

## Chapter II

### The British Museum Defined

Many eighteenth-century philosophers and Enlightenment writers promoted the ideal of an equality of opportunity in learning. When museums like the British Museum were established in the eighteenth century, they were exclusive, elitist, and met the needs of a very small section of the public. Any idea of presenting the collections to the masses was regarded as odd. Autocrats ran the museums and saw entrance as a privilege and not as a right.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary notions of access to the British Museum were grounded in the ideas that governed its foundation. Many eighteenth-century museums had their origins in the sixteenth-century cabinet and gallery, whose collections included art, curiosities, and books. Sir Hans Sloane's cabinet of curiosities provided the bulk of the collection of the British Museum, and for a few years after it opened, people continued to refer to it as a “cabinet”. Sloane had a great number of objects crowded together,<sup>2</sup> and he enjoyed showing them to curious travelers and scientists.

When Parliament created the British Museum, however, a major transformation took place. A private collection was turned into a public museum under the control of a board of trustees. Sloane did not need to write policies because he was not working in a formal institution and did not need to be accountable to anyone. Although the British Museum Act (1753) provided a few guides, the emphasis was on statutes and rules as a national repository. As a result, we are confronted with two questions: What were the circumstantial and physical conditions pertaining to the creation of the British Museum, and how did the trustees define the

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<sup>1</sup>Hudson, *A Social History of Museums*, p. 3-6.

<sup>2</sup>Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, trans. Jane van Nuis Cahill (Brussels: Dessert, 1967), p. 129.

extent of access? It is the purpose of the following two chapters to answer these questions by examining Sir Hans Sloane's will, the British Museum Act (1753), the trustees' reports during the formative years, 1753-1759, and the policies and patterns that developed.

The idea of a national museum and library in England predated Sir Hans Sloane by almost 200 years. In 1556 Dr. John Dee vainly petitioned Queen Mary in a "supplication for the recovery and preservation of Antient Writers and Monuments," and "Articles . . . concerning the erecting of a Library without any charge to the Queen's Majestie."<sup>3</sup> During the reign of Elizabeth, Sir Robert Cotton, Sir John Doderidge, and Sir James Ley, wrote a petition to secure a charter to incorporate the Society of Antiquaries, to establish a library called the Library of Queen Elizabeth, and to be furnished with books and charters.<sup>4</sup> The antiquarians were no more successful than Dee in the establishment of a library. A century later in 1697 Richard Bentley printed a proposal for refounding the royal library, which had fallen to decay and was improperly housed. He called for a new building, an established annual revenue by an act of Parliament, free access for foreigners, and for societies to hold conferences on matters of learning at the library.<sup>5</sup>

Forty years later, England's first national museum and library began with the ideas of Sir Hans Sloane. A former President of the Royal Society and physician to Queen Anne and King George I, Sloane was an antiquary and a natural scientist who had amassed a large collection of natural curiosities and books and manuscripts. The collection was well known among the

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<sup>3</sup>British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Cotton MS Vitellius C. VII, f. 310, cited by Edward Edwards, Memoirs of Libraries: Including a Handbook of Library Economy, 2 vols. (London: Trübner & Co., 1859), 1: 418. See also William H. Sherman, John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Cotton MS Faustina E.V., fols. 89-90, cited by Archaeologia: or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity 1 (1770): iii-iv; Edwards, Memoirs of Libraries 1: 418-19; C.E. Wright, "The Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries and the Formation of the Cottonian Library," in The English Library Before 1700, ed. Francis Wormald and C.E. Wright (London: Athlone Press, 1958), p. 189-90.

<sup>5</sup>[Richard Bentley], A Proposal for Building a Royal Library, and Establishing it by Act of Parliament (London: [1697]).

English and other Europeans. In 1739 Sloane, who was 79 years old and realizing that his remaining years were few, wrote a will. A large section pertained to his friends and relatives. The instructions for the collection indicated the careful thought that he took in developing the collection, its purposes, how he wanted to ensure its security upon his death, and for whom it was intended.

Whereas from my youth I have been a great observer and admirer of the wonderful power, wisdom and contrivance of the Almighty God, appearing in the works of his Creation; and have gathered together many things in my own travels or voyages, or had them from others, especially my ever honoured, late friend William Courten, Esq; who spent the greatest part of his life and estate in collecting such things, in and from most parts of the earth, which he left me at his death . . . And whereas I have made great additions of late years as well to my books, both printed as manuscript, and to my collections of natural and artificial curiosities, precious stones, books of dried samples of plants, miniatures, drawings, prints, medals, and the like, with some paintings concerning them. . . . Now desiring very much that these things tending many ways to the manifestation of the glory of God, the confutation of atheism and its consequences, the use and improvement of physic, and other arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind, may remain together and not be separated, . . . where they may by the great confluence of people be of most use.<sup>6</sup>

He offered it to the king for £20,000. In a codicil of 26 December 1751 he wrote

Having had from my youth a strong inclination to the study of plants, and all other productions of nature; and having through the course of many years with great labour and expense, gathered together whatever could be procured either in our own or foreign countries that was rare and curious; and being fully convinced that nothing tends more to raise our ideas of the power, wisdom, goodness, providence, and other perfections of the Deity, or more to the comfort and well being of his creatures than the enlargement of our knowledge in the works of nature, I do Will and desire that for the promoting of these noble ends, the glory of God, and the good of many, my collection in all its branches may be, if possible, kept and preserved together whole and intire . . . at, in, or about my manor house at Chelsea aforesaid, which consists of too great a variety to be particularly described. . . . To have and to hold to them and their successors or assigns for ever. . . .

