The World's First Museums

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In 1160 B. C., Shutruk-Nahhunte, King of Elam in the mountains east of Mesopotamia, campaigned triumphantly through Agade, Kish, Sippar, and other towns of ancient Babylonia. He returned to his capital at Susa with a rich haul of loot, which he offered up to the god who had led him to his victory. In all probability many a conquering monarch before him had done likewise; it was an appropriate gesture, and just about became standard procedure in later ages. Shutruk-Nahhunte's instance is notable only because it is the first of which we are sure: ancient records report that he presented his booty to the Elamite deity In-Shushinak and placed it on display in his temple.[1]

Since a museum is by definition any "room, building, or locale where a collection of objects is put on exhibition," whatever part of In-Shushinak's temple happened to be used qualifies as a sort of museum, one of war trophies—but just barely. For a museum that approaches what we generally mean by the term, we must go back in time to the first half of the sixth century B. C., to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. The Babylonian rulers of this age were particularly interested in the past. They studied archaic inscriptions; they restored old buildings; they even conducted archaeological excavations to locate the foundation stones of ancient temples. So it comes as no surprise to discover that Nebuchadnezzar II installed in his palace a collection of objects originating in bygone days.[2]

We have a fair idea of what it was like, since excavators have unearthed a good part of the contents. The earliest piece was over 1500 years old, an inscription of 2400 B. C. from Ur. There was a statue of a ruler of Mari in upper Mesopotamia of 2300 B. C., a clay spike from Isin in lower Mesopotamia of 2100 B. C., a club of 1650 B. C. which had once been wielded by a Kassite, one of the peoples who ruled Babylon until the Elamites took over. There were Assyrian pieces dating from 900 to 650 B. C.: inscriptions, reliefs, monuments, clay cylinders. There were a few Aramaic pieces—a statue of a weather god and some stone bowls dating from ca. 700 to 600 B.C. There were contemporary artifacts, some clay cylinders of Nebuchadnezzar himself. Obviously he was following in the footsteps of Shutruk-Nahhunte and the others who had amassed displays from the spoils of war. But his collection, though acquired for the most part in the same way, was deliberately selected

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1 E. Unger, *Assyrische und babylonische Kunst* (Breslau, 1927), 62-63; *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd ed. chapter 31, section 1, and chapter 32, section 1.

2 On Nebuchadnezzar's museum and its contents, see Unger, *Assyrische und babylonische Kunst*, 63-66; idem, *Babylon, die heilige Stadt* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1931), 224-28.

to illustrate a long span of time and a wide variety of objects. He proudly named it the "Wonder Cabinet of Mankind" and threw it open to the general public. For all intents and purposes it was an historical museum, the world's first.

For the next chapters in the history of the museum we must leave the Near East and turn to Greece. Certain important Greek temples, such as Apollo's at Delphi, seat of his renowned oracle, gradually accumulated objects which people donated either as thank-offerings for services rendered or as bribes for services that they hoped would be rendered. Some were particularly fine specimens of ordinary utensils, such as cauldrons, tripods, and bowls. The kings of Phrygia and Lydia in Asia Minor, ruling lands blessed with fabulous deposits of gold and, though non-Greek, anxious to enlist the favor of the potent Greek gods in their enterprises, made Delphi into a veritable Fort Knox. When Herodotus visited there in the fifth century B. C. he saw a throne dedicated by Midas of Phrygia, whose very name conjures up visions of gold, and he saw six gold mixing bowls dedicated by Gyges of Lydia. Their aggregate weight was no less that 1730 pounds.[3] Alongside such showy offerings were others that were works of art: carved reliefs and statues. As time went on, numerous temples acquired so many such works that they became sculpture galleries as well as houses of worship—exactly as Europe's cathedrals were to becomes centuries later through the offerings and grave monuments of pious Christians.

If the historical museum, then, owes its origin to near Eastern displays of war spoils and the art museum to the Greek practice of offering a god a statue or a relief, what about other kinds of museums? At least some owe theirs to Greek gullibility.

