

Chapter XI

Conclusions

The primary aim in this work was to examine access to the British Museum from 1759 to 1836. There was more to access than simply assigning the hours and days of operation. The creation and amendments to the statutes were a complex and intricate procedure based on the functions of the Museum, the definition of the public, and the perceptions of a public museum. The trustees' original perceptions of the Museum were reflected in the carefully constructed rules and subsequent amendments.

Sloane had amassed a large collection which was designed to glorify God and to advance learning. Upon Sloane's demise, Parliament assumed ownership of the collection and combined it with the Cotton and Edwards Libraries and the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts to form the British Museum. In order to examine life and truth, man had begun to practice careful observation, analysis and experimentation instead of looking to God or Authority. We see that the British Museum Act omitted references to the Deity and emphasized man, his thought and development, and the benefits that Sloane's collection would bring to mankind by furthering sciences and inventions.

The trustees came to a definition of the Museum by taking its direction from the British Museum Act and by borrowing from antiquity and other institutions. The trustees proceeded to turn the British Museum into an institution of knowledge and arts and sciences with the principal intentions of encouraging learning and knowledge and facilitating the studies and researches of learned and curious men. From these goals came the trustees' and officers' notions of access and the institution's purpose which was to serve the scholar in his pursuit of knowledge.

The British Museum's status as a research library and collection was the main consideration when debating access, and the trustees proceeded to define a Reading Room public

accordingly. They divided people into the 'learned and curious' and the 'rude and ill behaved'. To determine who were the 'learned and curious' it was assumed that legitimate researchers would be acquainted with an officer or a trustee and would have no difficulty procuring a recommendation. The trustees had created a 'known' Reading Room public based on acquaintanceship with an officer or trustee. It was a narrow and strictly enforced interpretation. William Hone, Rev. G.G. Stonestreet, Francis Hopkins, and others have shown that one could be educated and have good character but could still be denied access to the library.

Based on the analysis of the readers, the application procedure created a Reading Room public that was 'learned and curious' for natives and foreigners. In 1759 one half of the readers were clerics, lawyers, or physicians, and in the period 1770-1810, the proportion had only slightly dropped to one third. Many of the readers had attended a university and were members of the Royal Society or the Society of Antiquaries. There were foreigners among the Reading Room public, and in 1800 one in seven readers was French. With only one artisan (a watchmaker) and three women the Reading Room public in the period 1759-1810 was a male educated and propertied group of readers.

The trustees altered the statutes in 1822 to allow recommendations from people who knew a trustee or officer. By 1830 one fourth of the readers were recommended by someone other than an officer or trustee, and the officers had to rely on someone else's word that the reader had good character. Readers who were in professions (clerics, physicians, lawyers) constituted more than one in five of the total Reading Room public in 1836, while there were a few office employees and clerks among the identified readers. Even so, Ellis thought that the readers had diminished in respectability, and he did all he could to counter the situation by enforcing a strict interpretation of the recommendation procedures and by making an example of anyone who was caught stealing. The trustees' Reading Room public resembled Richard

Sennett's public of friends, acquaintances, and strangers and Raymond Williams' public, which he defined as the 'crowd'.

The trustees acknowledged, that because the public paid for the Museum, they were entitled to see the collections. The museum public did not mean the populace, however. The trustees had visitors complete application forms, which excluded all those except the literate. Hugh Cunningham stated that the wealthy tried to keep public spaces for their own use. Habermas said that the public was the educated, and, like Hudson, listed bourgeois occupations for the public; however, the public at the British Museum was much broader, for in 1784 the trustees determined that the majority of the recent visitors were 'Mechanics and persons of the lower Class'. By having people return on another day to claim a ticket, and, by closing the Museum during the religious holiday weeks and for two months in the summer, there were many whose schedules would not permit a visit the Museum. Finally, like Mr. Lever, who screened visitors to his museum, the Principal Librarian checked all applications and denied access to anyone of known bad character. In spite of the precautions the tours were limited to fifteen people. The trustees were afraid of theft or damage to the collection, and they did not have enough librarians to supervise tours of a larger size. The museum public was one that lay somewhere between the unknown publics in Williams' and Sennett's definitions and the public who visited Lever's museum.