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<sup>6</sup>Sir Hans Sloane, *The Will of Sir Hans Sloane, Bart. Deceased* (London: John Virtuosio, 1753), p. 2-3.

[The trustees were to] meet together from time to time as often as shall be thought fit, and there make, constitute and establish . . . such statutes, rules, and ordinances, and to make and appoint such officers and servants for the attending, managing, preserving, and continuing of my said musaeum, or collection. . . .

And I do hereby further request and desire, that the trustees hereby appointed . . . in promoting this my intention, and of perpetuating my said collection as afore mentioned . . . for making a provision or fund for maintaining and supporting the same for ever. . . .

And I do hereby declare, that it is my desire and intention, that my said musaeum or collection be preserved and kept . . . and that the same may be, from time to time, visited and seen by all persons desirous of seeing and viewing the same, under such statutes, directions, rules, and orders, as shall be made, from time to time, by the said trustees . . . that the same may be rendered as useful as possible, as will towards satisfying the desire of the curious, as for the improvement, knowledge and information of all persons. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Sloane regarded the collection as serving two basic functions, to glorify God and to benefit mankind. As we infer from the testimony, God was powerful, wise, good, divine, and perfect. In the preface to his book on the voyage to Jamaica, Sloane stated

They [products of natural history] afford great Matter of Admiring the Power, Wisdom and Providence of Almighty God, in Creating, and Preserving the things he has created. There appears so much Contrivance, in the variety of Beings, preserv'd from the beginning of the World, that the more any Man searches, the more he will admire; and conclude them, very ignorant in the History of Nature, who say, they were the Productions of Chance.<sup>8</sup>

He may not have believed that he had to have samples of everything to reflect God's attributes, nor did he explicitly dictate it as a goal, but based on the statements in the will and the preface and the mammoth size of the collection, it was clear that he thought that the more one had, the more it proved God's reality. Also, according to Dr. H.A. Hagen, a nineteenth-century natural

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 16-17, 19, 25-29.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c. of the Last of Those Islands*, 2 vols. (London: 1707, 1725), 1: preface.

historian, "collections of objects of natural history are indispensable to the naturalist . . . as the study of natural history consists chiefly in comparison." Every description and observation is a comparative one, "and it is easily understood that richer and more complete collections help to a more complete study, a more perfect work."<sup>9</sup> Achieving this broad goal required a large collection. Sloane had been a physician to the governor of Jamaica for two years, and he collected many botanical specimens there. Sloane purchased James Petiver's natural history collection which contained plants from Bermuda and Jamaica, and as the will stated, William Courten collected things from most parts of the world. From his position and influence as President of the Royal Society and as a physician to the court, Sloane came into contact with professional and amateur scientists who shared samples of their collections. According to Sloane, as man studied and understood these natural curiosities, he could apply the knowledge for his comfort and benefit. Man recorded the achievements and saved samples of his works as reminders of past achievements. As a result, by the time of Sloane's demise, his collecting followed two patterns. The objects represented specimens of pure or natural, and applied or useful science and art, whereby they glorified God and benefited man and his understanding.

Sloane ordered that the collection be made as useful as possible and for people to visit it. He had liberally granted permission to scientists, friends, and well-known people to view and to use the museum. He also allowed people to use it for free, which was not common among people who owned menageries. Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach visited the doctor in 1710, and Sloane was more than willing to show him around the house room by room and to talk about the collection. He accompanied each guest out of courtesy and also to assist the visitor who would not have known his way around or known where to find things. The detail that Uffenbach

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<sup>9</sup>Dr H.A. Hagen, "The History of the Origin and Development of Museums," The American Naturalist, an Illustrated Magazine of Natural History 10 (1876): 80.

recorded indicates that this was not a rushed visit, for his host pulled out cabinets of insects, butterflies, agates, and gems and later served coffee while he showed his guest some books.<sup>10</sup> Other visitors included John Evelyn in 1691, a young Benjamin Franklin in 1725, Linneaus in 1736, Handel in 1740, and the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1748.

There were times when Sloane lent material or gave samples and made the museum useful in other ways to help people. Ralph Thoresby left with a printed catalog and some Indian seeds.<sup>11</sup> Edmond Halley wrote to his fellow member of the Royal Society to borrow again Michael Maestlin's Observations of the Comet of 1580.<sup>12</sup> To the very end of his life Sloane made his collection useful, for when the trustees examined the inventory, they discovered that there were eleven people who had failed to return books from the library.<sup>13</sup>

The collection was worthy of the tribute that it was all encompassing. He left forty-nine volumes of catalogs whose contents revealed the breadth of his interests: coins, cameos, intaglios, rings, amulets, precious stones, metals, fishes, birds, eggs, quadrupeds, insects, antiquities, seals, pictures, mathematical instruments, vessels, agates, corals, sponges, serpents, crustaceans, plants, shells, crystals, fossils, bitumens, talcs, books, and manuscripts.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the size of the collection, Sloane did not want it to remain static, nor to become a tribute simply to him. Maintaining it as 'Sloane's collection' would not have been an unreasonable request. There was sufficient material for any person to research and collate in a

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<sup>10</sup>Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, London in 1710 From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, trans. and ed. W.H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1934), p. 185-87.

