

THE MUSEUM OF OTHER PEOPLE

FROM COLONIAL ACQUISITIONS
TO COSMOPOLITAN EXHIBITIONS

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Since at least the fifteenth century, Europe's 1 per cent collected Greek and Roman antiquities, Renaissance art and Chinese ceramics. Their gardens flaunted exotic trees. For entertainment, perhaps instruction, they had cabinets of "natural curiosities" and "artificial curiosities" with freaks of nature, bizarre devices, instruments of torture, titillating images.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century a few grand collections were put on public show. The venues came to be known as museums: shrines of the muses. At first only select visitors were admitted. The Hermitage insisted on court dress. The Louvre gave privileged access to artists. As late as 1808 anyone who wished to enter the British Museum had to submit a written application. Gradually more and more museums opened to the public, though children were not welcome.

In 1848 two Chinese scholars were dispatched to examine these new institutions. They reported that there were *jigulou*, "buildings for collections of bones," *wanzhongyuan*, "gardens of everything," *huage*, "pavilions of paintings," *jibaoyuan*, "courtyards of treasures," and *junqilou* "houses of military equipment." After visiting the British Museum, a Japanese delegation coined a new term, *hakubutsukan*, "mansion of boundless things."¹

This book tells the story of yet another kind of museum. Benoît de L'Estoile identified it as le musée des autres. I call it the Museum of Other People.²

Conceived in the 1830s and 1840s, the Museum of Other People put on display an exotic world of "primitive" or "tribal" peoples who lived far away or long ago. Its golden age began

with the wave of European colonialism in Africa and Oceania in the 1880s. It then went into decline in the era of decolonisation in the 1960s. Museums of ethnology and anthropology in the U.S.A. followed a similar trajectory, emerging at the height of colonisation of the territories west of the Mississippi ("Indian country"), and giving way to identity museums in the 1980s. By the twenty-first century the Museum of Other People confronted a full-blown crisis. This may be terminal.

The first plans for the Museum of Other People were drawn up in Paris, Leiden, Copenhagen and Dresden. In 1845 the British Museum installed an ethnographic gallery. In 1846 the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, established a department of ethnology. At the same time, societies of anthropologists and ethnologists were founded, part of a new wave of learned societies that were coming to terms with an industrialising, urbanising, imperialist Europe.

Governments assumed responsibility for education, poor relief, public health and policing (functions once left largely to parish authorities). For reasons of state and commerce, European powers began a new round of land grabs in faraway lands. Modernising bureaucracies found themselves in urgent need of facts and ideas. In 1836, Lord John Russell, who served twice as prime minister of Britain, declared: "We are busy introducing system, method, science, economy, regularity [and] discipline."³ A new breed of statisticians delivered the data. Positivists in France and Utilitarians in England proposed methods and theories—and a cluster of new sciences emerged. Michel Foucault called them human sciences, while admitting that he used the term "sciences" loosely: "the body of knowledge (though even that word is perhaps a little too strong: let us say, to be more neutral still . . . the body of discourse) that takes as its object man as an empirical entity."⁴

As the philosopher and historian of science Ian Hacking remarked, the new human sciences were *making up kinds of people*.⁵ Ethnologists and anthropologists began to investigate

the character, habits and customs of a very particular kind of people. Once known as savages, they were now, in a scientific era, identified as "primitive": stuck in an early stage of human development. These primitive people were distinguished by their "race," "culture," or degree of "civilisation," terms coined in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Anthropologists distinguished populations by race. Ethnologists concerned themselves with culture or civilisation. However, disciplinary labels were expansive, overlapping and often a matter of contention. William Edwards, son of a Jamaican planter, who founded the *Société ethnologique de Paris* in 1839, claimed that the term ethnology had the double advantage that it lent itself to generalisation and "designated indifferently the study of races or of peoples."⁶ In 1843, James Cowles Prichard, author of the first English textbook in the field, defined ethnology as the study of the history of peoples, and laid down that it "must be mainly founded on the relations of their languages."⁷ In 1859, Paul Broca, a professor of anatomy at the Sorbonne, set up the *Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, the first learned society to adopt the title "anthropology," an old term for the philosophical contemplation of the human condition. He dismissed the ethnologists as do-gooders, obsessed with slavery, their motivation not truly scientific. They were, he complained, deplorably reluctant to acknowledge the radical importance of biological differences.

Armed with eighteen signatures of potential members, Broca approached the Ministry of Public Education for permission to form his society. The minister hesitated. As a historian, Francis Schiller summed up official concerns: "Worse than ethnology, which smacked only of anti-slavery, anthropology suggested subversion and the spirit of 1848; something vaguely degrading to man's immortal soul, possibly in conflict with the teachings of the Church and the interests of the Empire." Permission was granted, but on two conditions: First, "they must never talk politics or religion." Second, "a plainclothes officer of the Imperial Police must be present at each session and report

to headquarters.”⁸ (Broca enjoyed reminiscing about the time the attendant policeman asked whether he might be excused. “There will be nothing interesting to-day, I suppose? May I go?” “No, no, my friend,” Broca replied, “you must not go for a walk; sit down and earn your pay.”)⁹

In London too, ethnologists and anthropologists were at daggers drawn. In 1842 the Aborigines’ Protection Society resolved that the best way to help native peoples was to study them.¹⁰ This was contentious. The missionary element in the society resisted. A year later the secretary of the APS, Richard King, and two Quaker physicians, Thomas Buxton and Thomas Hodgkin, formed the London Ethnological Society. The members were anti-slavery and committed to the doctrine that all human races had a common origin.

In 1863, in the heat of the American Civil War, a frankly racist faction broke away and set up the Anthropological Society of London. A year later its leader, James Hunt, published *On The Negro’s Place in Nature*, in which he asserted the separate origin of the various human races and defended slavery. The inner circle of the Anthropological Society formed “The Cannibal Club,” which was called to order with a gavel carved in the shape of an African head.¹¹ Hunt was even more dismissive of the ethnologists than Broca had been. These “opponents of comparative anthropology” suffered “arrested brain growth” and “from what I will call respectively the religious mania, and the rights-of-man mania.”¹²

Hunt died in 1869. In 1871, the year in which Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* was published, the feuding London societies merged under the leadership of Thomas Henry Huxley, John Lubbock and General Augustus Lane-Fox (later Pitt Rivers). They were all Darwinians. Indeed, one commentator complained that the new society promised to be “little more than a sort of Darwinian club.”¹³ The choice of a name for the society was a final bone of contention. Lubbock, intervening in a heated debate at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, said that he “looked upon anthropology as an ugly name for ethnology . . .

[Ethnology] was an older word and a prettier word than anthropology.”¹⁴ But after much heart-searching, and despite a rearguard action by the fervently anti-racist Lady Lubbock, the new association was named “Anthropological.”¹⁵

Museums of Civilisation (the Louvre, the British Museum, New York’s Metropolitan Museum) embodied the Enlightenment theory of history. All human societies progress from a lower to a higher condition, some more quickly than others. Progress can be measured by the advance of reason in its cosmic battle against raw nature, instinct, superstition and traditional authority. The goal towards which all must travel is what French philosophers in the late eighteenth century began to call *Civilisation*. Civilisation had three peaks: ancient Greece and Rome, the European Renaissance, and, well, obviously, the great city in which is found the premier Museum of Civilisation—Paris, or London, or New York. The antithesis of civilisation, its foil, was represented by “Stone Age” or “primitive” societies. Their crude arts and artefacts belonged in a Museum of Other People, if not in a Museum of Natural History.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer proposed that societies were like living organisms. As they “evolve” they become more complex and efficient. The term “evolution” duly entered the vocabulary of speculative historians, alongside “progress” and “civilisation.” Spencer’s “evolution” was, however, radically different from Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Darwin repudiated the idea that the development of natural organisms, let alone societies, follow the same path everywhere. Challenges are local and changeable. Particular adaptations cannot be foreseen. Outcomes are unpredictable. “What a chance it has been . . . that has made a man,” Darwin mused. “Any monkey probably might, with such chances be made intellectual, but almost certainly not made into man.”¹⁶

Yet Darwin pointed out that as human beings became tool-makers they were less exposed to a changing environment. Gradually they developed the means to engineer their own progress.

At that point, Darwin did buy into the civilisation narrative. He wrote, in *The Descent of Man*, that “man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals and religion.”¹⁷ And while he hated slavery, Darwin believed that there was a hierarchy of races. “It is very true what you say about the higher races of men, when high enough, replacing & clearing off the lower races,” he wrote to the Christian Socialist, Charles Kingsley, in 1862. “In 500 years how the Anglo-saxon race will have spread & exterminated whole nations; & in consequence how much the Human race, viewed as a unit, will have risen in rank.”¹⁸

In 1871 the father figure of English anthropology, E. B. Tylor, wrote in his *Primitive Culture*: “The educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life.”¹⁹ Perhaps Tylor was being ironic, but this way of thinking had an obvious appeal to imperialists, though not necessarily to the foreigners over whom they ruled.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as European powers were busily assembling tropical empires in Africa and Oceania, most Europeans were themselves living under imperial rule, subjects of the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman or the Russian empires. Central European intellectuals invoked the notion of *Kultur* to challenge the imperialist cult of *Civilisation*.²⁰ The identity of a *Volk* derived from its particular culture. This was rooted in blood and soil, fitted to a local environment. The *Volksgeist*, the national spirit, found expression in rituals, folk tales, music and crafts. Appeals to a universal civilisation were imperialist propaganda. There was no hierarchy of cultures, no universal historical dialectic leading peoples everywhere onwards and upwards to a civilised condition. “What does ‘progress of the human race’ mean?,” demanded Johann Gottfried von Herder. “How are we to measure so many different periods and peoples, even with the best of outside information?”²¹

Proponents of local culture feared that their very identity was threatened by foreign powers and the insidious appeal of modernity. Suspicious of science, industry and commerce, they looked to the past for reassurance and inspiration. Champions of civilisation were full of optimism, confident of moving forward, making progress, certain that they were on the side of history. Civilisation trumped barbarism. Progress had its costs, no doubt, but resistance was futile.

And yet the opposed poles of Tylor's series—"savage or cultured life"—do not correspond to objective, readily specified historical conditions. Remarkably little is known about the way of life and beliefs of hunter-gatherers in Upper Palaeolithic times. We cannot say with any confidence what these societies had in common, apart from a dependence on hunting and gathering. (Who knows whether they had families, leaders, shamans, music?) Since they were first documented, pastoral nomads and many foraging peoples associated with farmers and even with city folk, and had done so for many generations, in some cases for millennia. Far from being very like the ancient Stone Age peoples who lived in a world of hunters and gatherers, they have more in common with their farming neighbours than with foragers and herders in other parts of the world.

