

Wednesday 24 November 2021

**Speech by George Osborne
Chair, Annual Trustees Dinner, British Museum**

On behalf of my fellow trustees and the incredible team here at the British Museum - welcome to the wonderful Egyptian Sculpture Gallery.

After the enforced hibernation of the last eighteen months, I want you to know one thing this evening: the British Museum is back.

We're back, welcoming thousands of people every day to our galleries.

We're back with wonderful exhibitions that take us across all times and all places - from the imperial Rome of Nero to Thomas Becket's Canterbury, from the delicate Japanese ink drawings of Hokusai to the artefacts of the ancient civilisations of Peru.

We're back, travelling the world with our collections - and helping communities around that world discover more about their past and their stories.

It is a testament to the hard work of our Director, Hartwig Fischer, and the whole team here at the Museum.

From the directors to the keepers and curators, from the security staff who keep us safe to those who look after our visitors - all of us who love this Museum owe them a huge 'thank you'.

The people who work here remind us of all that is impressive and committed about those who work in our public sphere.

I could not be more thrilled or honoured to have been elected independently by our trustees to be their Chair.

We're here educating and learning and informing and we're provoking you to think.

In an age when there is such interest in culture, when our past is so hotly debated and contested, we are not defensive - we walk towards that debate with confidence and excitement.

It is what we were set up to do.

We are gathering tonight in the first national public museum of the world.

Founded in 1753 - over two and a half centuries later it is still one of the very few places on this planet where you can see all the great civilisations that have shaped our common humanity side by side.

I said we were the first public museum, and the word 'public' is important in this building.

Though we had drinks in the wonderful King's Library, this was never a royal collection. You can go to the Louvre or the Hermitage, or our own Buckingham Palace to see those.

Nor was this the collection of a Church, though we have many objects of religious and spiritual significance.

The British Museum was created by Act of Parliament explicitly by the people and for the people.

In the original collection were not just the antiquities collected by our founder Hans Sloane, and his natural history collection that was to spawn its own separate museum in Kensington a century later.

Right from the start, the British Museum also contained from the private collection put together by Sir Robert Cotton two of the four original copies of the Magna Carta.

The House of Commons at the time did not want those documents of democracy in a royal institution.

Today, they live in the British Library - another child of this place, although the great old round reading room still lies at our centre and we trustees are determined it will be open again.

So the British Museum was a public institution then - and it is a public institution now.

Much has changed in the intervening centuries. When they thought of their public back then, it was largely male and mainly white and exclusively western.

Today we welcome visitors from everywhere and we seek to tell a global story.

The founding ideals were those of the Enlightenment - about rational discourse, education, scientific research, toleration and progress.

And for all the tumult of the intervening generations, they remained our guiding star - and our confidence in the advance of those ideals was such that when the Great Court with its Norman Foster roof opened on the eve of the Millennium, we could say we were the Museum of the world, for the world.

Twenty years on, that is challenged. Globalisation has become a contested word. The Enlightenment, for some, a western construct. Progress is no longer the assumed goal.

Today people rightly want all stories to be told.

We call on the value sets of all cultures to be given equal weight. While at the same time we demand universal human rights, whose origins lie in the French and American revolutions and the European enlightenment which this museum epitomises.

We alone cannot resolve all these contradictions of our age in this place - but we can do what we've always done: help inform and educate and engage.

That critical examination of the truth starts with ourselves.

How could a collection of this scale and scope have come together without controversy or conflict? That is part of our human story. Is this room a room of the

British Empire? Or of the Egyptian empire? Or about how the empires and civilisations of the world have always collided, conflicted and collaborated with each other, and still do?

We do not shy away from telling our own story - the whole story. We do so not from a position of embarrassment but of pride. We're proud - so very proud - of what we do.

Our only ambition is to do it better. That is what our Masterplan project is about - turning this great Museum of the past and present, into the greatest Museum of the future.

We need your support to do that. The government have committed resources, for which I sincerely thank them. I know our patrons and donors now stand ready to help.

It's a huge undertaking. We need buildings fit for modern display - a huge undertaking in one of the largest, most complex sites in our capital.

We want the latest digital technology to support the physical experience: both online, but also here in our galleries.

We want our presence to be felt across Britain in a way it has not been before - from new medieval galleries in Norwich to the new South Asian gallery in Manchester.

We want to engage with the communities around the world whose objects we hold with sensitivity and collaboration. That's why we're leading excavations in Iraq and working on a new museum in Benin City.

And we want to tell the whole story of our human existence.

Amazing as they are, our displays are focussed on the great classical civilisations of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia.

Yet we have in our extraordinary archives, wonderful objects from the Americas and Asia, Africa and Oceania.

So our ambition is to tell a more global story.

There will always be those who question: why us?

There will always be those who say we should not exist - some said it in 1753 and some say it again in 2021.

But I would say this in response: the British Museum has never been more needed than now.

There is no shortage of voices seeking to divide us.

There is no lack of demand to push everyone back into silos, where the conversation is easy because we never meet anyone who disagrees with us.

It is easier to break ties than to make them.

In this fragmenting world, the British Museum is one the very few places that can remind us of what we share - of how all these civilisations and empires were connected.

This is the place on earth to tell the story of our common humanity - and we will not shrink from doing that.

The British Museum is back.

Further information

Contact the British Museum Press Office:

communications@britishmuseum.org