Fine utensils and sculptures were far from being the only things Greeks dedicated in their temples. Rare and prized objects also found their way there. And, in Greek eyes, the rarest and most prized objects were those that were somehow associated—or at least thought to be associated—with the remote golden days of mythology. Some years ago by great good luck, archaeologists came upon a stone inscribed with an inventory of the contents of a famous temple to Athena on the island of Rhodes. It revealed that the building had been practically a storehouse of mythological bric-a-brac. There were a pair of bracelets that allegedly once adorned the white arms of Helen of Troy, the cup from which she used to drink (it was in the shape of one of her breasts), various weapons once carried by Heracles and Menelaus and other Greek heroes, nine complete suits of armor worn by men from the contingent Rhodes had dispatched to the Trojan War, a set of tiller bars deposited by the helmsman of the ship that bore Menelaus to Troy, and a host of similar items.[4]

Relics of this kind were to be found all over the Greek world. You could see Aeneas's shield in a temple on the island of Samothrace, Diomed's shield in a temple at Argos, Achilles's spear in a temple in Asia Minor, the tools used for making the Trojan

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3 Herodotus 1.14, 50-51.

4 C. Blinkenberg, *Lindos, Fouilles de l'acropole*, vol. 2, *Inscriptions* (Copenhagen, 1941), no. 2B, iii-xiv.

Horse in a temple in southern Italy. Mementoes of the wandering Odysseus were scattered even further than the Greek world. A remote spot in Spain had one of his shields and the prow of one of his ships; Circei, the town on the Italian coast where Circe was supposed to have lived, had a goblet; Djerba, the island off Tunisia which claimed to be the land of the Lotus-Eaters, offered as proof an altar that the hero was said to have set up; and distant Scotland had an altar, appopriately inscribed in Greek, that he was supposed to have dedicated. Inevitably the same relic sometimes turned up in more than one spot. The renowned image of Athena that kept Troy safe from capture until Odysseus stole it was on display in no less than five different places (Athens, Rome, and three Italian towns).[5]

Temples preserved not only mementoes of the heroes of mythology but even their physical remains, as churches preserve those of saints. Tantalus's ghost may have been in the underworld vainly trying to drink the water at his feet and eat the fruit out of reach above his head, but his bones, or what passed for his bones, were resting in a bronze jar in Argos. Those of his son Pelops were in a small town in northern Greece, and the bones of giants were to be seen in any number of temples.[6]

From the cherishing of objects supposedly connected with the great names of mythology, it was a natural step to the cherishing of objects connected with the great names of history. And so we find temples preserving the weapons of Alexander the Great as well as of Achilles or Menelaus, the personal jewelry of King Artaxerxes of Persia as well as that of Helen of Troy.[7] There followed still another step—and this one was crucial: objects began to be preserved not because of their historical or pseudo-historical associations, but simply because they were strange or unusual. A temple in Morocco kept a stuffed crocodile on view, one in Greece a whale rib. Until Carthage was destroyed in 146 B. C., visitors could see in a temple there the skins of "three women with hairy bodies" that Hanno of Carthage had brought back from an epoch-making voyage down the west coast of Africa. His native interpreters had called them "gorillas," but it is hard to imagine an ancient exploring party capturing three gorillas alive; they were more likely chimpanzees or baboons. Quite a few temples exhibited elephant tusks. These may have come from India rather than Africa, since India seems to have been the prime source of a good many admired oddments. A temple in Asia Minor offered examples of Indian amber and Indian armor. "Indian reeds," described as being as big as tree trunks, were a common exhibit; they must have been specimens of bamboo. "Indian nuts," equally common, were probably coconuts.[8]

The list of items is miscellaneous, haphazard, and scrambled, and yet in it we can discern dimly but surely the seeds that would eventually blossom into our modern

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5 L. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*, vol. 1, 10th ed. (Leipzig, 1922), 450-51; F. Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, 5 (Giessen, 1909), 322, 331-34.

6 Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult*, 208, 321, 410, 424, 426-27.

7 Pausanias 8.28.1; Blinkenberg, *Inscriptions*, no. 2 C, xxix.

8 Friedländer, *Darstellungen*, 447-48; Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult*, 324.

museums of natural history, ethnology, geography. Even the mythological relics played a part. The giants' bones on display in many a temple were very likely mammoth's bones, which not infrequently turn up in Greece.[9] The tusks visitors saw in a temple near Naples that were said to be from the Erymanthian boar whose destruction was one of the labors of Heracles very likely came from some remarkably large specimen of a boar. And the various objects that were ascribed to Achilles, Odysseus and the other mythological notables were unquestionably genuine examples of strange or obsolete weapons, armor, utensils, and adornments--museum pieces, as we would call them.