"Civilisation," the Enlightenment antithesis to savagery or barbarism, is almost as hard to pin down. The term was applied at first to ancient Greece and Rome. In the nineteenth century, European scholars extended its range to include ancient Egypt and Israel, Babylon, Persia, China, Japan and Moghul India. Yet while all civilised peoples, ancient and modern, are assumed to share common features, there is little agreement about which features are decisive. "No civilised society would—" Fill in the blank according to taste.

In 1883, the English historian J. R. Seeley remarked that civilisation was associated with all sorts of conditions—"sometimes the softening of manners, sometimes mechanical inventions, sometimes religious toleration, sometimes the appearance of great poets and artists, sometimes scientific discoveries,

sometimes constitutional liberty." However, these qualities did not necessarily occur together. Nor were they produced by a single cause. And "civilisation" certainly did not explain, let alone excuse, the remarkable expansion of the British Empire. ("We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind," Seeley famously remarked.)²²

Britain's medals to honour veterans of the First World War were inscribed "The Great War for Civilisation 1914-1919": but after the horrors of that war, the differences between civilisation and barbarism seemed less apparent. The father figure of American anthropology, Franz Boas, wrote in 1928:

Anyone who has lived with primitive tribes, who has shared their joys and sorrows, their privations and their luxuries . . . will agree that there is no such thing as a "primitive mind," a "magical" or "prelogical" way of thinking, but that each individual in "primitive" societies is a man, a woman, a child of the same way of thinking, feeling and acting as a man, woman or child in our own society.²³

Yet even in this passage Boas wrote unselfconsciously about "primitive tribes." The idea of a primitive kind of people still cast a long shadow when I was a graduate student of social anthropology at Cambridge University in the 1960s. British, French and Belgian colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific were in the process of becoming independent states. And yet we were given to understand that out there, in the tropics and the antipodes, in countries that had until very recently been European colonies, functioning tribes could still be studied. To be sure, those people were now mostly Christians or Muslims. Their children went to school. But perhaps a residue of the old system could be discerned. Despite missionary disapproval, people sacrificed to their ancestors and tabooed animal totems. Tribal chiefs insisted on traditional prerogatives, even if they had to be propped up in office by colonial commissioners. Everyone had access to money and markets, and yet they practised barter and gift exchange.

Anthropologists did adapt to the post-colonial world. They dropped the fantasy of bounded tribes, each with its pristine culture, and began to study globalisation, hybrid religions, ethnic relations, urban life, the legacy of colonial structures. Some were drawn into projects of “modernisation” or “development” in the newly independent states. The description “primitive” was avoided. “Indigenous” might be preferred, though that term was applied to the same roll call of hunters and pastoral nomads whom the Victorians regarded as prototypical primitives.

Meanwhile, the Museum of Other People remained stuck in its ways. In 1969, William C. Sturtevant, long-serving curator of North American ethnology in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, asked his colleagues “to admit the minuscule role and the low prestige of museum work in present-day ethnology.”²⁴ This was fair enough. Many museums continued to purvey timeless images of exotic ways of life (dioramas of waxwork figures hunting, praying, carving, weaving, cooking and sitting around camp fires). The mood music was no longer imperialist, however. Exhibitions communicated a benevolent universalism. Look at funeral practices around the world, beliefs in spiritual beings, music, dance, initiation rituals. See what we all have in common!

The prototype was the blockbuster “Family of Man” photographic show that travelled the world in the 1950s. Even at the time it was derided as a happy-clappy, all-in-it-together, Kumbaya *family* show. The critic Roland Barthes pointed out the ambiguity of its message:

the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species, the diversity in skins, skulls and customs are made manifest, the image of Babel is complacently projected over that of the world. Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way . . . Of course

this means postulating a human essence, and here God is re-introduced into our Exhibition.²⁵

"The Family of Man" was a huge success. It helped that the United States Information Agency funded a tour through thirty-seven countries that attracted over 7.5 million visitors.

The Museum of Other People gradually lost its moorings, drifting away from the new centres of research in anatomy, anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and history of art. In the 1920s and 1930s, ethnographers began to do long-term field-work. Studying social and cultural processes, drawing on a range of social science theories, they lost interest in what came to be called "material culture"—the sort of things to be found in the museums. In the second half of the twentieth century, racist, typological thinking was replaced by a statistically based population genetics. There was no longer a good reason to display skulls and skeletons. Yet while the old paradigms were abandoned in the universities, they had a half-life still in the museums, where dusty showcases and dioramas continued to purvey timeless images of exotic ways of life.

In the 1960s the Museum of Other People sailed into troubled waters. European colonies in Africa and Oceania became independent states. Indigenous peoples' movements emerged in the Americas and in Australia and New Zealand. In the late twentieth century, identity museums along the Mall in Washington, DC, called into question the very idea of a Museum of Other People. Curators of ethnographic and prehistoric artefacts were thrown, unprepared, into a cauldron of controversy about race, colonialism, cultural appropriation and the very nature of scientific authority. And to cap it all, by the twenty-first century they were themselves in the dock, charged with sequestering other peoples' heirlooms.

"The trustees of the British Museum have become the world's largest receivers of stolen property, and the great majority of their loot is not even on public display," claims Geoffrey

Robertson QC, a human rights lawyer.²⁶ Dan Hicks, a senior curator at Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, insists that European museums must atone for their colonial past, transform themselves into "sites of conscience" and "take action to make the 2020s a decade of restitution."²⁷

An activist theatre group "BP or not BP" (a reference not only to Hamlet but to British Petroleum, a controversial donor) runs "stolen goods tours" of the British Museum. An Australian Aborigine man, resident in London, demands the return of a shield that was taken by Captain Cook in 1770. He claims that 250 years ago it belonged to his own ancestor, a warrior identified by Cook as Cooman. Next up, a woman introduced as a Maori calls on the museum to return 2,300 Maori artefacts. Then a British man with Greek Cypriot parents testifies that the Elgin Marbles belong back in Athens.

In a superhero film released in 2018, *Black Panther*, a visitor from a fictional African country, Erik "Killmonger" Stevens (played by Michael B. Jordan), confronts a curator in the "Museum of Great Britain." He tells her that a seventh-century war hammer on display with other African artefacts is wrongly labelled. It wasn't made in Benin. The British took it from his own people, the Wakanda. Now he is going to take it back. She protests that it isn't for sale. "How do you think your ancestors got these?" he replies. "Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it . . . like they took everything else?" Killmonger poisons the curator's coffee, kills the guards, and makes off with the hammer.

Iconic museum pieces were acquired by force or shady dealing in the heyday of European imperialism, usually from rival empires. Famous examples are the Elgin Marbles, the Rosetta Stone and Qing dynasty treasures looted from the Chinese emperor's summer palace, which together are the pride of the British Museum.²⁸ (Even the word loot was appropriated. It comes from *lut*, the Hindi word for plunder.)

A corps of scientists accompanied Napoleon's military expedition to Egypt in 1798. They carried off antiquities, a number

of which—including the Rosetta Stone—were seized by a British expeditionary force, shipped to London in a captured French frigate, *L'Égyptienne*, and ended up in the British Museum. In 1812, Lord Elgin, British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, arranged for half the surviving sculptures of the Parthenon to be removed and sent to his private home in England. "Bonaparte has not got such a thing from all his thefts in Italy," he boasted.²⁹ In 1816 he sold his trophies to the British Museum. The imperial summer palace in the north of Beijing was plundered and then razed to the ground by British and French troops in October 1860 in revenge for the capture and torture of thirty-nine Europeans during the Second Opium War, only eighteen of whom survived. When the looting began, the soldiers were given a free hand. About one and a half million precious objects were taken from the palace complex. A great many found their way into European and North American museums.³⁰ The whole forty-acre imperial estate was then torched on the orders of the British high commissioner to China, Lord Elgin (son of the Lord Elgin of the Elgin Marbles). "We, Europeans, we are the civilised, and for us, the Chinese are the barbarians," Victor Hugo wrote to a correspondent. "Now see what civilisation has done to barbarism . . . One day I hope that France will return these spoils of war to China, cleansed and polished."³¹

"Throughout history, soldiers have claimed the spoils of war, and the plunder and sacking of cities has been as common as the practice of forcibly requisitioning food from the countryside," according to Sir Richard Evans, regius professor of modern history at Cambridge University.³² Not only was looting a common accessory to warfare: it was regarded as right and natural. In his classic account of the laws of war and peace, published in 1625, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius recognised "the right to appropriate for oneself what one has taken from the enemy."³³

Napoleon Bonaparte elevated looting to a patriotic duty. Following the example of the Roman Triumphs, he ritualised

his appropriations. In 1798, on the anniversary of the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror, Paris celebrated a two-day "Festival of Liberty and Triumphal Entry of Objects of the Sciences and the Arts Collected in Italy." Among the prizes on show were four gilded Corinthian horses that a Crusader force seized from the Hippodrome in Constantinople in 1204 and carried off to Venice. French soldiers removed the horses from the porch of the cathedral of St. Mark and they were paraded through Paris beneath a banner that read: "Horses transported from Corinth to Rome, and from Rome to Constantinople to Venice, and from Venice to France. They are finally on free soil." A song written for the occasion had a refrain: "Rome is no more in Rome/It is all in Paris."³⁴

Much of the plunder of Napoleon's campaigns ended up in the Louvre, renamed the Musée Napoléon in 1803. After the Battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington insisted that the victorious allies "could not do otherwise than restore [works of art] to the countries from which, contrary to the practice of civilised warfare, they had been torn during the disastrous period of the French Revolution and the tyranny of Buonaparte."³⁵ Richard Evans notes, however, that "only about 55 per cent of the looted objects were returned; the rest had been sent out to provincial museums, beyond the ken of the occupying Allied armies."³⁶

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 were the first international instruments to ban pillage. This in no way inhibited the Nazis from plundering masterpieces from museums and from Jewish families. As a young man Hitler dreamt of being an artist. In his last years, in the midst of a world war, he was planning a Führermuseum, to be built in Linz, near his birthplace in Austria. It would be a museum of looted art.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the U.S. imposed a temporary embargo on trade in works of art and set up a mechanism for the collection and return of stolen goods (but that did not prevent Soviet troops from carting away truckloads of antiquities and works of art). Discussions in the United Nations and UNESCO led to the promulgation of the 1954 Hague

Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. At the time of writing, 133 states are party to the convention. (The United States signed up only in 2009, and insisted on a waiver where nuclear weapons are deployed.)

