Wednesday 15 November 2023

Speech by George Osborne
Chair, Annual Trustees’ Dinner 2023, British Museum

Your Royal Highnesses, ladies and gentlemen – on behalf of my fellow Trustees, and our new Director, welcome to the British Museum.

There are so many supporters of ours here tonight. Indeed, a record attendance at our annual dinner.

That means a huge amount to us all – not just for we Trustees, but for the team who work so hard here. We haven’t had the easiest of years.

In this week of improbable comebacks, with the Beatles at number one, your presence here in such numbers is a reminder that we all get by with a little help from our friends.

We have our most generous donors here – thank you for backing us to do what we do best, and thank you for the stunning bequests we have received, like the wonderful Chinese jades and other objects from the estate of Sir Joseph Hotung.

In hard times, the financial support from the public, our friends and our patrons has actually gone up this year.

We have lots of other guests here tonight. Business leaders, writers, journalists, scientists, civil servants, artists and creators. We have politicians of all colours. Quite a few members of the Cabinet – this week’s Cabinet and last week’s and maybe next year’s Cabinet as well.

We welcome you sir, the Duke of Gloucester, our former Trustee and patron who has been so supportive for so long – indeed, it is great that so many former Trustees are here.
It’s reassuring to the current Trustees to know your time on our board didn’t put you off ever stepping foot into this building again.

We have the Director General of our Security Service, MI5. Thank you to you and your colleagues in the police for keeping us all safe in troubling times.

We have our Olympian Sebastian Coe. Seb and I shared an office for many years and one day I asked him: “what got you into running?” And he said to me: “George, if you were born in Sheffield and you were called Sebastian, you have to learn to run”.

And I can announce that we have a newest Trustee, confirmed only in the last 24 hours, to fill the place on our board always reserved for a member of the Royal Academy – and so ably filled in recent years by Anthony Gormley, and then Grayson Perry.

She is one of Britain’s greatest artists, she’s regenerated the seaside town of her childhood through her willpower, her new show has just conquered New York and after 270 years she is the first female Trustee nominated by the Royal Academy to sit on the Museum’s Board. Tracey Emin, thank you for agreeing to join us.

Ladies and gentlemen, many of you will have been to our dinners before – and you will know that we have several amazing spaces we can hold them in. The Great Court, with Norman Foster’s roof. There’s the Egyptian sculpture gallery, under the gaze of Ramses II. King George III’s Library – always popular with the American friends of the BM.

But tonight we chose – for the first time in as long as anyone can remember – the Duveen Gallery, home of the Parthenon Marbles.

When these marbles were first displayed at the Museum two hundred years ago they wowed the thousands who came to see them, as they continue to wow the millions who come today.

The great sculptor Auguste Rodin was obsessed by them, he stayed in a hotel opposite, and came here year after year to sketch them. “In my spare time I simply haunt the British Museum”. As ghosts go, that’s not a bad spirit to have.
When I asked my fellow Trustee, and Britain’s Classicist-in-Chief Mary Beard, about the history of these marbles, she reminded me that they have – at various times in their two and a half thousand-year life – adorned the walls of a pagan temple, a Byzantine church, a mosque and now a secular museum.

They are the embodiment of the ties that bind different religions and cultures and countries, whether we acknowledge that or not.

And explaining those ties – and displaying the physical objects that connect us to the past and to each other – is what the British Museum is all about. Not just in this gallery, but in every gallery and every exhibition we have.

There’s something else that these sculptures have always been: controversial.

They were controversial in the fifth century BC when, along with the whole complex of buildings that Pericles constructed on the Acropolis, they were first created. “We are gilding and bedizening our city … like a wanton woman,” wrote Plutarch.

They were controversial in 1816 when the House of Commons, using taxpayers’ money, purchased them from Lord Elgin after he had shipped them from Athens.

Read the poem from Lord Byron where he calls his fellow peer a ‘plunderer’.

Look at the cartoon from the great George Cruickshank that lampoons the then Foreign Secretary for spending public money on buying bits of old stone during a cost of living crisis.

I don’t agree with lampooning Foreign Secretaries anymore.

And, of course, the Parthenon sculptures are controversial today. For forty years, the Greek state has formally demanded their return.
Indeed, the Museum was set up to be controversial – not a royal collection or a nobleman’s acquisitions, but a museum established at the time by Parliament, owned by the public, that was designed to make people think and think differently.

To expose visitors to cultures very different from their own, religions that weren’t the ones they held to, aspects of other civilisations that were not compatible to our own.

We should not shy from that controversy. I think too often we’ve thought: let’s keep quiet; if we don’t talk about things that are difficult, then no one else will.

And course, it hasn’t worked. There is a big conversation happening about this Museum, and other great museums like it – it’s just not taking place just in this building.

We want that to change.

When there is controversy because of mistakes we have made then we should own those mistakes.