<sup>11</sup>Ralph Thoresby, The Diary of Ralph Thoresby, F.R.S., ed. Rev. Joseph Hunter, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 2: 341.

<sup>12</sup>Edmond Halley, Correspondence and Papers of Edmond Halley, ed. Eugene Fairfield MacPike (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 131.

<sup>13</sup>British Museum, Board of Trustees, General Meetings, Minutes 1 (2 February 1754): 15-16.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 12-13.

lifetime. Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, the French traveller, visited the British Museum in the 1790s and thought it was a pity that the collection had not remained in its pristine condition, because the additional objects distracted a person's attention.<sup>15</sup> Sloane, however, was a man of vision, and he wanted the collection to grow and for the trustees to raise funds to support it. It is clear from the will that there were two principles governing his collecting: that the articles gathered should be rare and curious things from England and foreign countries, and that they should raise man's ideas of the Deity and increase his comfort and well-being. The instructions for collection development were deliberately non-specific. He believed that God created all works of nature, and anything that benefited mankind was useful. He did not want to confine the trustees to certain branches of the collection or to prevent their venturing into new areas. As the collection consisted of almost every conceivable aspect of art, science, and history, the potential for development was enormous. The trustees were free to exploit one or more fields or to develop all the branches of the museum.

The idea of keeping the collection within the family had too many risks to suit Sloane's purposes. England had private collections and museums, but they depended on the owner's resources or the public's support for maintenance, and many were short lived or sold off. William Courten had bequeathed his collection to Sloane, and there was no assurance that Sloane's daughters would not be forced to liquidate their father's legacy. Although Sloane could have entailed the museum to his daughters to guarantee its security, it was not a consideration he took seriously.<sup>16</sup> A national museum offered the possibility for larger numbers of visitors at a time, while the person who owned a personal collection would not have the facilities or resources

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<sup>15</sup>Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, Travels in England, Scotland, and the Hebrides, 2 vols. (London: James Ridgway, 1799), 1: 86-87.

<sup>16</sup>I found no evidence in the will, Sloane's correspondence at the British Library, or in any biographies to indicate his daughters's feelings towards the collection or how they felt when it was not offered to them.

to allow access to a large number of people. In addition, the visitor to the private museum or collection was subject to the caprices of the owner. Sloane had been generous in showing off his objects and allowing students and scientists to use them, but he was under no obligation and could deny anyone he chose. It was a common lament among English artists and connoisseurs, such as Thomas Martyn and Benjamin West, that the great art collectors did not make their works more available to painters.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, to ensure the collection's safety and to guarantee his plans, Sloane offered the museum to the king for the public good for £20,000. Only a person of Sloane's stature and reputation could make a bequest of this kind and expect it to succeed. So confident was Sloane over the collection's scientific and educational value, that should the king decline the bequest, then the offer for the museum was to go in turn to the government and various institutions and scientific bodies. If all of them declined it, then the collection was not to revert to the daughters but was to be sold at auction. The heirs were to receive cash. Sloane knew that with the government's sanction and by following his guidelines he could ensure the security and usefulness of the collection forever. A board of trustees had the responsibility of creating rules and statutes to improve and develop the collection and of satisfying the public's desire to see and use it. The transformation of a large private collection into a national museum began when Sir Hans Sloane died on 11 January 1753.

The British government took up the idea of a national museum with some reluctance. As chair of the executors, the Earl of Macclesfield presented a petition to King George II to purchase the legacy, but the king replied that he doubted if there was twenty thousand pounds in

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<sup>17</sup>In his account of art collections in England, Martyn hoped that the nobility and gentry would make their collections available to the curious. [Thomas Martyn], *The English Connoisseur*, 2 vols. (Dublin: T & J. Whitehouse, 1767; republished ed., Farnborough, England: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1968), 1: iv. At a lecture to the Royal Academy Benjamin West suggested that if noblemen opened their collections of paintings to students, there would be no necessity of studying art in foreign countries. *The Times* (14 December 1801), p. 3d.



the treasury.<sup>18</sup> George II was not recognized as a champion for the arts and sciences and was probably not interested in having the collection. He was noted for the remark, "I hate bainting and boetry."<sup>19</sup> Even so, he may have dismissed the offer as too expensive for an assortment of curiosities. Horace Walpole, one of the executors, harbored such sentiments in a letter (14 February 1753) to Sir Horace Mann. "He [Sloane] valued it [the museum] at fourscore thousand; and so would anybody who loves hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese! It is a rent-charge to keep the foetuses in spirits! You may believe that those who think money the most valuable of all curiosities, will not be purchasers."<sup>20</sup>

After the rebuff from the king, the executors approached Parliament. Although Parliament did not whole-heartedly embrace the idea of purchasing the museum, at the same time it did not want to let such a valuable bequest slip through its hands. According to the terms of the will, the government had one year from Sloane's demise to buy the collection; otherwise, the offer was to go to the academies in St. Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, and Madrid where Sloane had held honorary memberships. The collection had an appraised value of £80,000, and it would have been a disgrace not to accept it at such a bargain price. The government proposed to have a lottery to finance the transaction instead of taking the money from the sinking fund. After a period of deliberation, Parliament voted and passed an 'Act for the Purchase of the Museum, or Collection of Sir Hans Sloane, and of the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts'. By virtue of the Act creating the British Museum, Sloane's legacy had grown to something larger. Parliament

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<sup>18</sup>Horace Walpole, The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Oxford: Including Numerous Letters Now First Published From the Original Manuscripts, 6 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1840), 2: 462.