This convention affirms that institutional and individual owners of stolen works of art (and their descendants) have the right to reclaim them, but it can be very difficult to recover treasures looted by the Nazis. "In many cases, the original owners were dead, and sometimes their heirs had been killed by the Nazis as well," writes Evans, an authority on the Third Reich.

Entire families perished in very large numbers at Auschwitz, and while institutions, museums and galleries possessed the knowledge, the resources and the evidence to mount actions to try and regain what they had lost, the same was seldom true of individuals. As a result the number of restitution actions and claims fell sharply during the 1950s, at the same time as new international agreements protecting cultural property came into force.³⁷

UNESCO's 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property urged buyers to require proof that antiquities were acquired legally. The United States ratified the treaty in 1983, but it took Britain until 2002 and Germany until 2007 to sign it. In the meantime, countries rich in antiquities—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria—were ravaged by invasions and civil wars. Rare and wonderful pieces soon appeared on the world market.³⁸

Reviewing international conventions governing the ownership of "cultural property" (which he defined as "objects of artistic, archaeological, ethnological or historical interest"), the jurist John Henry Merryman distinguished two opposing points of view.³⁹ One school of thought treats cultural property as a shared endowment of humanity. Merryman dubbed this the cosmopolitan principle. An example is the preamble to the Hague

Convention of 1954, which states that “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world.” The other approach is nationalist. This underpins the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property. The thrust here is on the retention of cultural property within national boundaries.

Whether nationalist or cosmopolitan, the status of these international conventions is uncertain. The International Court of Justice has not tested whether there is a duty under international law to return “cultural property” even if it was illegally acquired. James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust and former director of the Harvard Art Museums, the Courtauld Institute and the Art Institute of Chicago, is disparaging. “It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to see these many conventions as a bouillabaisse of good intentions and bureaucratic ambitions,” he writes, “all of which are, in the end, unenforceable, except insofar as the States Parties themselves have imposed internal laws and sanctions governing the activities addressed by the Conventions.”⁴⁰

Some national legislatures did institute procedures for restitution. In New Zealand, Australia and Canada laws were introduced to protect the heritage of Indigenous peoples. In 1990 the U.S. Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). This provided a legal framework for the repatriation of Native American human remains and ceremonial objects held by museums. And social movements around the world demanded redress for the injuries of slavery and colonialism.

In July 2013, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter kick-started perhaps the largest protest movement in the history of the U.S.A.⁴¹ The killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 sparked massive demonstrations in nearly 550 locations across the United States. Halls of residence, lecture theatres and libraries donated to universities by slave owners were renamed. In June 2020, the statue of Edward Colson, a

philanthropist who profited from the Atlantic slave trade, was toppled and thrown into Bristol harbour.

A spotlight then turned on museum collections, and in particular on West African court art that had been looted by British and French armies in the 1890s. In August 2016, the newly elected president of the Republic of Bénin, Patrice Talon, demanded that France restore trophies looted by a French expeditionary force in 1894 from the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. France's Foreign Ministry made the customary response: objects deposited in French museums are inalienable national possessions. However, on 28 November 2017, during a visit to Burkina Faso, the newly elected president of France, Emmanuel Macron tweeted: "African heritage cannot be held prisoner by European museums."

Macron's intervention resonated with a general shift in public attitudes to race and imperialism. Veteran staff at the British Museum recalled with horror the campaign for the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens launched in 1982 by the Greek film actress Melina Mercouri, her country's minister of culture. But Macron's démarche was more troubling, its potential constituency larger and more radical. The cultural establishment was thrown off balance. Some museum directors were dismissive. Others issued pious mission statements. A few proclaimed their solidarity, but did not undertake to surrender prized collections.

Parodying Macron's tweet, the former head of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, Stéphane Martin, declared that "museums should not be held hostage to the painful history of colonialism."⁴² He pointed out that one of the items demanded by the Republic of Bénin, a statue of the Dahomey god Gou that is in the Louvre, was sculpted by a man from a neighbouring country while he was a prisoner of the Dahomey king. The statue was found on a beach by a French sailor. Exhibited in the Louvre for 150 years it became an icon of modernism, revered by Picasso and Apollinaire.⁴³ Nevertheless, Martin came out in favour of the "circulation" of artefacts between museums. He added that African governments should be urged to treat curators with respect and pay them decent salaries.

Directors of other European museums were more diplomatic. Harmut Dorgerloh, the director-general of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, promised that in future, labels would contextualise colonial artefacts and reveal their sometimes troubling provenance. "This will be done in a manner that displays the power relations between the colonists who brought the objects to Germany and the colonised," he declared.⁴⁴ The British Museum moved the bust of its founder, Sir Hans Sloane, from a pedestal near the entrance to a cabinet in the newly unveiled Enlightenment Hall. A text identifies him as a "slave owner" whose work was "enabled by the wealth and networks that grew out of European imperialism." "The British Museum has done a lot of work—accelerated and enlarged its work on its own history, the history of empire, the history of colonialism, and also of slavery," the museum's director, Hartwig Fischer, assured the *Daily Telegraph*. "We must not hide anything. Healing is knowledge."⁴⁵ In June 2020 he posted a pledge on the museum's website: "The British Museum stands in solidarity with the British Black community, with the African American community, with the Black community throughout the world. We are aligned with the spirit and soul of Black Lives Matter everywhere." And yet President Macron's initiative "does not change the policy of the British Museum, nor legislation in Great Britain," Fischer told *The New York Times*. The British Museum's trustees were of course open to all forms of cooperation. Nevertheless, "the collections have to be preserved as a whole."⁴⁶

Imperial wars cast a long shadow over collecting activities in the colonial era. The argument is sometimes made that because there was a great disparity of resources between local people and foreign collectors, all acquisitions made by Europeans during the colonial period should be considered illegitimate. Ample evidence might be adduced in support of this syllogism. The ethnographer and surrealist poet, Michel Leiris, while serving as secretary to a collecting expedition under the auspices of the National Ethnographic Museum in Paris, wrote, in a letter to his

wife in September 1931: "We pilfer from the Africans under the pretext of teaching others how to love them and get to know their culture, that is, when all is said and done, to train even more ethnographers, so they can head off to encounter them and 'love and pilfer' from them as well." And yet, Leiris noted in his diary, "even if we force them a little to turn over their objects (threatening them, for example, with the authority of the colonial administration), in the end it will not be to their disadvantage." And after all, "we paid for almost everything."⁴⁷

But blanket condemnation of all transactions in the age of empire downplays local agency. Collectors were typically drawn into established systems of exchange. Leiris parodied this, imagining a scenario in which Europeans trade carnival masks in order to acquire masks of deities for museums back home, only to find that local entrepreneurs begin to trade in European masks and open their own museum of exotic crafts.⁴⁸

Jenny Newell, co-manager of the Pacific collection at the Australian Museum in Sydney, cites an eighteenth-century account by the surgeon of a convict transport of what happened when his ship docked in a Polynesian port:

Once the ship had come properly to anchor, the chiefly family of the region would go aboard, or arrange to meet the captain and officers on shore. Chiefs and their families would bring high-value gifts: items of regalia, large rolls of decorated tapa, ornaments, pigs and fruit that were specifically intended for establishing connections rather than the more common practice of barter. These people of rank would, after assessing the status and wealth of the crew members, select an appropriate taio [friend] each. They would wrap him in cloth, sometimes place a taumi (warrior's gorget of feathers and shark's teeth) around his neck and hand him other significant objects until, as one officer reported, he could be close to fainting from the heat and weight of them.

"With taio bonds established at all levels of the ship and the community on shore, the commodity and gift-exchanges would continue throughout the ship's stay," Newell adds. "Tahitians would at times ask the ships' carpenters to make up wooden chests in which to store the important goods they had collected." She cites George Tobin, a young lieutenant on Captain Bligh's *Providence* voyage, who remarked, after visiting Tahiti in 1792: "they have at O'tahytey their Collectors, and their cabinets of European curiosities."⁴⁹

A handsome young aristocrat from an island near Tahiti, Omai, accompanied Captain Cook and Joseph Banks back to England in 1774, at the end of Cook's second Pacific voyage. Omai was presented to King George III, who made him an allowance and set him up in lodgings. His portrait was painted by Joshua Reynolds. A play about his life was performed at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. He was fêted in polite society, his courtesy and elegance widely admired. The very short-sighted Dr. Johnson told Boswell that when he dined with Omai and a British politician, Lord Mulgrave, one evening, "they sat with their backs to the light fronting me, so that I could not see distinctly; and there was so little of the savage in Omai, that I was afraid to speak to either, lest I should mistake one for the other."⁵⁰

Omai returned to his home island of Raiatea in 1777 with a horse, armour and some curiosities. He set up a museum. "The helmet, and some other parts of armour, with several cutlasses, are still preserved, and displayed on the sides of the house now standing on the spot where Mai's dwelling was erected by Captain Cook," a missionary reported forty years after Omai's death. "A few of the trinkets, such as a jack-in-a-box, a kind of serpent that darts out of a cylindrical case when the lid is removed, are preserved with care by one of the principal chiefs, who at the time of our arrival considered them great curiosities, and exhibited them, as a mark of his condescension, to particular favourites."⁵¹ Meanwhile, back in London, Joseph Banks donated to the British Museum a "very large Collection

of Artificial Curiosities Utencils, dresses &c. from the South-Sea Islands.”⁵²

Dr. Newell also tells the story of Hitihiti, a young Society Islander, who accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage as a translator and guide. When the ship visited Easter Island, Hitihiti exchanged Tahitian tapa cloths for carvings of human figures, “assuring us they would be greatly valued at Taheitee.” He gave a life-size carved hand with long fingernails to the expedition’s senior naturalist, Johann Reinhold Forster, who passed it on to the British Museum. It is now on display in the Enlightenment Gallery.⁵³

A number of familiar anecdotes are cited to illustrate the bad faith of collectors in European colonies. Typical is the story of how colonial authorities in Nigeria apprehended Leo Frobenius, a prolific collector for German museums, when he was caught substituting a copy for an original Ife head.⁵⁴ Yet how representative are such examples? “Some objects were undoubtedly stolen and taken by force,” writes Enid Schildkraut, who has studied collections made in the early twentieth century by Leo Frobenius, Emil Torday, a Hungarian ethnographer, and an American anthropologist, Frederick Starr. She points out, however, that

often the most active collectors hung around, sometimes (as in the case of Torday) learning African languages, drinking, smoking, and dancing with Africans to convince them to exchange their objects for imported goods. Even when these collectors moved rapidly from village to village . . . or worked through local middlemen, as most did, they had to establish some rapport to extract the objects they were looking for.⁵⁵

