecting in those areas work together and are not antagonistic towards each other, and that is in fact the case. Ethnography has a somewhat different way of seeing things from the ways in which some of the other departments operate. It's no accident that in universities, too, there are departments of anthropology or ethnography, and also departments which deal with specific world cultures. So these things don't worry me. What one does have to make sure about is that there's not significant duplication, that people are talking to each other, and that there aren't gaps.

On the British Museum web-site, for instance, the word 'aesthetics' is often used. Do you think that the permanent exhibitions focus on celebrating human artistic achievement, rather than educating visitors about the day-to-day reality of past life and other cultures?

Well, the British Museum has always considered itself to be a historical museum rather than an art museum. The fact of the matter is that much of our historical material is deemed to have high aesthetic quality: objects which can also be considered as art objects. If you regard the objects in the Museum as having historical content and aesthetic qualities, the former quality is present in a demonstrable form while the latter depends on the varying artistic feelings of particular people at specific moments. The British Museum has always been more interested in seeing objects as

offering historical evidence than as providing aesthetic responses, so it is educating visitors which is the more important.

How does the British Museum assess the responses of various sections of its public to exhibitions? How does this affect what is put on display?

We certainly conduct surveys of our visitors to find out how they respond to the exhibitions which we put on and the permanent galleries we introduce or renew. We ask them a variety of questions - we want to know who our visitors are, why they come, how many times they come a year, whether their experience is enjoyable, and what sort of thing they get out of their visit to the British Museum. We also want to know who's not coming. Exhibitions must be attractive to audiences but I think that the Museum has a responsibility for putting on some exhibitions on subjects which are not things at the uppermost of peoples' minds before they come here. That is part of our educational role: to broaden peoples' knowledge and understanding. We occasionally put on exhibitions on subjects to which we wouldn't perhaps expect a mass response, but we can be surprised. I've already mentioned 'Ancient Faces'. There was a very very good response to 'Ancient Faces'. It was a subject which most people had not known about, - are the painted portraits incorporated in these late mummies real portraits, and if so, when were they painted in relation to the death of their subjects? These are very interesting questions, partly because they can be considered to be the very first portraits. The response to the exhibition was extremely positive. It was always crowded and there were very good reviews, and this led to the exhibition being requested by many other museums around the world. It's only just closed now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, three years after we originally put it on. I think that if you had done a survey about exhibitions which people had wanted at the British Museum, mummy portraits from Fayum would not have come very high.

The Museum has been successful in attracting funding from the private sector. Do sponsors, or indeed donors of material, have any influence over what's presented in exhibitions or how objects or information are portrayed?

By and large the answer to that is no. We ask for help with specific exhibitions, and having agreed, donors and sponsors are generally happy to leave it to us, who I have to say have quite a lot of experience in these things, to put an exhibition on in the way we think is most appropriate. It's very rare that any sponsor wants a great deal of input at any point. They trust what it is that we do, and I think they are happy with how we deal with the issues. There have been problems in the past with sponsors, for example in the Smithsonian Institution, with the display of the Enola Gay recently, or with the 'Science and American Life' exhibition. The sponsors of this were deeply unhappy that it didn't present a triumphalist view of science. But I think there are particular problems when you're dealing with contemporary subjects, which don't arise in the same way when you're dealing with ancient material.

What is the role of temporary exhibitions within the Museum compared to the permanent ones? Who decides on the themes of temporary exhibitions and are these choices ever driven by commercial interests?

Temporary exhibitions are not driven by external commercial interests. There is an Exhibition Forum which I chair and which decides what we want to do, and then we

go out and find sponsorship for it, and we've by and large been quite successful at that. Sponsors aren't responsible for the content of exhibitions. That's not to say, of course, that from time to time we don't take in ready-made exhibitions, and obviously we haven't devised those exhibitions ourselves, we haven't made the choices. Again, though, I don't think those sorts of exhibitions are ever the result of heavy-handed sponsorship. Those are exhibitions which happen to have been created by other curators and other institutions, and they may well be sponsored, but the sponsor hasn't had a major role in determining how the exhibition is put together or presented to the public. We have good relations with our sponsors and often they help more than once.

Entry to the British Museum is free of charge. Can this be kept up, especially in the light of new attractions such as the Great Court?

It's certainly our intention to remain free. The Museum has been free since 1753 and we must do our best to see that it remains that way. It is how we maximise our benefit. The Great Court is a great opportunity for the Museum itself to earn more money than it has done in the past. We've done the sums and we feel certain the Museum can remain free. I think it would be a great disappointment if the British Museum ever in future has to charge, but that's certainly not the position at the moment.