Originally, the public saw the Museum by applying for a guided tour. Except for minor alterations in 1761, the procedure remained intact for more than forty years. In spite of surviving so long without alterations, the evidence indicates that the application procedure and the tours were not efficient and were unsatisfactory. In 1759 Gray said that it took a fortnight to get a ticket. By the 1770s Curwen said it took from two to three weeks, and by 1799 Desenfans said it took a month. In 1774 Sir George Lyttleton recorded that people who applied in April were told to come back in August. The tours confined the public to a two hour visit that left many people

unsatisfied, because they went too fast to see everything properly. People did not return to collect tickets. The officers did not like the tours because they kept them from working with the collections. Most important, the tours limited the number of people who could see the British Museum.

Throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century, the top priority was to simplify things to let the maximum number of people enter. British tourists had seen how easy it was to visit the Louvre. A large number of visitors, M.P.s and the 'public' commented on the disparity between the Louvre and the British Museum. Planta told the trustees that the public would not be satisfied until it had the same ease of access that was in practice at the Louvre. Planta simplified procedures so that the illiterate could apply. Instead of waiting a month, people could get tickets within a day. More tours were added, and attendants were hired to assist the officers with the tours. By 1810 the Museum had become so saturated with tours, and the procedures for obtaining tickets had become so simplified that Planta abolished both procedures and opened the Museum to the public on a more efficient basis. Visitors did not have to apply for tickets, and they could come and leave the Museum and visit the galleries as they pleased. As the information about the other European museums confirms, the British Museum had the most liberal access policies among national museums.

As Planta made alterations to access policy, he redefined the museum public to include the illiterate and youths. After tickets were abolished, visitors did not need to submit their names for the Principal Librarian's approval, and far more people could attend. Ellis was afraid of the large crowds, because they were an unidentifiable mass, and as there were no tours, there could be little intimacy between the officers and the visitors. The museum public were unknown people who were watched by warders but were trusted to behave in a large group setting.

In order to dismantle the ticket system, the Museum had to adopt another means for defining the public. Good behavior was kept, but literacy was replaced with appearance. There

was a statement in the printed statutes and the synopsis that warned the public to be appropriately attired. The article in The Penny Magazine implied that many people thought they could not enter because of their appearance. A porter, who received instruction from the Principal Librarian, denied access to a livery servant because of his dress. In the House of Commons Cobbett argued with Baring that 'decent attire' kept the poorest people out of the Museum.

During the overhaul from 1803 to 1810, the evidence indicates that the patterns of access bore a strong commitment to scholarship and learning. In 1801 Banks hoped to turn the Museum into an absolute domain for the educated by excluding the unlearned whom he thought were unfit for the collections. Although Planta dismantled the tour and ticket systems, there was at least one closed day reserved for students and readers. After 1810 Tuesdays and Thursdays were reserved for students in spite of intense criticism to open them to non-students. The officers and other witnesses testified that artists and students needed the attention of the officers and the freedom and quiet of an empty museum to do their work. Students and readers always had access to the library and the collections during the summer, but the Museum was closed to the public. When the Museum came under pressure to open on Saturdays, the trustees opened the library but not the museum section. In each case, the reader's pursuit of knowledge and the Museum's scholarly reputation remained the basis for access and dictated how change occurred.

As the evidence indicates, a 'public' had developed, according to Habermas' definition, because people became concerned about access to the British Museum and thought that the topic was no longer confined to the trustees but was one that was properly theirs to discuss. The 'public' wanted the Museum to be open more than three days a week, during the summer, and during the religious holiday weeks, and they wanted an easier recommendation procedure to use the library. In view of the fact that taxes supported the Museum and access to French institutions was easier, the 'public' could not understand why access to the British Museum was so difficult.

The trustees offered no explanation, so the ‘public’ challenged them in The Times and other periodicals to justify the Museum’s policies.

When the trustees printed Statutes and Rules in 1757 they stated that the public should be allowed to see the Museum, because it had been founded at their expense. The government had never spent more than £3,500 biannually to support the institution, but by the turn of the century, the substantially larger grants that went to the Museum made M.P.s and the public realize that they were supporting a museum that many people could not enter, and it gave the ‘public’ a foundation on which they could criticize access policies.