In the colonial period, collectors engaged with local people who were soon all too familiar with European interests. Some were shrewd traders. In November 1905, Frederick Starr recorded in

his diary an attempt to buy esoteric items from an old man in a Congolese village:

Afterward he showed the other bundle which contained a purplish mass. This had lost its efficacy so we proposed its purchase, a proposition that was promptly blocked by one of those present. After some little argument a small fetish figure was brought out and to show us how it was used the palm-oil bottle and cam-wood were produced: they were mixed in the palm and then carefully rubbed over the whole figure, suitable observations being addressed to it all the time. When the act had been gone through with we talked price; I finally offered 1½ francs for it alone or 2 in case the old man stood greasing it while we photographed him; he took the latter. This fetish he told us was for success in hunting.⁵⁶

In a book published in 1907 Frobenius described bargaining for curios in the Congo:

Slowly the tall sons of the Kukengo State approached and offered their ethnological stuff [*ethnologischen Kram*] for sale. I had sent my people into the country to invite the Bakuba and they came. But when they sell, the Bakuba are truly the worst Greeks. They begin by asking prices that are unheard of and don't bargain much. Then someone brings the same object and haggles over it such that the Ethnologist needs all his patience and passion for valuable collections in order to endure this ordeal. But in order to be able to acquire more I first had to pay higher prices and initially had to let much blood.⁵⁷

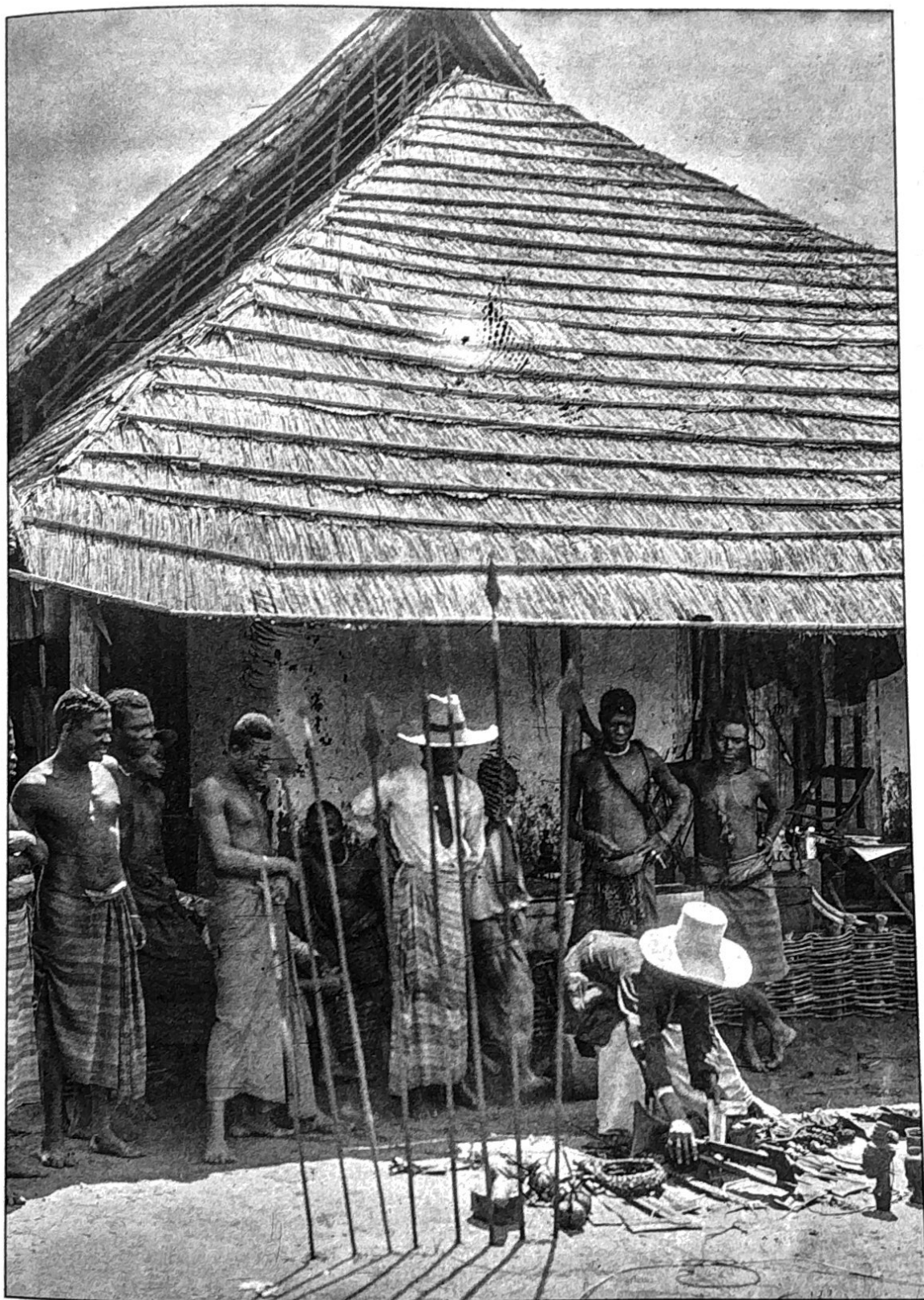
The reference to blood-letting may not have been meant literally, but Frobenius was prepared to use force, particularly when it came to recruiting bearers, and he travelled with an intimidating private escort of "police soldiers."⁵⁸

By the 1920s, trained ethnographers were embedded in faraway villages for months and years at a time, doing their best to fit in. Gregory Bateson and his wife, Margaret Mead, did fieldwork in New Guinea in the 1920s and 1930s. Bateson recalled that:

in one of the big villages of the Sepik River headhunters, I was negotiating to buy a specially fine pair of secret flutes—highly decorated bamboo tubes, about 6 feet long and giving deep organ notes. The members of the clan which owned the flutes had two objections to the sale: “If you take these flutes away to your country *women* may see them,” and “The flutes will never make music again. Who will know how to play them?” On the subject of women, I assured them—“No New Guinea women shall see the flutes and any women in my country who may see them will not know what they are.” To the other objection my only reply was to take some lessons in flute playing.⁵⁹

Melville Herskovits, a pioneer of African American studies, did fieldwork in the late 1920s among the Saramaka Maroons in a Dutch colony in South America, now the Republic of Suriname. He recalled that just as he prepared to depart:

I was getting into the dugout canoe that I was to take for a final run through the rapids that lay between the base camp and the railhead. My field kit, my notes, my collection of carvings and specimens were being stowed away. I was saying my goodbyes. At that moment, an old woman came up to me. In her hands she held a fine food-stirring paddle, which I had tried in vain to buy from her earlier. “White man,” she said, “take this. Ayobo made it for me before I came to live with him in his village. Put it in the big house, in your white man’s country, where you told me beautiful things are kept. And write on a piece of paper that Ayobo made it.”⁶⁰



A trader sets out craft items for sale in the town of Ibantshe, in what is now the Kasai Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Leo Frobenius, who took the photograph during his 1904–6 expedition to the Congo Free State, complained that the prices charged by Kuba traders were far higher than he had expected. (By permission of the Frobenius Museum, University of Frankfurt. Image: FoA 01–2229.)

The focus on the colonial period is arguably misleading. According to Maureen Murphy, a historian of African art at the Sorbonne, “70 per cent of the works preserved outside the continent ‘departed’ after independence in the 1960s.”⁶¹ Corruption, civil unrest and local wars fuel smuggling. John Picton recalls how during the Biafran war in the late 1960s, federal Nigerian soldiers looted Igbo sculptures “which ended up as trophies fixed to the fronts of military vehicles, while much else found its way into the international market.”⁶²

Christian and Islamic evangelists in Africa have instituted periodic purges of Satanic images. Marxist regimes in some West African countries banned polytheistic cults. (For instance, *Voudou* was banned in the Republic of Bénin from 1970 to 1990.) Each time, a surge of exports of antiquities followed.⁶³

Iconoclasm may bring about even more serious losses than smuggling. In February 2001 the Taliban leader Mullah Omar decreed the destruction of pre-Islamic monuments and figurative art works in Afghanistan. In March, two monumental statues of the Buddha carved into a cliffside in Bamiyan between AD 570 and 618 were blown up. A team of Taliban inspectors then visited the National Museum in Kabul and ordered the curators to open locked cabinets of antiquities. “Here were drawers of extraordinary Bactrian artifacts and Ghandara heads and figurines,” writes Kwame Anthony Appiah. “My friends recall the dead look in a curator’s eyes as he described how the Taliban inspectors responded to these extraordinary artifacts by taking out mallets and pulverizing them in front of him.”⁶⁴

Modern art is also anathema to some authoritarian and clerical regimes. In the 1970s, when the Shah of Iran was in his pomp, courtesy of a boom in oil prices, his wife, Farah Pahlavi, went on a museum-building spree. Her signature project was the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. A team of curators was despatched to New York and Paris to buy works by great modernists including Picasso, Van Gogh, Pollock, Warhol and de Kooning. Among the more controversial paintings were *Gabrielle With Open Blouse*, 1907, by Renoir, and Bacon’s 1968

triptych, *Two Figures Lying on a Bed With Attendants*. (The naked figures, both male, are posed facing one another.) Orientalist images included such challenging examples as Derain's *L'Age d'or*, an exercise in primitivism that featured androgynous, semi-naked figures play-fighting with wild animals.

A former curator of the Tehran museum, Roxane Zand, comments that here was "a major institution actually reflecting a reverse process, a reverse colonialism or reappropriation."⁶⁵ Iran's sudden openness to international movements in the arts was certainly remarkable. But everything changed when a fundamentalist regime came to power in 1979. Artistic representations, critical literature, even ancient texts were condemned as sacrilegious. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill Salman Rushdie because his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was blasphemous. Iranian politicians then joined a clamour over satirical cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad that were published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005.⁶⁶ And the collection of the Contemporary Art Museum was shut away in a high-security vault. (It is now estimated to be worth £2.5 billion.)⁶⁷

Shortly before the Islamic Revolution, the Shah had been negotiating with the British Museum for the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylinder inscribed with an account of the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BCE. The new regime carried on with the negotiations. Some Iranian politicians even claimed that the Cylinder, excavated in Babylon in 1879, rightfully belonged to Iran, and demanded its permanent return. In 2010, following lengthy negotiations, a loan was agreed. The director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, claimed this as a diplomatic triumph. But there was an outcry in Iran because the ancient artefact shed a glorious light on a pre-Islamic dynasty. The director of the national museum was imprisoned.