That’s what we are doing when we told the world that many precious objects have been stolen from our stores, over probably several decades – and most likely by someone who worked here and we trusted.

I tell you, the people who feel the betrayal most keenly are the many hundreds of staff – who work so hard, and who in many cases have devoted their professional lives to this place.

We can’t pretend it didn’t happen, or it doesn’t matter, or that some years ago we weren’t warned. It was our duty to look after these objects and we failed in that duty.

That’s why we made news of the thefts public. It’s why we commissioned a far-reaching, independent review into what went wrong and how to fix it. It’s why we will publish its conclusions in the coming months. And it’s why I’ve apologised for what has happened.
I want sincerely to thank Sir Mark Jones, our Director. When I called Mark one Saturday in August, out of the blue, he was enjoying a comfortable life in semi-retirement in the New Town in Edinburgh.

I told him the Museum he loves, where he started his glittering career, was in trouble and needed him. And he didn’t hesitate. He stepped up to help us – and gave us the time we will now take to find the very best Director for the long term. That search is underway.

Under Mark’s leadership, we are now embarking on the huge task of not just documenting our whole collection – but doing so in a way that makes it more accessible, and gives it more global reach, than ever before.

The simple answer to a security breach would have been to restrict access to our treasures – the right answer is to open it up.

Next year we will put on an exhibition in which we display the stolen objects we have recovered rather than return to a storeman where they were never seen – we’ll tell the story about what happened to us, rather than leave it to others to tell.

But the British Museum is controversial, not just when we get things wrong – but when we get things right.

Our exhibition Hidden China just closed. It told the story of the nineteenth century – of rebellions and Opium Wars. We put on display the original Treaty of Nanjing that ceded Hong Kong and a picture of Queen Victoria’s Pekinese dog called Looty.

We didn’t have to tell that story. We could have avoided the difficult subjects and put on a pretty display of silkscreens and porcelain.

But if you visited that exhibition, you will have seen the crowds around you, many of them young Chinese eager to learn the hidden stories of their past.

Tens of thousands more people came to see that show than we had expected.
Why? Because we weren't afraid of controversy – we did what we do best. We told one of humanity's great stories.

It's why our stunning new exhibition on Myanmar engages directly in provenance and the British colonial history in Burma, rather than pretending it never happened.

It's why the big archaeological digs we're undertaking right now aren't in comfortable Mediterranean locations, or muddy fields in Britain.

They're in Girsu in Iraq; Benin City in Nigeria. Hard places. Controversial in our history. But whose stories need telling.

When we look to our future, we're not seeking the easy life.

Our main building here in Bloomsbury is magnificent but it is old.

For decades it has been patched up in a piecemeal way and by closing galleries when the rain comes in.

We could continue to do that, but instead we have chosen the much harder route:

A new, incredible facility in the Thames Valley to house our stores – BM ARC – open this year, and with many objects already transferred there.

It's one of the lasting legacies of the work our previous Director, Hartwig Fisher – and we thank him for his service to this place.

A new energy centre – about to be started, funded with thanks by the government and our Arts Minister here today – so that we heat this enormous site in a way that is consistent with the protection of our collection and our climate.

And then there is our masterplan for a great redevelopment of all of these western sculpture galleries – this gallery included – that will:
- transform the way this Museum presents its collection;
- find space to display our incomparable collections from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific;
- and puts the Round Reading Room at the centre of the visit. I promised last year that it would be open and I hope you all visited it.

Next year we will reach out to the architects and designers of the world for their ideas of how to make this a reality.

And what of these Parthenon sculptures?

I hope we can reach an agreement with Greece.

An agreement that enables these great sculptures to be seen in Athens as well as London.

An agreement that that allows other treasures from Greece, some that have never left those shores, to be seen here at the British Museum.

As Trustees we look for a partnership with our Greek friends that requires no one to relinquish their claims, asks for no changes to laws which are not ours to write, but which finds a practical, pragmatic and rational way forward.

We may well not succeed. But we think it’s worth trying.

I know there will be people who will be opposed. People who are opposed to change and to development and partnership.

There were people who opposed the creation of this Museum in 1753.

There were people who objected to enclosing of the Great Court.

There are people who, frankly, don’t think we should exist at all – and always have done.
We welcome the controversy.

The troubles in the world today – the bitter divisions – they are not new.

The Parthenon sculptures around us depict soldiers on horseback.

The reliefs in the Assyrian gallery next door show the sacking of a city, with terrible cruelty.

Yet the objects themselves are the products of exquisite artistry and craftsmanship, the products of learning and human ingenuity.

Our human story is one of debate and disagreement, of conflict and collaboration.

How could a collection of our humanity, in all its beauty and barbarity, be anything other than controversial?

Human beings are controversial.

And this is one of the very few places on earth that aspires to tell that human story.

With your support, long may it have the courage to do so.