In 1804 Sheridan complained about the £8,000 grant, and suggested that there should be, in return, greater access to the curiosities. Critics and M.P.s defended the right of access on the basis that the British Museum was a public museum based on ownership. In 1805 Bankes said that if Parliament was voting away the public’s money, that they should require some arrangements for greater access to the Museum. Inquilinus said that the defects of access needed to be fixed, because the British Museum was ‘a public institution, supported by the nation.’ ‘X’ was surprised that people would permit themselves to be denied access to their own property. The Reformer and Reformer said that money from Parliament paid the staff who were there five days a week, but why was it closed so often? The Penny Magazine said that the visitor paid for the Museum; therefore, he had every right to be there. Hume spoke for many M.P.s when he said that the public paid for the Museum; therefore, it should be open five days a week. The British Museum Act guaranteed the right of access for the public, but when the ‘public’ and M.P.s stressed the right, it was not the Act they cited, but the nature of ownership.

The ‘public’ assumed that its opinion would render change to the access policies at the Museum. In one case in 1808 when Planta submitted a plan to enlarge access to the Museum, he said that "the public will be satisfied with nothing short of immediate free admission such as they are told is allowed at Paris"; otherwise, we see from the evidence that public opinion alone did

not bring change to the Museum, and that the 'public' needed Parliament's intervention. William Smith stated in the House that no "trustees of any institution had more completely seconded the view of parliament than the trustees of the British Museum had done." The speech was indicative of the trustees' obedience to Parliament's views. By the 1830s 'X' in The True Sun and the Athenaeum book reviewer recognized this fact when they advised people to address their complaints to Parliament.

Habermas stated that public opinion did not rule, although the enlightened ruler would have to follow its insight. The article in The Edinburgh Review has shown that M.P.s were aware of public opinion, but unless it was supported by facts, then M.P.s did not believe that access at the British Museum needed to be altered. One of the reasons Long had been able to persuade members that it was unnecessary to change access to the library was that the library was 'sufficiently open to those who wished to visit it' and that the restraints at the Museum were not too great. Lennard successfully refuted Long's claims by citing two men who had not been able to get recommendations. By the following year the trustees amended the statutes.

It was difficult justifying to fellow M.P.s that alterations to access policies were necessary when the annual number of visitors rose. In 1830 the statistics that had been submitted annually to Parliament for more than twenty years showed a decrease in the number of visitors for the third year in a row. Bankes, who through the years had been able to persuade M.P.s that more open days were not necessary, had failed to prove that the Museum was making progress on service. Hume, who had been advocating additional access, took advantage of the dwindling numbers and mustered support for change in the House. Many M.P.s did not know how the Museum operated or when it was open. By asking Bankes for information or explanations, they had united like a 'public'. In 1830 the Museum initiated a plan to stay open an hour later, but the readers petitioned against it, and the plan was dropped. In the following year Wilks misinterpreted the number of readers at the library, but because the error worked in favor of

M.P.s who wanted greater access, they were able to force the trustees to open the library on Saturdays.

One of the intentions of printing the ‘public’s’ criticisms in periodicals was that everyone could read and debate them. Members of Parliament brought the criticisms before the House, and M.P.s determined the place for a ‘public’. Hume obviously read the criticisms that the ‘public’ wrote, because he asked the same questions they did and considered the ‘public’ a valid commentator on the procedures at the Museum. He had ‘interpreted a place of a public’ and thought their criticisms should be addressed in the House. Although Thornton, Lennard, Cobbett, and other M.P.s argued for greater access, no one spoke as often on the subject in the House as Hume did. He had become the ‘public’s’ advocate.

When the ‘public’ and M.P.s challenged the trustees, they offered alternative definitions to the Museum and Reading Room publics. They were not advocating a change that would have benefited the ‘public’ only, but a change that would have enlarged the museum public. ‘Z’ (1814) and Viator were British citizens who complained that having the Museum closed in August and September did not benefit foreigners. A Reformer witnessed visitors from the country who came on a closed day, and he thought that having the Museum open daily would prevent disappointments for people who lived outside London and could not conveniently visit the following day. The Penny Magazine spoke for the artisan and tradesman, and Cobbett spoke for laborers, tradesmen, and the poor. Hume spoke for the largest museum public when he argued that, because the British Museum was tax supported, and the populace paid taxes, access was for everyone.