Despite cautionary tales about smuggling, theft, iconoclasm, censorship and neglect, the force is with those who demand the restitution of colonial collections. The director of a major

European museum told me that her younger curators are convinced that every questionable piece in the collections should be “returned.” Yet it may not be a simple matter to restore antique works of art, or even to identify who might be their rightful owners, or reliable custodians. Do people who share a “culture” (whatever that might mean), have collective rights in historical artefacts that date back centuries? Do museums that preserved and displayed foreign artefacts for a century or more retain no legitimate claim to them?

“There have been bad arguments on both sides” when it comes to Lord Elgin’s Athenian booty, in the judgement of Mary Beard. “Politicians have leapt on and off the bandwagon. Successive Greek governments have found the loss of the Parthenon sculptures a convenient symbol of national unity, and demands for their restitution a low-cost and relatively risk-free campaign.” Difficult questions of principle are at stake: “to whom does the Parthenon, and other such world-class monuments, belong? Should cultural treasures be repatriated, or should museums be proud of their international holdings? Is the Parthenon a special case—and why?”⁶⁸

By the 2020s pressure was building. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and the Horniman Museum in London announced that they would return Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. There may even be a deal in the making to settle Athens’s claim on the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum. At a meeting of UNESCO in May 2021, “every country there ganged up against the UK,” *The Times* reported. A poll published by YouGov in November 2021 revealed that 59 per cent of British respondents believed that the Parthenon statues should be returned to Greece (18 per cent wanted them to stay in Britain; 22 per cent were don’t knows). However, while Greece wanted acknowledgement of its “ownership” of the marbles, Jonathan Williams, deputy director of the British Museum, preferred talk of loans. “There are many wonderful things we’d be delighted to borrow and lend,” he said. “It is what we do.”⁶⁹

While demands for restitution command the headlines, the crisis of the Museum of Other People is also, perhaps yet more fundamentally, an intellectual crisis. The museum is charged with disseminating racist and imperialist propaganda. Even if that broad-brush indictment may be countered, relativised or put into historical context, more insidious questions must still be addressed. Can we (Europeans, let us say) grasp the world view, the rituals, the customs, the arts of people with whom, it may seem, we have little in common, and who have reason to suspect us of racism, or at least condescension? Can we, should we, translate their ideas into our own terms? Some argue that the very act of observing and classifying others is a power play. If that is so, it may be impossible, in good faith, to undertake ethnographic research. But would you accept a stranger's self-representation on trust? After all, how many English people are able to provide reliable information on their country's history, literature, arts or religions?

Then there is the most challenging question of all. What is the Museum of Other People about? *What is it a museum of?* In 1988, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London commissioned six posters that advertised the V&A as: "An ace caff, with quite a nice museum attached." One poster asked: "Where else do they give you £100,000,000 worth of *objets d'art* free with every egg salad?" What slogan might be blazoned on a poster to advertise the Museum of Other People in the twenty-first century? (Under a different name, it goes without saying.)

INVENTING THE MUSEUM OF OTHER PEOPLE

On 10 October 1789, the revolutionary French government seized the properties of the Church. In March 1792 the estates and goods of noble émigrés were confiscated. In October 1793 the republic claimed the belongings of people who had been guillotined, among them King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette.

Church buildings, grand houses, parks, farmlands and forests were now at the disposal of the state. The authorities also found themselves in possession of sprawling assemblages of manuscripts, holy relics, jewellery, works of art, weapons, and zoological and botanical specimens. Some precious objects were sold off, but there was a high-minded view that the great collections should be accessible to everyone. The royal gardens were opened to the public together with the collection of natural curiosities, which became the National Museum of Natural History. The royal library became the National Library. In 1793, the Palace of the Louvre became a public museum of art and classical antiquities. ("The museum is not supposed to be a vain assemblage of frivolous luxury objects," Jacques-Louis David, the leading French painter of his generation, and a close ally of Robespierre, advised the National Assembly. "What it must be is an imposing school.")¹

Putting things right was not always so straightforward, to be fixed by a change of name. A particularly intractable problem was posed by the French king's *Cabinet des médailles*, which was deposited in the royal library. A relic of the medieval treasury,

it was originally a repository of antique and foreign coins, precious stones, and assorted seals and engravings.² By the time the royal library was transferred from Versailles to Paris in 1724, the *cabinet* functioned as a sort of royal attic, crammed to overflowing with a jumble of ancient and exotic artefacts.

In 1795, the committee of public instruction of the revolutionary National Assembly dispatched one of its members, a radical bishop, Villar de la Mayenne, to advise on the reorganisation of the royal library. He reported that the attic of the library was stuffed with idols, vases, busts and ancient lamps. Other antiquities and exotic objects were packed into an obscure and humid room on the ground floor.

In 1800, an audit was ordered. This recorded that the *cabinet* held over 6,000 Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, Gallic, Indian, Chinese and Peruvian items, including sculptures, vases, hieroglyphic inscriptions, furniture, surgical instruments and weapons. The audit classified items according to the materials used in their manufacture (marble, silver, bronze, stone, etc.), and then by region of origin; but the principles guiding the classification were not made explicit.³ Nor is it easy to reconstruct the logic behind the acquisitions. For example, in 1776, the royal library procured from Russia two calendars inscribed on wooden boards; an iron harness from Siberia; representations of deities from Siberia and Mongolia; and a Chinese balance. There were also unsolicited, sometimes idiosyncratic gifts from naval officers and travelling scientists. So in 1779, Joseph Dombey, an adventurous French botanist, donated a striking if miscellaneous assemblage of objects from Peru, including gold and silver ornaments and statuettes; vases made in "unusual, even bizarre" shapes; an ornamental wooden staff; and a superb embroidered poncho.⁴ (The following year, Dombey dispatched botanical specimens from Peru to France. The ship on which they were transported was intercepted by a British vessel and the collection transferred to the British Museum.)

Villar de la Mayenne reported that the *Cabinet des médailles* was swamped, and yet more and more treasures were

being brought in. Holy relics, sculptures and paintings were removed from churches. The cabinets of curiosities of nobles who fled the country or perished on the scaffold were confiscated. Revolutionary armies brought back spoils from sorties abroad, notably masterpieces of art from Belgium and Italy but also such specialist collections as the papal archive and the trove of orientalist manuscripts and maps assembled by the Stadtholder of the Netherlands. What was to be done with all these treasures?

In 1803, the secretary of the short-lived Société des Observateurs de l'Homme, Louis-François Jauffret, published a brief plan for an "anthropological museum." It would collect skulls and skeletons to allow the "naturalistic" study of humanity, and display "products made by savages" in order to promote an understanding "of the customs and usages of ancient and modern peoples."⁵ Nobody took him up on it.

Choice carvings and sculptures might be acceptable to the Louvre. Anatomical, geological, zoological and botanical specimens could be passed on to the new National Museum of Natural History. But what was to be done with all those antiques and curios crammed into the attic of the National Library? Villar de la Mayenne proposed that a museum of antiquities be set up in one of the mansions recently confiscated from fleeing aristocrats.

The head of the library and curator of the *Cabinet des médailles*, André Barthélemy de Courcay, began to make arrangements for this museum of antiquities, which, he announced, would document "the customs and practices of peoples distanced by time and space" ("*les mœurs et des usages des peuples éloignés par les temps et par les lieux*").⁶ Pressed for space, the Museum of Natural History promptly offered unwanted "artificial curiosities" to Barthélemy. An employee of the *Cabinet des médailles* went through boxes of odds and ends in the museum and recovered "idols worshipped by savages, and weapons and furniture used by them . . . I also brought away a mummy, some Egyptian antiquities, and a mummified head"⁷

In October 1799, Barthélemy died suddenly of a stroke, surrounded by unopened boxes of curiosities. Without his commitment, the prospect of a museum of antiquities faded from view. And yet still more stuff was coming in. Napoleon's expeditionary force in Egypt sent boatloads of antiquities to France. Scientific and naval expeditions in Oceania, South America and the Far East brought home not just maps and ocean charts, and plants and seeds, but also antiquities, jewellery, weapons and miscellaneous arts and crafts. If these were not accepted by the Louvre, or offloaded on the *Cabinet des médailles*, they might be sold at auction. Napoleon's wife, the Empress Josephine, commandeered some particularly desirable pieces for her swanky new home, the Malmaison.

Every now and then a particularly significant cargo arrived, and concentrated minds. Typically, the Ministry of Public Instruction would appoint a commission to work out what should be done with it. In 1818, the French consul in Cairo offered a substantial but rather random collection of Egyptian objects. The ministry duly set up a commission. It advised that antiquities should be acquired for the Louvre. Plants, animals, and human skeletons and skulls should go to the Museum of Natural History. "As for the diverse objects, brought from Egypt, Nubia and Abyssinia, to wit: musical instruments, tools, arms and armour, clothes, cooking implements, vases and domestic objects, there is no establishment designed for their reception." The commission recommended that the authorities fund "a *special collection*, devoted to this third type of object."⁸ In the event, the consul's collection was auctioned off. However, the secretary of the commission, Edme-François Jomard, would devote the rest of his life to the establishment of this *special collection*.

An engineer and cartographer, Jomard was one of the savants who travelled to Egypt with Napoleon's army. Later he coordinated the encyclopaedic official report on the country. In 1828, he was appointed curator of the *Cabinet des médailles* and charged with the organisation of a *dépôt de géographie* which would assemble "various objects and instruments yielded by

scientific voyages.”⁹ From now on he was a man on a mission. He would create a museum dedicated to “this third type of object.” And the timing was auspicious, Jomard noted. France was undertaking military operations in Algeria. “Science as well as commerce should profit . . . No doubt, objects would be collected from tribes in the interior . . . including much of interest in relation to the customs and traditions of the Berbers and other peoples of the Atlas, such as arms, vases, and instruments of various kinds.”¹⁰

Like Barthélemy before him, Jomard planned to exhibit ethnographic and ancient artefacts side by side. The royal library possessed a Nubian lyre with five strings and a sound board made from a turtle shell. Studying it, Jomard had an epiphany. “*Voilà*, I said to myself, the lyre of Mercury, found far from the lands of Greek mythology. And so I began a collection, whose utility for the study of man and his diverse races I sensed at once.”¹¹ This collection of ancient and exotic “instruments, weapons and costumes . . . would give an idea of the customs and usages or the degree of civilisation of peoples.”¹²

But almost immediately Jomard had competition. The Bourbons were back on the French throne. In 1827, King Charles X ordered the establishment of a naval museum (*Musée de la Marine*) within the Louvre. The museum would be mostly about ships, sea battles, ocean charts and so on, but it also took in naval exploration, and so it would exhibit “ethnographic” materials collected by the French navy in faraway ports. Admiral Dumont d’Urville presented more than a hundred objects from Oceania.¹³ Royal collections and other national depositaries handed over specimens that seemed suitable, including vases from Chile, snowshoes from Canada, a Hawaiian helmet and a magnificent Sioux costume. The king had high hopes for the new museum. He named it for his son, the dauphin. There seemed little chance that Jomard would get his hands on its ethnographic specimens.