<sup>19</sup>Henry Francis Taylor, The Taste of Angels: A History of Art Collecting From Rameses to Napoleon (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1948), p. 445.

<sup>20</sup>walpole, The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford, 2: 461-62.

added the Cotton Library, the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts, and the Edwards Library and the legacy to Sloane's original bequest.

As the trustees' perceptions of the Museum were based in part on the intentions of the government, it is appropriate to examine the Act that connected the collection with the national institution that was given to the care of the trustees. The preamble to the Act reiterated Sloane's will concerning the collection and the intents. Parliament defended the purchase because it was worth the money, beneficial to mankind, and furthered science and manufacturing.

And whereas all Arts and Sciences have a Connection with each other, and Discoveries in Natural Philosophy, and other Branches of speculative Knowledge, for the Advancement and Improvement whereof the said Museum or Collection was intended, do and may, in many Instances, give Help and Success to the most useful Experiments and Inventions.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas Sloane saw that the collection glorified God and benefited man, Parliament made no reference to God as one of the intentions of the collection. In the eighteenth century Parliament did not largely involve itself in issues of doctrine or the deity, but only in issues concerning a religion's perceived strength and its ability to maintain or subvert the balance of power and harmony and order in the kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Many politicians markedly lacked religious feeling and were reticent on matters pertaining to God. They especially wanted to avoid the religio-political controversies of the seventeenth century.<sup>23</sup> It would have been difficult to devise a plan whereby God could have been glorified without writing an interpretation of God and bringing a religious context to the Museum.

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<sup>21</sup>Great Britain, Laws, Statutes, etc., An Act for the Purchase of the Museum, or Collection of Sir Hans Sloane, and of the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts; and for providing One General Repository for the better Reception and more convenient Use of the said Collections; and of the Cottonian Library, and of the Additions thereto, 1753, 26 Geo. 2, ch. 22.

<sup>22</sup>G.I.T. Machin, Politics and the Churches in Great Britain: 1832 to 1868 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Ernest E. Best, Religion and Society in Transition: The Church and Social Change in England, 1560-1850, Text and Studies in Religion, v. 15 (New York: Edwin Mellin Press, 1982), p. 85-86.

As a result, Parliament placed emphasis on man and his thought and development. In fact, the Act went a step further by specifically noting that the Museum would lead to successful experiments and inventions, and one early visitor referred to the Museum as 'England's temple of the sciences.'<sup>24</sup> The empiricist methods of experiment and observation had become more universal in science, and Sloane's collection could provide opportunities for such endeavors.<sup>25</sup> Parliament did not deny the niche that pure art and science had, but the implied benefits for the applied arts and sciences gave the collection greater potential. Because the king had declined the offer and many in government thought it was an unnecessary expense, the collection had to appear profitable to science and man's way of life in the long run to justify the purchase.

The additional British Museum collections were the Cotton Library, and the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts. From the 1590s until shortly before his demise in 1631 Sir Robert Cotton collected manuscripts, printed books, papers, parchments, and records for a library on the constitution in church and state. His son and grandson maintained and improved it by adding coins and medals and other curiosities. By an Act of William III, the library was vested in trustees for its preservation, though little was done to make it useful to the public and to secure its safety. During the reign of Queen Anne the government purchased the library, garden, and buildings for £4,500 and ordered the construction of a proper repository. The Act was not enforced, and Ashburnham House, where the collection was finally stored after having been at Cotton House and then Essex House, suffered a fire in 1731, and part of the collection was lost.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Marie Sophie von La Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786: Being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche*, trans. with an introductory essay by Clare Williams, with a foreword by G.M. Trevelyan (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), p. 107.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. J. Lewis May (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1965), p. 39-40, 147.

<sup>26</sup>J. Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p. 41.

Arthur Edwards wanted to restore the library for public use and willed that after the death of Elizabeth Milles, if there remained £7,000 in his estate, it was to be used for the construction of a proper repository for the Cotton Library. If one should already be erected, then the money was to be used to purchase "Manuscripts, Books of Antiquities, ancient Coins, Medals, and other Curiosities, as might be worthy to increase and enlarge the said Library."<sup>27</sup> He also left books and pictures to the Library. Since Edwards's demise in 1739, the government had done nothing to find a suitable repository for the Cotton Library, and as Elizabeth Milles was alive, the money remained in trust. By making the Cotton Library part of the British Museum, the government enriched and enlarged the Sloane bequest and relieved itself of a collection that it had let ruin. They also struck a bargain. The Act honored the first terms of Edwards's will by selecting an appropriate repository for the Museum, and although Elizabeth Milles would not die until 1769, the prospect of £7,000 proved lucrative for collection development.

The last collection mentioned in the Act was the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts. Robert, Earl of Oxford and his son, Edward, formed a collection of books, prints, pamphlets, and manuscripts. After the death of the second earl in June 1741, his widow, Henrietta, sold all but the manuscripts in 1742 to Thomas Osborne, the bookseller at Gray's Inn, for £13,000. The sale included 50,000 printed books, 41,000 prints, and 350,000 pamphlets.<sup>28</sup> The manuscripts consisted of 8,000 volumes, chiefly on the history of Great Britain, the several families and counties, works of ancient and classical writers, tracts, and old charters.<sup>29</sup> The second Earl of Oxford's daughter, the Duchess of Portland, agreed to sell the collection for £10,000 on the condition that the collection be kept together and properly housed, as an addition to the Cotton

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<sup>27</sup>British Museum Act, 1753.