When the ‘public’ sought to redefine the Reading Room public by making the recommendation procedure an easier process, they sought it for the ‘public’ only. The letters point to people in literary, professional, or similar backgrounds. ‘A Citizen’ sought access for people in the learned professions. Francis Hopkins, a surgeon in the military, and Mr. Bellenden,

a lawyer, both thought that they should be granted access on the basis of their professions. The M.P., Thomas Lennard, said that there was a lawyer and the son of a professor who could not get recommendations. According to the analysis of the readers for 1820 and 1830, many of the readers were clerics, physicians, lawyers, or in other similar professions. When the 'public' requested access, it made the request for people whose occupations or backgrounds were similar to the readers who already had access to the library. With the exception of Syntax, none of the critics advocated abandoning a means of measuring a prospective reader's character. They wanted an easier procedure for students, scholars, and people in professions to obtain access. They wanted the known Reading Room public of clerics, lawyers, physicians, and other educated people to include an unknown public of scholarly and professional people.

When the 'public' sought to redefine the Reading Room public by extending the times of service, there was no unanimity among the 'public'. Writers to The London Magazine and The Westminster Review complained that the hours benefited authors and the 'republic of Letters' and was of no benefit to people who were engaged in business during the day. When the Museum attempted to change the hours and close at 5:00 p.m., the petitioners and The Morning Herald fought for scholars and students to have the hours remain at 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Even the House was divided. In the House Mr. Jephson argued for service that would benefit gentlemen and clerks in public offices who were engaged in business all day, while Mr. Sadler was against the idea, because the library was a place of reference and not a reading room. In the end, when the British Museum library closed at 4:00 p.m. but opened on Saturdays, it was a concession to two competing 'publics' and an acknowledgment of two different Reading Room publics.

Habermas stated that the 'public' wanted to debate issues and to have the authorities justify their actions. The 'public' questioned access, but when they received no response, they asked the trustees to account for their policies and decisions. The British Museum and the

trustees were a secret institution, and they did not answer critics in the press. The Museum rarely advertised in publications, nor did they have printed instructions on the walls outside the Museum to advise visitors when they were open. The 'public' and many M.P.s hardly knew what was going on, and because the trustees did not justify themselves before the 'public', M.P.s demanded an explanation from the Museum's spokesman in Parliament in order to make the Museum be more open or public in its affairs. Ultimately, the British Museum had to account for its rules and statutes at the Committee hearings in 1835 and 1835, and access was being judged by Parliament.

As the title of this work includes the phrase, 'museum culture', it is possible from the evidence to create a definition of the phrase that is applicable to the British Museum from 1753 to 1836. The British Museum Act (1753) and the trustees defined the Museum by its collection, building, and purpose. From the combination of these three components and from the comments on the Museum we can add another dimension and say that museum culture was a creative or appreciative experience which involved the clientele, behavior, time, and a learning experience.

To enjoy the Museum the trustees and officers assumed that one had to be surrounded by one's peers, and usually it meant any group that did not include the uneducated. Ward and Maty wrote that persons of different classes should not be mixed in the tours, and Moritz stated that he was not pleased with the company in his group. Obviously, there was class consciousness, but further evidence indicates that people were seeking a sense of camaraderie in which to share mutual experiences. Banks wrote that the tours were composed of people who had read and prepared for the tour and those who had not. Those who were not prepared cheated the pursuits of the others by asking idle and senseless questions. For someone like Banks or Moritz, they were people who disturbed the uniformity of the group. The livery servant was angry because he was denied access, but he was also angry because he was denied the experience of attending with his friends. The trustees restricted the library and the Gallery of Antiquities (on the closed days)

to scholars, researchers, and artists for educational reasons, because they had similar ambitions - to research and search for knowledge. Ellis said that the library was for research and reference and not for idle reading. According to Ellis it was the novel readers who stole. When the ninety-two petitioners reacted against the time change in 1830, their reactions were a group mentality with accusations of 'we' versus 'they'. Museum culture involved a shared identity based on similar interests and experiences.