As one of Britain's major attractions, the British Museum mainly draws its visitors from outside the UK. Do you worry about the potential exclusion of people living in this country?

Obviously, we are interested in the proportion of people who come to the Museum who come from this country. We have very large visitor figures indeed, and I suspect that when the Great Court is open more still will come. The public from Britain are very important to us, and we want to attract a greater proportion of people who come from this country. We are going to open for longer hours quite soon: from December we're going to have two late night openings a week, for example, where we have none now. The Great Court itself will be open even longer, and that will nearly always include an exhibition gallery, and there will be educational programmes in the Clore Education Centre. I think that in itself will attract a stronger British audience than we have now. But I have to say that if you count the number of people who come into the British Museum from London and the rest of the UK, you find it's a huge figure, much bigger than the total attendance of most other national museums.

If the role of the Museum is to encourage multi-cultural appreciation, do you think the name 'British Museum' is a suitable one for the future?

The name of the British Museum is becoming, perhaps, a bigger issue. I think the British Museum is the right title for a museum which was founded in the middle of the 18th century and I certainly can't see the name of the Museum ever changing. The name is recognised all over the world. Of course some people say 'why is it the British Museum - how many galleries have you got which deal with British material?' The answer is, I think, that at the moment the number of galleries which deal solely with British material in the British Museum, or material from British soil, is one out of 100. And this is the Romano-British gallery, which I suppose one can consider as Roman to a degree, as well as British! I think, though, that this is the great strength of

the British Museum: its multi-culturalism and its broad chronological sweep. The Museum was founded in the Enlightenment, and 'Great Britain' itself was an 18th century concept, the English and Scottish parliaments being merged in 1707. It was quite natural to call it the British Museum, and I think that the name we have is certainly preferable to the names which many other museums have. Recently the Victoria & Albert Museum floated the idea of changing its name, and I don't think anything has come of that. Certainly if they have a problem we have a much lesser one.

What is the basis for the British Museum's acquisition policy? Who decides what is worth preserving and exhibiting?

The Keepers - the heads of the departments - have a very clear view about what is important in their field and how to develop coherent collections. There is a written acquisitions policy to refer to. We're very anxious to specify what we shouldn't acquire as well as what we should acquire, and we're particularly sensitive at the moment to illegal excavations and to illegal export of objects from other countries. We take provenance into account very carefully when we decide what it is that we acquire. To some extent of course you are reactive, in that objects become available and you can't influence that much. We do archaeological work of our own, of course, and that does mean that we can, to some extent, make choices about where it is that we do excavation and therefore what we receive. We operate significant fieldwork programmes as well as archaeological programmes, and again we have been very selective about where we go and what it is that we collect when we go there. In recent years we have been particularly anxious to be able to develop the 20th century collections, to ensure that we enter the 21st century feeling that we've got a good coverage of the output of the last century.

Is it ethical to buy unprovenanced objects under any circumstances, even if they are of outstanding intrinsic interest?

Well, the issue of unprovenanced objects is taken into account in our stated acquisitions policy. The answer is that if the object is probably from a foreign source, as far as we can tell: no. If it is likely to be from a British source, the answer is occasionally maybe. The last thing we want to do is encourage illegal activity, but on rare occasions it is important that objects which are of significance, and are likely to come from British sources, don't leave the public domain. A particularly good example of this is the now famous Salisbury Hoard, a collection of Bronze and Iron Age objects which were acquired in 1989. Without knowing the exact provenance at that time, the Museum acquired a number of miniature bronze shields. Subsequently, the Museum was approached again and asked whether it wanted further material, seemingly from the same source. We gave the answer that we were interested, and as a result of that we managed to have two men arrested who'd conducted an illegal excavation near Salisbury. Through tremendous detective work of one of our curators, Ian Stead, eventually the hoard could be reconstructed, on the basis of finding out where the material had been dug up, and tracing its passage through various dealers and auction houses. If the Museum hadn't made that opportunistic acquisition in 1989 - if it had really been very hard line about not accepting unprovenanced material - then the information which is now available from that extremely important excavation would be lost.

What can museums do to discourage the looting of antiquities?