In 1828, a remarkable collection of religious materials from India was offered to the French state. Several museums put

in bids. The ministry duly set up a blue-ribbon commission, including both the great naturalist Georges Cuvier and Jomard. It recommended that:

1. An ethnographic collection should be established in Paris to illustrate the history of "*l'homme physique et l'homme moral*," the physical man and the moral man.
2. This depositary should be placed within the Royal Library.
3. "Objects of a kind appropriate to this collection that are presently dispersed in various public establishments in Paris . . . should be brought to the Royal Library."¹⁴

Jomard must have been encouraged, but the Louvre was unimpressed. Ministerial budgets were tight. And then, in 1830, there was a political crisis. The Bourbons were driven out. The new citizen king, Louis Philippe, had other things on his mind. Nobody had time to spare for Jomard's project.

Before there were ethnographic museums, they could be imagined. In 1831 Jomard published one of the first—perhaps the very first—coherent plan for the identification, classification and arrangement of "ethnographic" objects.¹⁵ The Baron de Férussac, a veteran of Napoleon's campaigns, and the director of the naval museum in the Louvre, reprimanded Jomard for wanting to poach its ethnographic collection.¹⁶ A distinguished naturalist accused him of trying to expand and glorify his niche in the *Cabinet des médailles*.¹⁷ But rising above these local jealousies, Jomard made a coherent, considered argument. His essay initiated a debate that would resonate throughout the nineteenth century.

Even the most isolated societies were adopting European languages, customs and techniques, Jomard began. It was therefore urgently necessary to collect artefacts that bore witness to their unspoilt aboriginal condition. Such a collection would serve both philosophical and practical purposes. France was

expanding its trade with faraway countries and acquiring tropical colonies: French traders and officials should learn more about those remote lands. Finally, the clincher. There were substantial ethnographic collections in St. Petersburg, Berlin, London and even in the capital cities of small Scandinavian countries. Surely Paris, which Jomard called "the capital of civilisation," should have its very own museum of ethnography?¹⁸

Jomard's central claim was that this "third type of object," these "ethnographic" artefacts, were indeed distinctive. Although often fashioned from natural materials, they were not "natural," and so they did not belong in a museum of natural history. Nor were they antiquities. After all, they were still being made. No more were they works of art. Any aesthetic qualities were incidental. Ethnographic objects were rather to be regarded as tools or instruments (although Jomard did note that even useless fripperies might help philosophers to understand the "moral man"). The conclusion was evident. Ethnographic objects belonged in a museum of ethnography.

As to what objects should be selected, that "depends on the specification of the goal," Jomard wrote. "This goal is essentially *scientific*: it concerns, principally, coming to know, in a precise and positive manner, the degree of civilisation of peoples who have made little progress at the social level."¹⁹ A "philosophical observer" who made a study of the artefacts of such peoples could not fail to be impressed by the progress of humanity.²⁰

And how were these ethnographic objects to be ordered and displayed? It was here that Jomard made his most influential contribution. In the early nineteenth century, the orthodox taxonomic system in the natural sciences was still that of Carl Linnaeus, but Georges Cuvier, the most celebrated natural scientist in France, argued that what mattered most was not form, or presumed family relationships (genus, species, variety), as in the system of Linnaeus, but rather function. Indeed, Cuvier argued that function determined form.²¹ A professor in the Museum of Natural History, he had reordered the museum's collections of animal skeletons, paying particular attention to

the function of organs, and to what he termed the correlation of parts.²²

Cuvier, a weighty figure in scientific circles, was a supporter of anthropology and ethnology. Jomard served alongside him on official committees, including the commission in 1828 that recommended the establishment of a museum of ethnography. In 1830, Cuvier took on a more orthodox naturalist, Geoffroy St. Hilaire, in a historic debate about scientific taxonomies.²³ Jomard's brochure appeared a few months later. It applied Cuvier's method to the classification and comparison of ethnographic materials. Function was the key.

All human beings share certain common needs, Jomard began. Even "savages" make tools that help them to satisfy these needs (for food, shelter, defence and so on). At a more advanced stage, the arts, sciences and religion develop. Objects of the same "genre," which perform similar functions, should be placed together. So, for instance, Jomard proposed to exhibit weapons from around the world—antique or ethnographic—in a single display, arranged in a series from "primitive" to "civilised." And there would be virtually no limit to the geographical range of the collection. "With the exception of civilised Europe, practically the whole of the inhabited globe furnished suitable materials."²⁴ So there, in plain sight, was the Other: the whole world beyond "civilised Europe."

Jomard's brochure caught the attention of Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold, a medical doctor, cosmopolitan adventurer, and dealer in oriental antiquities who had plans for an ethnographic museum in the university city of Leiden in the Netherlands. Born in the bishopric of Würzburg in 1796, Siebold was twenty years younger than Jomard.²⁵ He came from a family of doctors and duly qualified in medicine, but his ambition was to become a traveller and scientist like his hero, Alexander von Humboldt. He made a promising start. Recruited to serve as a doctor with the Dutch military in the East Indies, he was immediately promoted by an officer who had been treated

for a gunshot wound by Siebold's grandfather. Soon the young Siebold was a colonel.²⁶

After the fall of Napoleon, the Dutch East India Company retained a precarious foothold in Batavia, its headquarters in the Far East, and managed to hang on to a potentially valuable base in Dejima, an artificial island at Nagasaki that was the only site of direct trade between Japan and the outside world during the Edo period. In 1822, Siebold was sent out to Indonesia as a military surgeon. He made a good impression on the Dutch governor-general and was dispatched to Dejima with the expectation that he would practise medicine while dabbling on the side as a commercial agent and collector. Conveniently, he was permitted to give instruction in medicine in Nagasaki, so he was able to develop a wide acquaintance with local scientists, and he set up house with a Japanese woman. (Their daughter, Kusumoto Ine, became the first female doctor in Japan qualified in Western medicine, and she was appointed a physician to the Japanese court. Her story has inspired plays, musicals, TV dramas and a novel by a famous Japanese author, Akira Yoshimura.)²⁷

Siebold did not master the Japanese language: he explained that the "perverted pronunciation is impossible for a European in so short a time."²⁸ However, he collected flora, fauna, scientific instruments and arts and crafts, apparently all part of his intelligence gathering on behalf of the Dutch East India government.²⁹ Then he went too far. Permitted to visit Edo (the modern Tokyo), he acquired maps of Japan. This led to his detention on a charge of espionage, house arrest and expulsion from the country. In retribution, Dutch trade with Japan was halved for a time, but Siebold was treated leniently by the Dutch authorities. In 1830, he returned to Europe with a remarkable haul of paintings, books, and botanical and ethnographic specimens. He began at once to compile and publish extensive though prolix and poorly organised reports on Japan.³⁰ (His model was Humboldt's volumes on Mexico and Cuba.)³¹ And he now began a sustained push to market his materials.

When Napoleon occupied the Netherlands, the Dutch Stadtholder, William V, fled to England. His natural history cabinet was seized, packed into 150 chests, and taken to France, together with a large portion of his magnificent hoard of oriental manuscripts and treasures.³² Following Bonaparte's defeat in 1813, the Stadtholder's son, William, Prince of Orange, returned as the first king of the United Netherlands, bringing with him collections that his father had managed to take with him into his exile. Under pressure from the Duke of Wellington, who was instrumental in the defeat of Napoleon, the Louvre returned choice items that had been seized by Napoleon's agents. In 1816, King William established the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (*Het Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden*). In 1821 it was moved to the restored Mauritshuis in the Hague, alongside the royal art collection. A year later it opened for public viewing.

Reinier Pieter van de Kastele, a minister of the Dutch Reformed church, was put in charge of the cabinet of rarities. Confronted with the task of putting this very mixed bag in order, he wrote, rather desperately, to a colleague, that: "now, like when one moves house, things are pulled out of the sacks and not yet placed in order in the new house."³³ Yet the king was soon busily making further acquisitions: "rarities, antiquities, products of nature, art and taste," according to Kastele.

Kastele had studied geography and ethnography in Halle, in Germany, and he noted that the collection represented "the morals, habits and religions of all extant peoples since the Middle Ages and those of the Fatherland."³⁴ Given Holland's historical investment in the Far East, the Orientalist selection was particularly rich. The king now commissioned further purchases of Chinese and Japanese materials by agents of the Dutch East India Company operating out of Dejima.

In 1831, the king bought a large selection of books and artefacts from Siebold. While the king would remain his most important client, Siebold sold choice items from time to time to collectors in Russia and Germany, much to the irritation of the Dutch authorities. Nevertheless, he was not content simply

to be a dealer. He had scientific pretensions. And he hoped to direct a new museum in Leiden that would bring together the king's Japanese collections and his own. Meanwhile, he opened his personal stock of East Asian materials to visitors to his home.

In 1834, Siebold circulated a prospectus for an ethnographic museum that would display objects from certain countries beyond Europe, in particular from Dutch colonies and trading partners in the East.³⁵ Setting out his stall, he proclaimed that "Humanity in its many-sided development in foreign climes is therefore *the main subject matter* of an ethnographic museum." Drawing on contemporary German geographical discourse, he distinguished the study of "lands and peoples" from environmental studies, which were a topic for natural history.

But Siebold was not concerned solely with science. "The purpose of an ethnographic museum is the expansion of knowledge of lands and people in general . . . such a development of geographical knowledge would be without question of the greatest utility for a country that depends on trade and seafaring."³⁶ His museum would showcase "commercial trade products" of little-known faraway countries, selecting those that would be "beneficial to the economist, the artist, the manufacturer and the master builder alike." Prehistoric artefacts were excluded. Siebold declared that they belonged in a different kind of museum: a museum of antiquities, or a natural history museum.³⁷

In 1838, Siebold finalised a large sale of his Japanese materials to the Dutch king. He continued to lobby for a publicly funded museum under his leadership, but vacillated between the project for a museum of Japan and vaguer plans for a more broadly conceived ethnographic museum.