The second dimension of museum culture was appropriate behavior. Ward was afraid of letting the populace enter the Museum, so the trustees had the Principal Librarian review the lists of people who wanted a ticket and deny access to anyone of bad character. The visitors were kept under control, because they saw the collection while on a tour. The librarians closely watched the visitors and could remove anyone who was disorderly. When the tours became more numerous, Planta hired warders to keep order. After Planta abolished the tours no one knew for sure how the public would act, so the librarians had to go through the galleries regularly to be sure that all was well. At the Committee hearings Mr. Samouelle testified that mechanics, soldiers, sailors, and police officers visited the Museum and were in awe by what they saw. They were well behaved and nothing was damaged.

Michael Shapiro stated that museum directors adopted behavioral codes in the nineteenth century to have visitors avoid "modes of speech and conduct that intruded upon another's experience." Numerous testimonies have shown that the visitors asked questions. According to Wittlin they were looking for meaning in what they saw. Banks resented the idle questions that the uneducated visitors asked the officers. To him it prevented the officers from answering serious questions from visitors who were prepared for the visit. Some of the officers would not answer questions and expected the visitors to be quiet. The Penny Magazine advised the tradesman and artisan not to talk too loud and not to trouble other visitors or artists with questions. Although Banks, other officers, and The Penny Magazine hoped to condition visitors

to restrain their modes of speech and conduct while at the Museum, they were never wholly successful, for Gray testified at the Committee hearings that there were too many visitors who occupied the officers with frivolous questions.

The third dimension of museum culture was a sense of time. Moritz said that there was no time to look at anything. Many of the visitors' complaints involved the speed with which they were hurried through the rooms. Curwen wrote that because there were so many curiosities, and the tour moved so quickly, that it confounded his memory as they went from room to room. With so many strange and different items on display, it was too difficult to comprehend in a short visit. Powlett wrote that because the time was short, and the rooms so numerous, it was impossible without a directory 'to form a proper Idea of the Particulars.' On the other hand, Inquilinus, who had disregarded everything in the Museum because he wanted to look at the mineral collection, was denied the time to examine it properly because the tour had to go to the next room. When the atmosphere was not rushed, visitors like Sophie von La Roche had no time to visit all the rooms. Alma Wittlin claimed that the uneducated museum visitors ran from object to object searching for meaning. Some were doing this at the British Museum because they knew their time was limited. After Planta opened the Museum apartments to everyone and eliminated the tours, the confines of time disappeared, and visitors stopped complaining that they were rushed. The one thing that many people had assumed they would be granted at the Museum was now available.

The final aspect of museum culture was the arrangement of the collections and educational tools that led to an increase in knowledge. People wanted and expected their curiosity to be satisfied. The visitors not only wanted to see the exhibits, but they wanted to understand what they were looking at. Hutton gave the most damning account when he said that he left the Museum as ignorant as when he came. Other people alluded to a sense of intellectual loss, because they learned little or nothing at all. In spite of some of the remarks from the

officers and attendants on the tours, the objects themselves were not sufficient to convey meaning to the people. From Wendeborn's and Hutton's accounts not all the specimens were labeled, and Wendeborn thought that appropriate labels would answer the visitor's questions and satisfy his curiosity without bothering the officer. The public's failure to comprehend fully what they were looking at explains the outcry for a synopsis.

Service was very important to the visitors and students, and assistance from the officers was expected and necessary in order to use fully the Museum. Many of the readers and students were experts in their fields, but with so many specimens and books the Museum could be a daunting place. The officers worked with the collection and books, and their expertise was a key that could expedite a student's research. Authors noted in their works the debts they owed the librarians. In The Times 'S.C.G.' wrote about the great service that Baber gave him, and 'C.M.' said that Mr. Keats could tell him the titles of rare books that he needed.

Bad service not only hindered or destroyed learning, it ruined the experience of visiting the Museum. Hutton and Louis Simond despised their tour guides because of their rude and condescending manners. Sometimes, the attendants made learning and attempts at acquiring culture a painful experience. The relationship between the officers and the public was more than one of extracting information, it was a rapport, and in some cases, a camaraderie as the officers and students became very close friends. If students and visitors learned something or visited the Museum because the officers and attendants were helpful and supportive, then the British Museum clearly earned praise as an institution of knowledge.