The problem is that the public market is much smaller than the private market, so the fact that we refuse to accept unprovenanced material might not make a big difference. All we can do is to educate, try to persuade, help the police and customs, and hope for occasional prosecutions. Lord Renfrew and myself have just been asked to join a panel set up by the DCMS to look into the problems of illegally-held material, and through that process, the panel may recommend that the United Kingdom sign the UNESCO 1970 and/or the UNIDROIT 1995 Conventions.

How closely involved is the Museum in the Portable Antiquities Scheme? Has this been successful?

The Museum is deeply involved in the Portable Antiquities Scheme. We were in there right at the beginning. We helped set it up, and one of our curators, Roger Bland, also works at DCMS, and the combination of the British Museum and DCMS has in fact helped establish it. A pilot scheme has been run successfully, huge quantities of material have now been reported, and we know much more about what is being excavated than we ever have done in the past. An application has now been made to the Heritage Lottery fund to set the scheme up on a national basis, and we very much hope that the Study Centre will act as the 'nerve centre' for the future Portable Antiquities Scheme throughout England and Wales.

Is it possible to adopt a consistent ethical standpoint on repatriation, or can each case only be decided on an individual basis? For instance, is there a difference between the restitution of artefacts from Mediterranean cultures, such as the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon on Athens, and the repatriation of artefacts to indigenous communities?

The British Museum holds one of the world's great international collections, and my job is to exploit it beneficially in London for the broadest possible public. Repatriation is not something I've been employed to do. I think it's important to realise that one can't unravel the processes of history. The fact is that the Parthenon Marbles were legally acquired at the beginning of the 19th century and transferred in 1816 to the British Museum. Although there are many people who would like them to be returned to their original location, or more accurately, nearby, we feel that at present they are easily accessible, free, and are very well displayed where they are. They have become part of world culture, and should stay. Concerning indigenous communities, I hope that we can continue to work with and encourage those peoples with rich but vulnerable material cultures, though some do not have the means to establish significant museums at the time being. We want their own material to be safeguarded from illegal export and we would like to work alongside them. Certainly, we are extremely sensitive about the acquisition of any material from, for example, African countries at the moment. We will not acquire any material which does not have a provenance. But as far as objects acquired in the past are concerned, that is a different matter.

Do you think that this issue of repatriation is something that is going to keep growing in the future?

I looked into the statistics of this. Over the last 30 years, from 1970 to 1999, 27 requests have come for repatriation, which is not a huge number. However,

repatriation has always been on the agenda in some way or other, ever since the Parthenon Sculptures were acquired at the beginning of the 19th century, and in my view the subject is never likely to go away. It's something we'll always have to live with and be sensitive to. When requests come in, we do treat them very carefully. We don't simply write letters saying 'no'. We try to appreciate why it is that various governments, cultures, peoples or museums are asking for this, and we hope that the fact that we cannot return material doesn't preclude the possibility of developing a good relationship.

What do you think is going to be the role of national museums in the 21st century? To what extent is the mission of a museum like this explicitly connected with changing political and social trends?

I think that museums, if you look at their history, have performed different functions at different times. I have no doubt at all that we shall continue to develop new and important functions in society, and some of the old functions will carry through and continue. There is a thirst for knowledge, I've no doubt at all about that, and museums can deal with that particular thirst in a particular kind of way. We can provide evidence which is not available easily by other means. I think that looking at the real thing, looking at an object which was created in the distant past, does raise questions in peoples' minds in a way that other forms - electronic forms for example - simply do not do. I'm very anxious that we do in fact provide information electronically - we're doing it ourselves very actively at the moment - but we're also expecting that that provision will in itself result in an increased number of people wanting to come to the Museum. I also think that places like the British Museum will increasingly be called upon to offer services to regional museums, and will be prevailed upon to provide more loans to museums both home and abroad.

What events are planned for the celebration of the Museum's 250th birthday?

We're looking at different kinds of events. Obviously we're looking at exhibitions, which is the traditional way, and a major series of public events. We're working closely with the British Library and the Natural History Museum - of course, all three institutions were founded as one in 1753, and we all share our anniversary together. It's too soon, I think, to say specifically what it is that we intend to do, and indeed many of these ideas are emerging at the moment, but certainly there will be a series of fascinating exhibitions. More permanently, the King's Library, the Wellcome Gallery and much of the Study Centre will be opened in 2003. We are aiming that the British Museum will become the museum focus for the world in that year.

What are your plans for the time after your contract with the Museum runs out?

I'm not thinking about that at the moment. What I am thinking about is the opening and use of the Great Court. That really is the most important thing for the next period.

[¹] The New Deal? *Museums Journal*, March 2000, 100 (3): 16-17.