<sup>28</sup>Dictionary of National Biography, 1890 ed., s.v. "Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford."

<sup>29</sup>General Meetings, Minutes 1 (2 February 1754): 17-18.

Library, and that it be named the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts after the family name.<sup>30</sup> Parliament had merged three libraries and a financial legacy into a museum of natural and artificial curiosities, books, and manuscripts. The British Museum had become a museum and a library.

The British Museum Act helped secure the idea that the British Museum was a national institution. Membership to the Board of Trustees came by family appointment,<sup>31</sup> election, or by office. Of the forty-two member Board, nineteen were members by virtue of the position they held in government, and they were the important offices of the state.<sup>32</sup> They had the potential for considerable legal and financial influence on the administration of the Museum. The office-holding trustees acted as a two-way system of accountability. Employees answered to them in their role as trustees, while as members of the government, they answered to the other members in Parliament on how revenue was spent, adherence to the Act, and the proper running and organization of the Museum. From their positions at Westminster they fostered the idea of a 'national' museum.

The Act defined the Museum by its collection, building, and purpose. The four named collections had stated or implied provisos that they remain intact and in a proper repository. Sloane requested that his museum be 'kept and preserved together Whole and Intire'. The Acts of William and Anne and the legacy of Arthur Edwards were attempts to house properly and preserve the Cotton Library. The Duchess of Portland sold the Harleian manuscripts on the condition that they be kept together in a proper repository. Setting the sentimental reasons aside,

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<sup>30</sup>British Museum Act, 1753.

<sup>31</sup>Two representatives of the Sloane, Cotton, and Harley families.

<sup>32</sup>Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Chancellor, Speaker of the House of Commons, Lord President of the Council, First Lord of the Treasury, Lord Privy Seal, Lord High Admiral, Lord Steward, Lord Chamberlain, the three Principal Secretaries of State, Bishop of London, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Chief Justice King's Bench, Master of the Rolls, Lord Chief Justice Common Pleas, Attorney General, and Solicitor General.

such requests had definite implications. The will had given the trustees freedom to augment the collection, and the decisions and policies to implement it were theirs. Sloane and the Duchess of Portland knew that once they relinquished title, the state and administrators could preserve the Museum collections in a manner that benefited the whole at the expense of a legacy. It was not unusual for connoisseurs to sell one painting in order to buy another or to sell entire collections of books or gems to complete a series of sculpture. Also, the wealthier members of society owned homes in the country and in London, and some moved from place to place, and took their valuable possessions with them. Finally, families like the Earl of Oxford's sold items to raise income as fortunes declined, or because beneficiaries did not have the same appreciation for the objects as the ancestors who gathered them. The failure to house properly the Cotton Library was but one example of negligence and indifference on the part of trustees and caretakers. Sloane, Edwards, and the Duchess of Portland wanted the preservation and security of the collections forever, and the Act acknowledged the requests by authorizing that within the cities of London, Westminster, or the suburbs, one general repository was to be erected or provided, and

Provided always, That the said Museum or Collection of Sir Hans Sloane in all its Branches, shall be kept and preserved together in the said General Repository whole and intire, and with proper Marks of Distinction.

Provided also, That the said Harleian Collection of Manuscripts shall be kept together in the said General Repository, as an Addition to the Cottonian Library.<sup>33</sup>

Sloane's museum was in his manor house at Chelsea, and he requested that it be left there. It was his home and land, and there would be little to alter. It had been a monumental task moving everything to Chelsea in 1743, and as the collection had continued to grow, it would be simpler keeping it there. The government considered the house, but as they were adding the

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<sup>33</sup>British Museum Act, 1753.

Cotton and Harleian libraries to Sloane's collection, and as there might be insufficient space or other difficulties, the Act authorized that the repository be located within London, Westminster, or the suburbs.<sup>34</sup> The Act received the Royal Assent on 7 June 1753, and the British Museum came under the care and supervision of the trustees.

The trustees held their first official meeting on 17 December 1753. They planned to meet on a quarterly basis as a 'General Meeting' to handle more important business which required the guidance and advice of the three Principal Trustees (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor, and the Speaker of the House). For day-to-day affairs or for work particularly assigned to them from the General Meeting, the trustees met from weekly to monthly as a 'Committee' without the Principal Trustees.

During the next five years the trustees spent time defining the purposes of the Museum and its intended clientele. In The New World of Words (1706) Edward Phillips defined 'museum' as "a Study, or Library; also a College, or Publick Place for the Resort of Learned Men." A repository was "A Place where things are laid up and kept; especially a Building, or Room set a-part for keeping a Collection or natural and artificial Rarities."<sup>35</sup> In Dictionarium Britannicum (1736) Nathan Bailey used the same meaning for 'museum' but defined 'repository' as "a storehouse or place where things are laid up."<sup>36</sup> Finally, in Cyclopædia (1750) Ephraim Chambers stated that a museum was "any place set apart as a repository for things that have some immediate relation to the arts, or to the muses", while a repository was "a store-house or

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<sup>34</sup>The executors found Sloane's house structurally unsound and not safe from fire and decided to look elsewhere.