The Romans took their cue from the Greeks. They were every bit as reverent toward relics from mythological times, and even more liberal in treasuring historical mementoes. And they enthusiastically gathered and preserved all kinds of curiosities. They were the first to exhibit collections of precious stones: Pompey, after his defeat of King Mithridates, looted the latter's collection and dedicated it on the Capitoline at Rome, and Caesar put into his favorite temple of Venus no less than six different collections. the emperor Hadrian deposited the hide of a she-bear in a temple at Thespiae in Greece and an Indian snake in a temple at Athens. Once, in the third century B.C., Roman soldiers campaigning in Tunisia killed a 120-foot serpent with a well-aimed catapult shot; the skin and jawbone were exhibited in a temple at Rome. A century and a half later soldiers on campaign there came across certain animals resembling wild sheep which were named "gorgons" because allegedly their looks could kill; after a number of men had been lost trying to get near enough for a sword thrust, mounted hunters stabbed a few specimens with javelins, and the hides were deposited in the Temple of Hercules. A large cinnamon root, which must have come from India, was enshrined in a gold dish in a temple on the Palatine, an extraordinary chunk of crystal that weighed over 100 pounds in a temple on the Capitoline, a breastplate of British pearls in a temple in Caesar's forum. Technological curios were also put on display; there was an archaic flute with only four holes, a mirror that conveyed a distorted image, a special dental forceps made of lead for testing extractable teeth (the dentist was to attempt only those which could be pulled by this relatively feeble instrument).[10]

Statues, painting, armor, snakeskins, dental forceps--all were on exhibit for the art lover and curiosity seeker, yet all were kept in buildings whose primary function lay elsewhere, most often as a house of worship. They were museums, but only incidentally, and most often they merely housed objects which people were expected to gape at in wonder without making any particular sense of them. And this situation continued for well-nigh a millennium after the fall of Rome. Christian churches took over the role of pagan temples as repositories of oddments. The cathedral at Arezzo sheltered the jaw-bone of a whale, St. Stephen's in Vienna some mammoth bones, St. John's at Lüneberg the shoulder bone of some sea monster, the cathedral at Merseburg a large tortoise shell, the church at Ensisheim in Alsace a meteorite, the cathedral at Seville a stuffed crocodile,

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9 Cf. J. Frazer, ed., *Pausanias* (London, 1898), 4:314-15.

10 Friedländer, *Darstellungen*, 447-49.

a few elephant tusks, and the bridle used by El Cid. As time went on, wealthy nobles caught the fever and began to amass private collections of such curios. Toward the beginning of the fifteenth century, the brother of Charles VI of France had a "cabinet of wonders" that boasted ostrich eggs, snakeskins, porcupine quills, boars' tusks, whalebone, polar bear hides, mammoths' bones, coconuts. It was a primitive museum of natural history--and it was strictly for his eyes and those of his friends, not the general public.[11]

And then, on the 15th of December, 1471 A.D., Pope Sixtus IV took an epochal step: he set aside certain rooms in the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill for a display of ancient sculpture and appointed a board of four men to take charge of it. He thereby brought into existence the world's first true museum of art.[12] Very soon thereafter, alongside the wealthy amateurs with their ragbag agglomerations of curiosities, arose a new type of collector, the professional scholar. Georg Agricola of Saxony (1490-1555), for example, a physician who worked in the mining areas of his country, gathered specimens of minerals, published codified descriptions of them, and through his writings induced his sovereign, Augustus of Saxony, to found at Dresden a "Chamber of Art and Natural History" that eventually grew into the city's fine museums. Andrea Cesalpino (1519-1603) was a passionate botanist who headed a botanical garden at Pisa; his pupil, Michele Mercati (1541-1593), became keeper of the botanical garden of Pope Pius V and founded in the Vatican Italy's richest collection of minerals and fossils.[13] These are the names of but a few out of many. By the sixteenth century the day of the modern museum had dawned.

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11 J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* (Leipzig, 1908), 12-16; P. Salmon, *De la collection au musée* (Brussels, 1958), 27-29.

12 W. Heckscher, *Sixtus IIII Aeneas insignes statuas romano populo restituendas censuit* (The Hague, 1955), 46-47.

13 D. Murray, *Museums, Their History and Their Use*, (Glasgow, 1904). 1:24-29.