

Wednesday 2 November 2022

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

On behalf of my fellow trustees, welcome to the British Museum – to the magnificent Great Court – and to this annual dinner.

Let me welcome in particular the Ambassador of Ukraine.

Our curators are working to protect your country's heritage, our galleries are showcasing your country's treasures, and all of us support your country in its struggle for freedom.

This year we've also been helping our Lebanese friends painstakingly piece back together the shards of ancient glass vessels shattered in that horrific explosion in Beirut.

That's what a museum is. Not just a collection of objects – like some storeroom – but instead a set of relationships.

Relationships between those who made an object, those who owned it, those who collected it, and those who now come to view it.

When we were founded in 1753 – not as a royal collection or trappings of a religious house, but as the first national public institution of its kind in the world – the purpose was not to wallow in nostalgia for bygone ages.

Our forebears had a firm conviction that the future would be better than the past – that the treasures that were once only the preserve of kings and high priests should now be available as a right to all to study and improve on.

A century later, in 1857, the magnificent Round Reading Room behind me opened.

For the likes of Karl Marx and Oscar Wilde, Vladimir Lenin, HG Wells, Virginia Woolf and Mahatma Gandhi, this was not a silent library, it was quite the opposite: it was the place to be noisy about a better future.

And when, just 22 years ago, this magnificent Norman Foster roof was placed above our heads, it was the strongest of statements that the British Museum was as relevant as it had ever been.

So why now the doubts? Why now the hesitation?

Not just about this place, but about all the great universal museums and picture galleries of the world.

Why the calls to break these extraordinary collections up, send them back from whence they came?

It's because we're not just a museum of the world, for the world – we're a museum in the world.

A world where the certainties of the European enlightenment and globalisation are being challenged; where the nationalism of great powers is on the rise again; and where the societies we live in are fragmenting.

Our response is to be the global Museum of our common humanity.

And I'll tell you something about that humanity: we can be extraordinarily kind and creative; and extraordinarily cruel and destructive.

It's all there in our collection.

So how can we expect to escape the maelstrom of the moment?

We don't. But don't expect us to be passive in the face of it.

When people say that the very fact that it would be impossible to assemble this collection today makes us illegitimate – we respond: no, it is the very thing that makes us invaluable.

For where else on our planet can we bring together under one roof the fruits of two million years of human endeavour?

Who else has the platform to connect us all to our common past?

The public thirst for that connection is as strong as ever.

You can see it in the way so many millions of people have come from around our country and across the globe to see us again.

Here in London, yes – in the single most visited building in one of the most visited places on earth.

But also, in our travelling exhibitions from Beijing to Nottingham.

You see it in the excited anticipation for our new permanent partnership galleries that will open soon in Manchester, Norwich and Mumbai.

Like those before us who conceived of this Museum, constructed these vast buildings, rebuilt them when they were bombed, built exhibition spaces and research facilities, and added new galleries – we too, the current custodians of this great wonder of the world, want to leave this place in better shape than we found it.

We understand that if we want things to stay the same then things have to change. And change a lot.

I can report to this annual dinner that three weeks ago the trustee body agreed to a masterplan that will see the complete reimagination of the British Museum.

The details will be published next spring.

The ambition is great: we want this to be the Museum of our Common Humanity.

A place for the future that connects us to our past and to each other.

To do that, we will undertake over the coming decade and more, great changes.

First, we will present this extraordinary collection in galleries and buildings that are fit for modern purpose.

This will be the biggest undertaking since we first moved into this building two centuries ago.

The whole western sculpture galleries – that house our great treasures from Greece and Rome, Egypt and Mesopotamia – will be transformed.

The exceptional Greek revival architecture of Robert Smirke will be restored to its glory – and much of the rest will be completely rebuilt.

Vistas will be opened up. New connections between civilisations will be made.

We will cast far and wide for ideas, with competitions among the world's most exciting architects.

And it will all be powered by a brand new energy system.

Our goal is to be a net zero carbon museum – no longer a destination for climate protest but instead an example of climate solution.

At its heart will be this Round Reading Room.

Today this great space in our capital is closed to the public. To me, that's not acceptable.

We can tell you tonight that next year it will re-open. And in the years ahead it will become integral to a visit to the Museum, a place where the journey starts.

We are hugely grateful for the financing the government has already announced, from you the taxpayer.

We thank in advance the generous support we know we will get from our friends and backers.

We're literally going to fix the roof while the sun still shines. Who knew, but it's come back into fashion.

Second, we will put the human into this museum of our common humanity.

When the public flocked to our fabulous Stonehenge exhibition this year – they were drawn to one object in particular.

Not the stone monoliths or the gold amulets of the chieftains, magnificent as they were. It was a small, plain ball that attracted the crowd –made out of chalk.

No gold, no decoration. No bigger than a squash ball. Yet people stood in front it and stared. Some cried.

Why? It was a toy. That belonged to a child born 5000 years ago. Placed behind their head by those who loved them in their untimely grave.

That simple chalk ball cut through the five millennia – connected us to that child of the past, and connected us also to those we hold dearest in the present.

This is a museum known for its vast granite sculptures and its marble battle friezes, its bronze palatial panels and its priceless porcelain vases.

These were not the works of gods, but of humans. Thanks to the brilliant research of our curators, and the use of the latest technology, we are going to tell their story better.

With imaginative displays and making full use of the digital possibilities – we will place our visitors in that long chain that links us to those who came before us and those who will come after.

Third, and finally, we will further change the way this Museum engages with the communities of the world, whose treasures we hold in trust for all humankind.

You heard from Hartwig about the extraordinary work he and his team are doing across the globe.

Yes, we hear the voices calling for restitution.

But creating this global British Museum was the dedicated work of many generations.

Dismantling it must not become the careless act of a single generation.

Not just because the law prevents it. That's an excuse to hide behind for those who don't have the courage to make their case.

But because we believe in this Museum of our common humanity.

To the silos and splintering of our times, we offer an antidote.

It's all the more reason why we must not ourselves contribute to the problem.

We the trustees and the staff here understand that for some communities the status quo is not good enough.

I am confident that there are long-term partnerships to be struck.

Some of our greatest objects could for the first time be seen again in the communities they originally came from.

My message is: if you're ready to find the common ground, then so are we.

It's all part of our great transformation.

We were born in an age of enlightenment. This great court was fashioned in an age of globalisation.

Now, in the age of fragmentation, the need for the British Museum has never been greater.

A place that binds us in a world that is pulling us apart.

With your help and support, we can become that Museum of our common humanity.

Further information

Contact the British Museum Communications Office:

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High resolution images of the British Museum Trustees Dinner available at:

<https://tinyurl.com/2rybj4v7>