In 1843, Siebold visited Jomard in Paris. He then published a pamphlet on the subject of museums of ethnography. Formally addressed to Jomard, it should be read in the context of his long-running campaign for a museum in Leiden. Siebold took up Jomard's suggestions critically, but courteously, and at some

length.³⁸ On what was perhaps the crucial issue, he agreed that there was a pressing need for ethnographic museums, in order to inform colonial officers, missionaries and traders about the character of a particular population with which they had dealings. Indeed, Siebold's pamphlet was entitled: "on the utility of ethnographic museums and the importance of their creation in European states that possess colonies or which maintain commercial relations with other parts of the world."

Ethnographic museums would also serve a more philosophical purpose. Scholars generally neglected the civilisations of East Asia and the Americas, wrote Siebold. However, he had himself lived for many years in Japan, which, he judged, represented "the summit of Far Eastern civilisations." He noted that Jomard was well acquainted with Egypt, a country once highly civilised, though now occupied by "barbarous tribes." Both he and Jomard had accordingly developed a sympathetic appreciation of very different civilisations.³⁹ But Europeans were apt to neglect less spectacularly endowed societies. "Other non-European peoples were almost forgotten," Siebold noted, "and the epithet 'savages,' vulgarly applied to them, was sufficient in itself to put off the learned world." Cabinets of "curiosities" or "rarities" included weapons, costumes, sacred objects and utensils of "savage peoples," but the "most hideous examples were specially chosen, in order to certify the bizarre character and the inhumanity of their customs, and when it came to their religious and moral institutions, or their principles of government and administration, interest was shown only in pagan edifices and despotic maxims."⁴⁰

Yet while Siebold agreed with Jomard that the time had come for dedicated museums of ethnography, the two men had very different ideas about how ethnographic collections should be classified and displayed.⁴¹ Jomard advocated a "functional" classification, on the model of Cuvier. Siebold took the view that a museum of ethnography should focus on objects made within particular geographical regions. He recognised that similar artefacts might well turn up in very different locations,

but he assumed that this was because they had been borrowed. For example, the zodiac of the Chinese, or so it seemed, had been found among the Aztecs. (When Siebold showed Japanese colleagues Humboldt's illustrations of Aztec "zodiacs" they immediately recognised the similarities.)⁴²

Summing up, Siebold wrote to Jomard:

You and I elect different systems for the classification of ethnographic objects. Yours facilitates comparison by bringing together objects of the same nature, that serve the same purpose, as they exist among different peoples; mine, on the contrary, is ordered geographically, and brings together the productions of one and the same nation . . . One room in my collection shows the richness and high perfection of Japanese technology; another room, dedicated to the peoples of New Guinea, reveals the poverty and imperfection of the utensils, clothes and other objects that are indispensable even among the most savage of men.⁴³

Siebold remarked that when he visited Jomard's collection he saw some Japanese bronze mirrors. Jomard put them together with ancient Roman mirrors. In his own museum, Siebold set Japanese mirrors within a broader display of Japanese luxuries. Perhaps, Siebold suggested, he and Jomard were practising different sciences. "One might call the juxtaposition of objects of the same nature among different peoples the ethnological method," Siebold wrote, "while the practical study of peoples taken separately is the ethnographic method, and I think it should be preferred."⁴⁴

In February 1848, Siebold was at last informed by the minister of the interior that the Dutch king planned to unite the royal collections of Japanese and ethnographic artefacts with Siebold's collections in Leiden. Siebold was to be the director of the new museum. As part of the deal, Siebold agreed to sell all his materials to the state, although he continued to deal in

Japanese artefacts, despite the objections of the responsible Dutch bureaucrats.⁴⁵

In the 1850s, responding to American and British pressure, Japan relaxed its restrictions on foreigners. Siebold was permitted to return to the country in 1859. He remained for three years and accumulated another large collection. In the meantime, back in Holland, Conradus Leemans, director of the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, took custody of Siebold's Japan museum. In 1864 it became the basis for a national museum of ethnography under Leemans's leadership.

Thwarted in his ambition to establish a public museum under his own direction, Siebold offered his new collection to the Dutch authorities. They balked at the asking price. He then sent catalogues to leading European museums and bustled about trying to promote commercial exchanges with Japan, which was now at last opening up to foreign trade.

The French novelist Alphonse Daudet, who had a position in the court of Napoleon III, and who Siebold briefly employed as a secretary, published an ironic account of a visit to Paris in 1866 by "M. Le Colonel de Sieboldt," a grand old man with a long white beard, "firm and upright despite his seventy-two years," who was accompanied "by a young demoiselle from Munich whom he presented as his niece." (According to Rudolf Effert, Siebold was accompanied only by his youngest son, who had long blonde hair. It seems that Daudet was playing games with the reader.) Siebold's purpose was to interest the emperor in an international business consortium that would invest in Japan. Daudet had some fun with that:

Poor old Sieboldt! I still see him on his way to the Tuileries, his medals pinned to his chest, in his fine colonel's dress uniform. He returned in triumph that evening: Napoléon III had received him, heard him out for five minutes, and sent him on his way with his favourite phrase: "I will see . . . I will reflect" . . . I had the greatest difficulty to make him understand that His Majesty might take quite a while for

reflection, and that he would be well advised to return to Munich, where the legislature was at that very moment voting funds to buy his vast collection.⁴⁶

A few months later Siebold, caught up in the Prussian invasion of Bavaria, died suddenly of a stroke. The Bavarian authorities did buy a large haul of Japanese materials from Siebold's estate, but Maximilian Buchner, who became director of the Munich Ethnographic Museum in 1887, described it as "the collection of a natural-history researcher, who was far from artistically inclined, and who tried to substitute in quantity what it lacked in value and quality."⁴⁷

Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, the director of the newly established Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities in Copenhagen, was in correspondence with Jomard and Siebold, and he visited them both in 1841 and 1842. The three men were fellow pioneers in the still novel field of ethnographic and archaeological museums, but they had very different ideas about what these museums should collect and how collections should be arranged. Like Siebold, Thomsen preferred to show ordinary and common objects, "used by the entire people." He hid away his museum's holdings of "unusual and rare" curiosities.⁴⁸ On the other hand, he agreed with Jomard that the ideal museum of antiquities should illustrate "the gradual development of humanity."⁴⁹ Accordingly, he did his best to order archaeological and ethnographic specimens in a chronological series.

Thomsen was the eldest of six sons of Christian Thomsen, merchant, shipowner and one of the first five directors of the National Bank of Denmark, which was founded in 1818. After his father's death, he ran the family firm for a decade before selling it in order to devote himself to the development of a national collection of ancient Nordic artefacts.⁵⁰ This was a patriotic cause. Although Denmark had done its best to stay on the sidelines during the Napoleonic wars, the British authorities suspected that the country was being drawn into an alliance with France

and Russia against Britain. In 1801, Royal Navy ships entered the Sound and destroyed the Danish fleet in Copenhagen harbour. In 1807, British forces occupied Zealand, imposed a naval blockade and bombarded Copenhagen, laying waste to large parts of the city.

In reaction, there was a surge of patriotic interest in the ancient world of the sagas. Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger's epic poem, published in 1802, "The Golden Horns," became a popular sensation. Its occasion was the theft from the royal *Kunstammer* of two golden prehistoric drinking horns which had been discovered in Jutland in the seventeenth century. (Thomsen attempted to discover the thieves. The horns themselves were soon found, but they had been melted down.)⁵¹ Oehlenschläger represented the horns as gifts from the Nordic gods, and lamented that modern Danes had shown that they were too materialistic to appreciate their true value.

But romantic antiquarians were confronted by sceptical historians. There was a culture war in progress, a struggle for the past. The new German critical historical scholarship was devoted to documentary research. It was conceded that there was an age before writing, but this had no place in history, certainly not in historical scholarship. A critical historian, August Ludwig Schlözer, wrote in 1772: "I am allowed to separate all history from the beginning of the world to the beginning of Rome—or rather the poor leftovers of it—from the rest of world history, and to call it prehistory (*Vorgeschichte*)."

Schlözer, who spent many years in Sweden, judged that there could be no northern history before the ninth century, when Scandinavia became Christian. There could be no "internal history" because there was no writing. And there could be no "external history" because there were no contacts with the civilised, literate, Christian south of Europe.⁵² A professor at the University of Copenhagen, Christian Molbech, who founded the Danish Historical Association in 1839, insisted on the need to "separate the absolute historical night" of prehistoric times from real history. Prehistory "can be the object of mythical poetry

or of speculation in natural philosophy, but never of historical knowledge.”⁵³ Odin, the wise, one-eyed Norse god, was a legend, not a real person.

The sagas mixed myths and legends together with what were perhaps historical episodes, but the austere new doctrine seemed to leave no place for scholarly research on ancient Nordic times. However, a few enthusiasts began to collect relics of those ancient days, not just runic inscriptions but also stone implements. These were not “thunderstones” that dropped from the sky, as folklore had it: they were the work of Nordic craftsmen.⁵⁴ What insights might these artefacts give into pagan Scandinavia?

In 1806, Rasmus Nyerup, the librarian at the University of Copenhagen, published a book urging the protection of monuments and the establishment of a national collection of antiquities. A Royal Commission for the Preservation and Collection of Antiquities was established in 1807, with Nyerup as secretary. It soon put together a substantial collection.

Thomsen was brought in as Nyerup’s deputy. In 1816 he was invited to help catalogue the commission’s collection of antiquities and to arrange for its exhibition. He was just twenty-seven years old, and with a commercial rather than an academic education. A snuffy Copenhagen professor remarked that he was “only a dilettante” but, he conceded, “a dilettante with many qualifications.” His business training was certainly an asset. He introduced budgetary controls, created a register of acquisitions, and instituted an energetic programme of acquisition.⁵⁵

In 1819, Thomsen supervised the opening of the grandly named Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities. Popular with visitors, the museum attracted donations. Within a few years its display cabinets were overflowing. Thomsen began at once to develop a system of classification. This was based, first, on the materials used to make artefacts, and then by function. In 1820, an English visitor to the museum noted: “the collection of heathen antiquities is the most complete: in one cabinet are only things of stone, in relation to religious matters . . . In another cabinet

are only stone weapons. . . . After this follows in a third cabinet antiquities of metal, in relation to religious worship (idols, sacrificial vessels, etc.) and in a fourth cabinet are weapons and tools of metal.”⁵⁶ When the collection was moved to Christiansborg Castle in 1832, Thomsen arranged it into Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age sections. This came to be known as the “Three Age System.”⁵⁷ In 1837, the Royal Society for Ancient Nordic Texts put together a collective volume, *Guideline to Knowledge of Nordic Antiquity*. Thomsen contributed an essay setting out the Three Age System. This was immediately translated into German. An English translation followed in 1848.⁵⁸

Thomsen’s model was not entirely original. It might even be traced back to the long poem, *De Rerum Natura*, written in the first century BCE by Lucretius, which contrasted stone, bronze and iron decorations and weapons. This text was familiar to classically educated people. In 1813, a colleague of Thomsen on the Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, Vedel Simonsen, suggested that it might be applicable to the commission’s collection.⁵⁹ But it was Thomsen who demonstrated that the model worked. It imposed a coherent chronological narrative on his museum’s large and variegated holdings.

