

4-15-2014

The British Museum and the Cultural Logic of Museology

Mita Choudhury

Purdue University - Calumet Campus, choudhur@calumet.purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lsg>

Choudhury, Mita, "The British Museum and the Cultural Logic of Museology" (2014). *Library Scholars Grant Program*. Paper 11.
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lsg/11>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

*The British Museum and the Cultural Logic
of Museology*

Library Scholars Grant 2013 Report
Mita Choudhury (choudhur@purdue.edu)

Purdue University Calumet

April 15, 2014



Research Supported by the LSG 2013

Title of Book-Length Project: *Nation-Space in Britain, 1660-1800: Vision, Narration, Performance*

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”

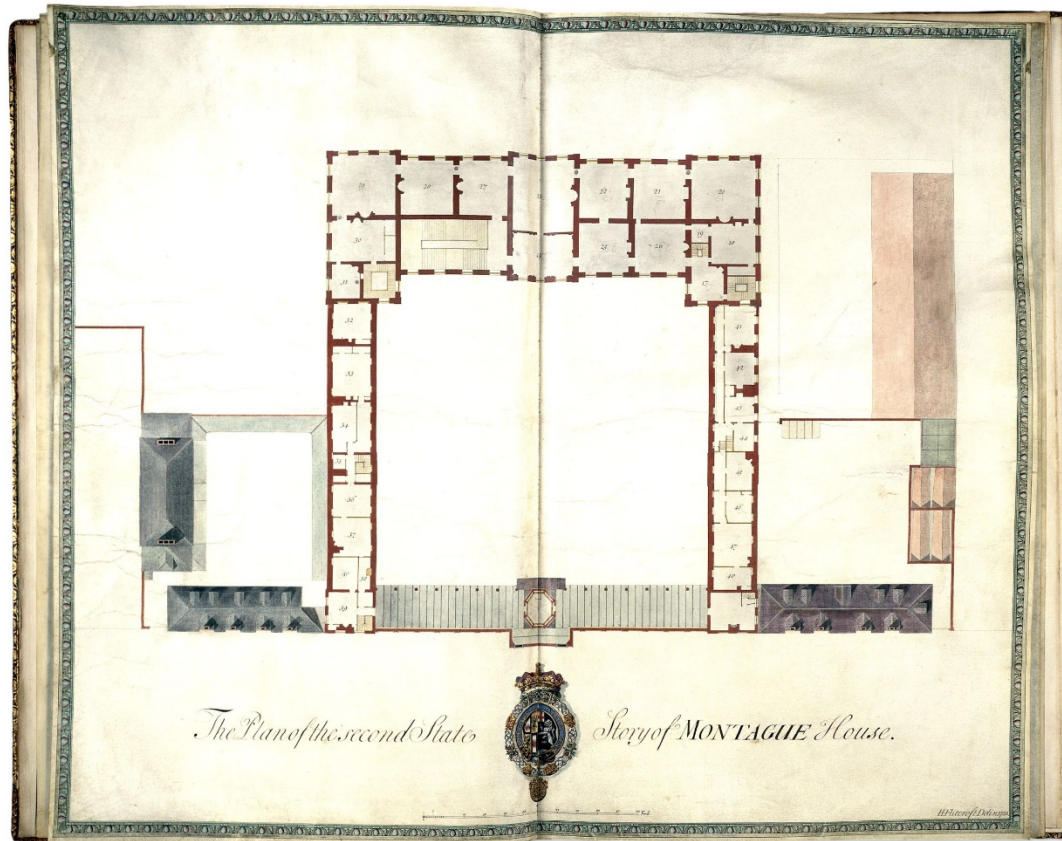
Museum History circa 1740

- 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 Montagus;
- 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.

Globalizing Space: Premise of the Study

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.

Purpose of Studying Order and Space

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

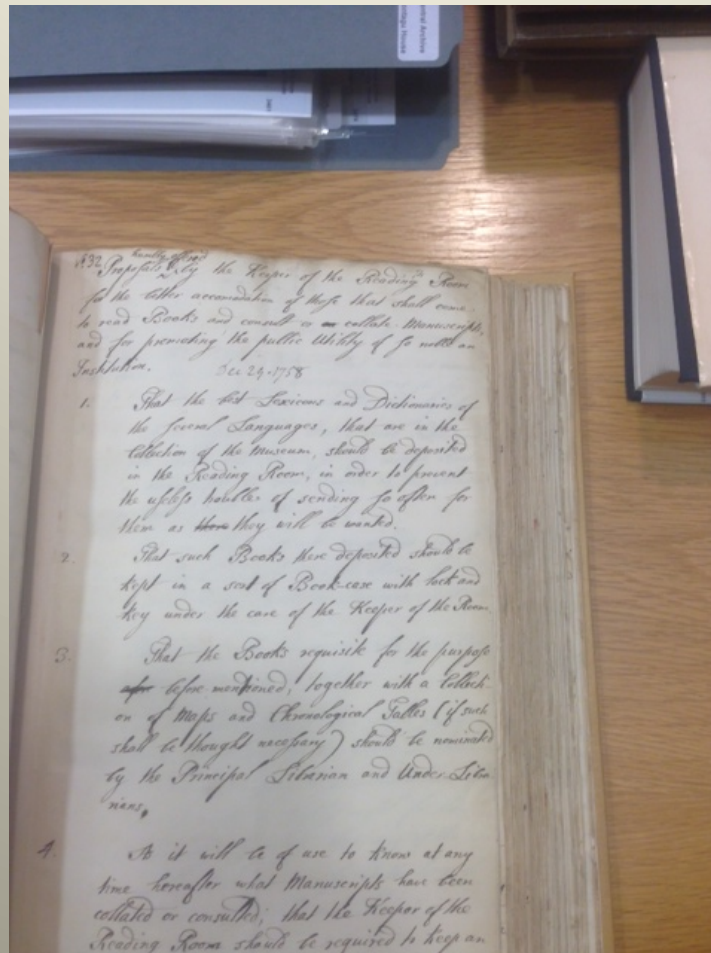
“Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also relations. As objects, they possess discernible peculiarities, contour and form. Social labo[u]r 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*



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.
- *Original Letters and Papers*, Volume I: 1743-1784.
- *Papers Relating to the British Museum*, Birch Collection, Add MS 4449 (British Library).

My Space @ the British Museum!