<sup>35</sup>Edward Phillips, The New World of Words: or, Universal English Dictionary, 6th ed., s.v. "Museum," "Repository."

<sup>36</sup>Nathan Bailey, Dictionarium Britannicum: or a more Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary Than any Extant, 2nd ed., s.v. "Museum," "Repository."

place where things are laid-up, and kept."<sup>37</sup> The definitions referred to a museum as a place and a repository as a building. The Act did not go to the trouble of defining 'museum', although by using Sloane's will in the preamble, it provided a definition by accident. (Sloane gave, devised and bequeathed 'all that his Collection or Museum' at his manor house.) As a church was the building and its members, and a library was the room and its books, so a museum was a building and the collection. The Act recognized the double meaning, albeit unintentionally, in the title, "An Act for the Purchase of the Museum, or Collection of Sir Hans Sloane, and of the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts; and for providing one General Repository for the better Reception and more convenient Use of the Said Collections; and of the Cottonian Library, and of the Additions thereto."

The trustees were confronted with the creation of a national museum that had no precedent in England. They thought it was important to analyze the history of the museum and of the word itself, so it would provide a context that would reflect their opinions on the goals and purposes.

. . . The word Museum properly Signifies a Building dedicated to the Service of the Muses.--there were Several of these antiently in Greece and other Countries particularly at Alexandria which is described by Strabo, as assigned for the residence of Learned and Studious men, with a walk and Gallery furnished with Seats, belonging to it. It is said to have been founded by Ptolemey Philadelphus whose Celebrated Library was Deposited there, tho in after Ages it received large Indowments from Several of the Roman Emperors.

But of later times the name Museum has been commonly applied to Signify any Repository of Natural and Artificial Curiosities, and that either with or without a Library.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 6th ed., s.v. "Museum," "Repository."

<sup>38</sup>*General Meetings, Minutes* 1 (1 June 1754): 44.



The trustees clearly had the ideas of antiquity in mind when they drafted the definition. 'Museum' was a Latin word borrowed from the Greek word 'Mouseion' for the Muse's realm, and the atmosphere was as important as the concrete features. In Greece, museums were dedicated to the Muses, and to philosophical contemplation and discussion, literature and poetry, and advanced learning and research. Aristotle's lyceum and Plato's academy were museums. At Plato's academy there was an altar erected to the Muses at which sacrifices and festivals were celebrated, while speculation and research, particularly in mathematics, were the principal pursuits of the academy.<sup>39</sup> Another famous museum was the institution at Alexandria founded by Ptolemy the First and not by his son, Philadelphus, as the trustees said.<sup>40</sup> The museum at Alexandria had the features of the mouseion in Greece with a sanctuary and an altar and a priest as its head. As a body of scholars lived at the museum the emphasis was on religious and intellectual pursuits. There was a public room for discussions and lectures, an astronomy and a medical school, a botanical and zoological park, and a library of manuscripts and texts. Ptolemy collected books, agents bought works, and there were gifts. Agents searched ships in the harbor for books which were taken to the library, and the owner was compensated. Books were used for reference and research. The books and manuscripts were copied which preserved many works that might have been lost. Collections of art and other treasures were kept at temples and other public and private buildings.<sup>41</sup>

With the exception of the religious element, the trustees preserved the flavor of the mouseion at Alexandria by emphasizing a scholarly atmosphere and a pursuit of knowledge at

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<sup>39</sup>Henry T. Rowell, "A Home for the Muses," *Archaeology* 19 (April 1966): 79.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup>Dillon Ripley, *The Sacred Grove: Essays on Museums* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1970), p. 24-25; Alma Wittlin, *The Museum: Its History and Its Tasks in Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1949), p. 1-2; Bazin, *The Museum Age*, p. 16; David Murray, *Museums: Their History and Their Use*, 3 vols. (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1904), 1: 1-2; Wallace Koehler, Class notes, Foundations of Information Studies, U. of Oklahoma, Tulsa, Okla., fall 1999.

the British Museum. In the definition they expanded the meaning of 'museum' further. It was noted as a building and a collection.<sup>42</sup> The trustees were men who knew or were related to Sloane and whose backgrounds included the government, the church, science, and literature. Some were collectors and owned or had access to libraries, and they appreciated the value of books and education.

The Greek reference to a museum as a place for learned and studious men suited the trustees' expectations of the British Museum, so it was appropriate to depict ancient deities in the design of the seal. The seal was represented by the front of a building with the images of deities and their attributes which denoted the several parts of the collection, 1) Goddess of Tellus, representing the natural part of the earth, 2) Minerva, representing arts and sciences, 3) the Sun, symbol of Apollo, inventor of art and medicine, and 4) Apollo.<sup>43</sup> According to Suetonius, Augustus had erected a temple to the honor of Apollo and furnished it with Greek and Latin books. The trustees presumed that any educated foreigner "might be Sufficiently informed both of the History of this Museum, and the General parts of which it consists" by looking at the seal.<sup>44</sup> The seal, though, served the same purpose for Englishmen too. The use of the Greek deities for the seal and Latin for the inscription, 'Sigillum Curatorum Musei Britannici ex Senatus Consulto Conditi 1753', and the motto, 'Exergue, Bonarum Artium Cultoribus'<sup>45</sup> were figures and text of classical culture that many in the middle classes and probably everyone in the working classes would not have any knowledge. The ability to translate and recognize such a

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<sup>42</sup>For an indepth view of the architecture and construction of the British Museum, see J. Mordaunt Crook's The British Museum.

