The British Museum and the Cultural Logic of Museology

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Library Scholars Grant 2013 Report

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The LSG provided partial support for archival work at the British Museum, conducted in two segments (in March and July), for the following chapter: “The Cultural Logic of Museology and the Idea of the British Museum”
Montagu House was built by Ralph Montagu in 1686; House owned by Montagu family till early 18th C; By the early 1740s the house was empty and in disrepair; Montagu House was purchased in 1754 to house the first “British” museum, established by British Museum Act of 1753.
The Origins of Building and Space

• In 1725 Henry Flitcroft (1697-1769) was asked to draw up a plan for Montagu House when it was still owned by the Montaguses;

• Subsequently, Flitcroft Plans used for upgrading the museum space under the supervision of chief surveyor, Henry Keene, appointed in 1754;

• In 1755 these Keene Plans presented to the Trustees of the British Museum.
A Page from the Flitcroft Plan, 1725
Collectors: Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), Robert Harley (1661-1724) & Others

“Initially there was a tripartite division of the collections:

1. Printed Books (including prints);
2. Manuscripts (including medals);
3. Natural and Artificial Productions (everything else).”

*** The separation of books, manuscripts, and natural objects was to come much later.
Order of Collections: Zoological, Vegetable, and Print

- Dr. Gowan Knight, first Principal Librarian of the British Museum Library (1756-1772):
  “All the articles ... may be properly classed in the three general divisions of Fossils, Vegetables, and Animals. Of these the fossils ... may properly be disposed in the first Rank. Next to them the Vegetables, & lastly the Animal substances.”
- Harleian Collection of Manuscripts: 80,000 vols.
The philosophy which seeks to universalize and to globalize through the space of the museum both *artistic endeavors* (work associated with generating or developing, building or creating art works and educational or aesthetic products) and *aesthetic judgment* (the critiques of such works) overlaps with the philosophy of civilizing missions.
The purpose of the British Museum chapter is to

(a) Describe how the eighteenth-century British Museum manifests its modernity through “artful” juxtapositions of creative and intellectual works and artifacts as well as specimens of natural history and to

(b) Consider how and why this modernity stages the choreographed interplay of space and objects and celebrates its alliance with or knowledge of various other cultures.
The Idea of Social Space

Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also relations. As objects, they possess discernible peculiarities, contour and form. Social labor transforms them, rearranging their positions within spacio-temporal configurations without necessarily affecting their materiality, their natural state.” Henry LeFebvre, *The Production of Space.*
Archival Documents of Importance

Plans and (handwritten) Manuscripts:

- **Plans:** The Revised floor plans based upon the Flitcroft Plans and designed by Henry Keene are uncatalogued and preserved (fairly intact) in a large black box, BM archives.

- **MSS:** The Minutes of the British Museum Board of Trustees meetings and the Minutes of the Standing Committees, leather-bound and in very good condition.
A Typical Page from the Minutes

1. That the Treasurer and Secretary, of the several languages, that are in the use of the Association, shall be deposited in the Secretary's Room, in order to prevent the theft or desecration of reading matter when they are not in use.

2. That the books shall be kept in a safe, under the care of the Treasurer.

3. That the books be removed for the purpose of special reference, together with a list of titles and their contents, to the school of the Principal, shall be annexed to the Principal's Residence.

4. That it will be of use to keep a record of any manuscript that has been collected or written by the Secretary of the Reading Room should be altered to bring an.
Some Pertinent Manuscripts

- *British Museum Statutes and Rules 1756*, BM Add MS 42852.
- *Committee (Minutes of the Committee Meetings).*
- *General Meeting, (Minutes of the British Museum Board of Trustees)*, mostly volumes I & II.
- *Papers Relating to the British Museum, Birch Collection, Add MS 4449 (British Library).*
My Space @ the British Museum!