<sup>43</sup>General Meetings, Minutes 1 (1 June 1754): 44-45.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>45</sup>British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 36,269, fol. 161. "The Seal of the keepers [Trustees] of the British Museum founded by resolution of Parliament [literally the Senate] AD 1753". The motto - "To the cultivators of the good arts." The Trustees opted to not include 'Exergue' in the motto. (I am indebted to Janet Wallace of the British Museum for her assistance)

sophisticated seal belonged "to the high end of the [literacy] range," for it "marked the gilded culmination of the most rarefied scholarly elite."<sup>46</sup>

A museum was a storehouse and a collection seen in the building and gods as represented on the seal, but it was also a place of learning and education. It was Sloane's desire that the collection be used for "the use and improvement of physic, and other arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind" and that it be for "the improvement, knowledge and information of all persons. . . ."<sup>47</sup> The collection spanned time from creation (with the minerals and fossils) to the present (with printed books and biological specimens). The trustees, though, in designing the seal, chose characters from mythology to symbolize the branches of the collection and the Museum. The deities served a double purpose. They represented learning and education for the Muse, and they signified to the visitor an institution for scholarly purposes.

Because the trustees interpreted the British Museum as a place for research, they accorded the facilities most readily to 'learned and studious men'. At one of the earliest General Meetings (14 January 1754) the trustees established a committee to frame rules for visiting and inspecting the Museum. During the course of the three years that it took to devise the rules, they prepared a draft in 1755 that clearly indicated whom the Museum was for.

In Order to prevent as much as possible persons of mean and low Degree and Rude or ill Behaviour from Intruding on such who were designed to have free Access to the Repository for the sake of Learning or Curiosity tending to the Advancement and Improvement of Natural Philosophy and other Branches of Speculative knowledge And in Order to render the said Repository of such Use to the Publick as by the Act for that purpose was meant and Intended That no person

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<sup>46</sup>David Cressy, "Literacy in Context: Meaning and Measurement in Early Modern England," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 311-312.

<sup>47</sup>Sloane, *The Will of Sir Hans Sloane, Bart. Deceased*, p. 3, 28-29.

or persons whatsoever be admitted to Inspect or View the Collections but by a proper Authority from the Trustees. . . .<sup>48</sup>

The trustees followed the request that the collection should encourage applied science and art for the benefit of mankind and linked it to their idea that the Museum was a place for studious and learned men. If the collection was to be useful for advancing and improving knowledge, it required that the books, manuscripts, antiquities, scientific specimens, and the rest of the collection had to be seen and used. Twelve tickets were to be sent to every trustee the first Saturday in every month to give 'to such persons as such Trustees shall think fit', and no one could see the collection without a ticket or by written order of the trustees.<sup>49</sup> When the trustees referred to those people 'who were designed to have free Access', it was left solely to their discretion to make that determination. Honoring Sloane's wish to make the collection useful and staying in accordance with the Act of Parliament meant defining the public.

The trustees expected thousands of visitors to tour the Museum each year. Parliament dictated that the Museum had to be open to the public, and as shall be seen in the next chapter, the trustees provided tours. For now, the important point is that 'persons of mean and low Degree and Rude or ill Behaviour' had not assumed acceptable behavior standards to handle properly and use the collections. As a result, the trustees saw them as intruders, and they could not visit the Museum at all. If the unintelligent or unqualified had access to materials, they interrupted and hindered the studious from using them and discredited the Museum's intended purposes. Because the trustees already knew they could not employ many men, the illiterate would waste time with idle questions and prevent the employees from attending to the needs of the people for whom the Museum was created.

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<sup>48</sup>British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Thomas Birch, A Collection of Papers Relating to the Establishment and Government of the British Museum, Add. MS 4,449, fol. 115. See also British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Dr John Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6,179, fols. 63-65.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

In the following year (1756) or shortly thereafter, Gowin Knight, the Museum's first director, or Principal Librarian, as the trustees referred to the office, wrote a composition of the rules. As the officers did not establish policy, he probably took the rules from dictation at a trustees meeting. It bore a resemblance to the report from the previous year and began with the sentence, "Tho the principal Intention in founding the British Museum is for the Use of learned & studious men, as well natives as foreigners. . ."<sup>50</sup> The trustees elaborated on the rationale behind their decisions, as this report was more refined than the previous one. There could be no doubt about the Museum's purpose and the people they intended to serve.

As the principal view & intention in founding the British Museum was to encourage [sic] & facilitate the Studies & Researches of learned Men from whose labour & application under such advantages as greater progress in the several Branches of useful<sup>51</sup> Knowledge may be expected & thereby the good of the publick & the honour of the nation very much promoted. . .<sup>52</sup>

Knight proceeded to list the regulations. Some were lined through completely, while others had crossed out sections with alterations written beneath or above in a different ink and handwriting. Presumably, there were other meetings, and someone else edited the paper. The trustees recommended that they, the Museum officers, fellows of the Royal and Antiquarian Societies, members of the Royal College of Physicians, and Greshams' professors be admitted to the library and manuscripts without any recommendation. If a person did not meet these qualifications and did not know a trustee, he could gain access by recommendations from any three persons who had a Reading Room ticket. They added

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<sup>50</sup>Birch, A Collection of Papers Relating to the Establishment and Government of the British Museum, Add. MS 4,449, fols. 118-20.

<sup>51</sup>In this terminology, 'useful' refers to the sciences and agriculture, but in a broader context 'useful' included philosophy, theology, and commerce. M. Kay Flavell, "The Enlightened Reader and the New Industrial Towns: A Study of the Liverpool Library 1758-1790", The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies 8 (1985): 17.

<sup>52</sup>Birch, A Collection of Papers Relating to the Establishment and Government of the British Museum, Add. MS 4,449, fols. 118-20.

By these Regulations no one, that can have any pretentions [sic] to come to read or consult the Books or MSS, can have any difficulty to acquire that priviledge, [sic] & none but improper persons can be excluded, for all, who have so little commerce with men of letters, as to be at a loss to get some of the Recommendations above required, or who have so little pretenssions [sic] to Literature as not to deserve them, are certainly of the last Class.<sup>53</sup>

As one could expect, the trustees were confirming the declaration that the Museum was for the learned, but the procedure was very exclusive. Half the trustees were members of Parliament, and almost all the members came from wealthy families. If a person were truly a man of letters and involved in breaking new grounds in knowledge or some course of research, the trustees assumed he would come into contact with fellow researchers in the arts and sciences. Having connections was paramount, and the trustees believed that under the proposed liberal terms, only the unqualified or fakes would be denied entrance. Such people could visit the Museum on tour with the rest of society.

Relevant to the previous report, the trustees wrote a job description for the position of 'Principal Librarian' with the intention of helping scholars in their research. The trustees dictated that the Principal Librarian should be studious and learned, a physician, one who had studied abroad so that he had learned another language, particularly French, have a knowledge of Latin, so that he could converse with native and foreign persons of learning, and be versed in mathematics.<sup>54</sup> The applicant had to be as intelligent and adept as any of the readers. In an age before specialization, it was possible for the Museum to employ someone who was a generalist and expect him to become conversant in all aspects of the collection. They wanted the Principal Librarian to get to know those men who were very knowledgeable in the liberal arts and to set apart time "when they might meet at the Repository for their Studious Amusement which will

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., fol. 108.

tend to promote the great design of the Museum." The trustees hoped that, after meeting with the Principal Librarian, these men would show "any Curious Inventions of Art where the Inventors might be sure of a Candid and proper Examination and afterwards with the Assistance of the Trustees as the Patrons of the Museum be encouraged according to their deserts and their Inventions properly made known for the Use and benefit of the publick."<sup>55</sup> It is a curious notion that the trustees took their positions and the Museum's purposes to the point that they ventured to be patrons and advisers. The policy was not carried out, but we can see the intended results. The trustees had no way of knowing whether the Museum would be a success. If they could encourage or assist a student, and the mechanical or literary invention proved successful, it reflected favorably on the British Museum and promoted the great design of the Museum - developing things for the benefit of the public.

After three years of sporadic work on the statutes and rules, on 12 July 1757 the Committee submitted 'STATUTES and RULES To be observed in the MANAGEMENT and USE OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM'. The key to the 'Statutes and Rules' and how it related to the Museum, and who should use it, is in the second half of the preamble.

. . . For altho it [British Museum] was chiefly designed for the use of learned and studious men, both natives and foreigners, in their researches into the several parts of knowledge; yet being founded at the expence [sic] of the public, it may be judged reasonable, that the advantages accruing from it should be rendered as general, as may be consistent with the several considerations above mentioned.<sup>56</sup>

The British Museum Act stated that the collection was for the 'Use and Benefit of the Publick'. The trustees had always recognized that some accommodation was necessary for the people who wanted to see the collections. It was in their printed report that the Board came closest to

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 18.

articulating who the 'public' were. The emphasis in the British Museum Act and the trustees' reports was on the learned and studious. The government and administrators banked on the tenet that access for them would prove beneficial to the public and the nation. From the evidence of the job description for the Principal Librarian, the expectations the trustees had for the visitors, and the contents of the Museum, the 'public' were the highly educated. The definition excluded the illiterate and those tutored in a rudimentary education. Access for those people, it was judged, was warranted because they helped pay for the collection.

In the report the trustees did not refer to the British Museum as a 'public' museum. The framework had been laid in the British Museum Act and reconfirmed and put into practice when the trustees wrote, "yet being founded at the expense of the public." When the Museum officially opened, the trustees let the general public visit the Museum, because they judged that the public would benefit from the experience. The trustees had already determined that the British Museum was a national institution for learning and the pursuit of knowledge. Now, the trustees had decided, that as a national institution, the British Museum should serve the general public, as well as the 'learned and curious' members of the public.

For the time being, the trustees limited access to people they knew. Because of the arrangements going on, there was no time for large groups, and it was inconvenient to permit strangers to enter. The procedure garnered no criticism from the public, but it was a practice that was limited to 'friends only' of the trustees. With only the trustees granted the right to permit access, it was the strictest period in the Museum's history. The rest of the Museum's history involved a struggle to serve the chief clientele (the studious and learned) and to maintain the sanctity in light of claims and demands for greater access from those who fell outside the Museum's purposes and the trustees' definition of the public.