Thomsen nevertheless recognised that the boundaries between the three stages were far from watertight. “Bronze and stone artefacts had continued to be made in the Iron Age, just as stone tools had been used in the Bronze Age,” writes Bo Gräslund, a Swedish archaeologist. “The challenge was therefore to distinguish bronze tools made during the Iron Age from those made during the Bronze Age and to differentiate which stone tools had been made in each period. There was also the problem of assigning objects made of gold, silver, glass and other substances to each period.”⁶⁰ Within these three periods, Thomsen arranged artefacts into functional categories (tools, weapons, cooking implements, jewellery, cult objects, and so on), and then by shape and decoration, which were also a guide to periods, giving clues, for example, as to which objects made of stone were actually associated with Bronze Age objects.

In 1825, Thomsen wrote to a German colleague: "It appears clear to us, that in an early period the whole of the northern part of Europe: Scandinavia, most of Germany, France and England, was occupied by very primitive peoples, who all resembled one another a great deal." And, he added, "It is certain that they resembled the savages of North America in many respects."⁶¹ Perhaps, then, exotic "ethnographic objects" should be exhibited alongside Nordic relics of the Stone Age.

Crammed initially into an attic in the university library, the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities was moved to the more glamorous royal castle Christiansborg in 1832. In 1839, Thomsen was given control of the ethnographic collections in the Danish royal *Kunstkammer*. Between 1845 and 1847 a corvette, the *Galathea*, sponsored by King Christian VIII, travelled to India, China, Tahiti and South America with five researchers on board. It returned with a large haul of zoological, botanical and also ethnographic materials to add to Thomsen's collection. When, in 1849, the museum reopened as the "Royal Ethnographic Museum" in forty-four rooms in the Prinsens Palace, neighbouring Christiansborg, exotic ethnographic items were exhibited together with archaeological finds from Europe.

Thomsen's one-time assistant, Jens Worsaae, was appointed to the first chair in archaeology at the University of Copenhagen in 1855. He conducted excavations in Scandinavia and in Viking settlements in England and Scotland and confirmed that the Three Age System could be applied to archaeological sites throughout northern Europe. He also launched a devastating critique of antiquarians who treated the Nordic sagas as historical sources.⁶²

The Danish king was delighted when Worsaae showed him that some allegedly runic inscriptions were in fact natural fault-lines in the stones. Worsaae recalled:

After a while the King said "I both thank and congratulate you. From now on, nobody will be able to make me believe that there is even a single runic letter at Runamo. I would

never previously have thought it credible that it was so clear a product of nature." At this he began to laugh so strongly that in the end he clutched his stomach, repeating "oh these academics" and . . . "This is definitely an unmatched story."⁶³

The Three Age System was quickly adopted by Scandinavian scholars. Worsaae was by now a firm favourite of the Danish king, who sponsored his visit to the British Isles in 1846–7. In London he met prominent British antiquarians, and was not impressed. "The British Museum is an utter shambles!" There was not even a room dedicated to British antiquities. Worse still, "there was absolutely nothing in the way of a generally accepted archaeological system. [The curators were] utter dilettantes, who had no concept of the chronological sequence of the monuments and antiquities . . . I think I can state without being immodest my trip was a sort of archaeological Viking raid, which served . . . to establish the foundations of the Danish system's influence on the British Isles."⁶⁴

In fact, as Peter Rowley-Conwy has shown, British antiquarians were by no means persuaded that the Three Age System was an improvement on their established, if imprecise, notions of a "Celtic" past. They took the Danish model more seriously after the shock discovery of Stone Age implements and human remains in Brixham cave in Devon in 1858, and the publication in 1865 of John Lubbock's *Pre-Historic Times*. But while Lubbock endorsed the Three Age System, he set it within a broader framework, a more ambitious, "evolutionist" way of thinking that made the Copenhagen approach seem rather limited and old-fashioned.

Neither Thomsen nor Worsaae took on board the vast time-scale of life on earth that was being revealed by geology. Nor did they challenge the orthodox theological view that the world had been created very quickly, complete with human beings, no more than about 6,000 years ago. Thomsen was also uncertain about how to date the end of the Stone Age. In common with other scholars at the time, he fell back on "legends about Odin as

the 'creator' of the Nordic metal technology in the last century before the birth of Christ."⁶⁵

Yet the Nordic antiquarians were on to something. "By ironic coincidence," explains a distinguished archaeologist, Bruce Trigger, "Scandinavia, Scotland, and Switzerland had all been covered by glaciers during the Würm glaciation and to this day have produced little evidence of human habitation prior to the Holocene epoch. [The Holocene is the current geological epoch. It began about 11,600 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age.] Hence the absolute chronology imagined by the Scandinavians, Scots, and Swiss for their finds was not significantly out of line with reality as we currently understand it."⁶⁶

Jomard proposed a museum that would illustrate the progress of civilisation from its distant savage origins. (Thomsen's three-stage model was one version of this paradigm.) Following Humboldt, Sieboldt advocated a geographical arrangement of cultural traditions. Until the second half of the twentieth century, any Museum of Other People would adopt one of these two models: "evolutionist," or alternatively "cultural" or geographical. From time to time, there would be flip-flops from one model to the other. After Thomsen's death in 1865, Worsaae became director of the Copenhagen museum. He abandoned Thomsen's system and rearranged the exhibits on a geographical plan.

CIVILISED AND UNCIVILISED: THE BRITISH MUSEUM AND THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

Almost as if designed to illustrate some stereotype of contrasting national cultures, the post-revolutionary museums in Paris were rationalist and modernist, but susceptible to shifts in ideological fashion. The British Museum was economical, classicist, stuck in its ways. The French naturalist Georges Cuvier visited in 1818 and remarked: "we saw very nice things in Natural History, especially amongst the fossils. Their collections, however, are not to be compared with ours . . . they don't even know the value of their treasures. In general, the scientific institutions are nearly zero in Great Britain; the government is just interested in the art of earning money . . . All is a question of money."¹

Unlike other great European museums, the British Museum did not grow out of a royal collection. It was created by parliament to house the vast but idiosyncratic collection of a self-made man, Sir Hans Sloane. An Irish apothecary, Sloane became a London society doctor, served as president of the Royal College of Physicians and succeeded Isaac Newton as president of the Royal Society. In 1712 he bought Chelsea Manor, a grand house in London. (Once a residence of Henry VIII, it occupied what is now Cheyne Walk.) In 1716, he was made a baronet. In the 1720s, "his private fortune grew and he became a gentleman of singular public standing," writes his biographer, James Delbourgo.² He died in 1753, at the age of ninety-three. In his will he arranged for his collections to be sold to the nation (he claimed that he only demanded a quarter of their real value), but stipulated that they should be open to the public. Parliament lent its support, and in 1753

George II gave royal assent to the British Museum Act. The purchase was financed by a public lottery. ("Even by the gamble-happy standards of the eighteenth century," Delbourgo remarks, "the British Museum lottery was widely seen as scandalous.")³

Sloane published little, and what he wrote did not impress the experts. "No article Sloane published better exemplified his enthusiastic curiosity-mongering—and its sometimes rocky reception—than the four-part illustrated essay that described what he called a 'China Cabinet,'" Delbourgo writes. Presented to the Royal Society by a surgeon with the East India Company, this China cabinet included rustproof razors, brass and steel knives, bezoar stones, tweezers, combs, ink and paper and assorted anatomical specimens. In Sloane's view, "the most unusual instruments that came over in this cabinet were those contrived for the taking any substance out of the ears, or for scratching or tickling them, which the Chinese do account one of the greatest pleasures." A Chinese figurine was included, "using one of these instruments, and expressing great satisfaction therein"; but, as a good doctor, Sloane warned about the "misfortunes" that follow from people "picking their ears too much."⁴

Almost as a parody of Sloane's collection of curiosities, one of his former servants, James Salter, set up "Don Saltero's Coffee House," where he exhibited, according to one visitor, "all manner of exotic beasts, such as crocodiles and turtles, as well as Indian and other strange costumes and weapons."⁵ But distinguished guests up to and including the Prince of Wales accepted invitations to Chelsea Manor to view Sloane's cabinets. "These remarkable collections, perhaps the largest assembled by a single individual in the eighteenth century, Sloane assembled using the substantial sums he earned as a society physician, income from Jamaican slave plantations, rent collected on land in London and salaries from public offices," Delbourgo writes.⁶ Sloane did very little first-hand collecting; Delbourgo describes him as "a collector of collectors."⁷ He was ideally situated: his "prominence at the heart of London life placed him at the centre

of Britain's empire. This was an empire of peoples and goods and . . . an empire of curiosities."⁸

Despite his exalted connections in the Royal Society, Sloane's collection was more like an old-fashioned cabinet of curiosities than a nineteenth-century museum. He hired learned assistants to see to the cataloguing, but there was no master plan, no scientific classification. There were odd juxtapositions. For instance, the collection of musical instruments included smoking pipes. As Delbourgo remarks, there was a "recurrent drift towards miscellaneousness."⁹

H. J. Braunholtz, appointed keeper of the British Museum's department of ethnography when it was created in 1946, noted that Sloane's exotica included "miscellaneous items such as shoes, tobacco pipes, bows and arrows, &c., from India, Persia, China, Japan Turkey, and Russia. It is not always clear whether the unlocalised objects described as 'Indian' are from India proper or America . . ." In fact, "a drum from Virginia which, though described by Sloane as 'Indian,' is characteristic of recent Ashanti work in the Gold Coast, and was almost certainly introduced or made by a slave from West Africa."¹⁰

Braunholtz lamented that the growth of the museum's ethnographic collection was "spasmodic and fortuitous, depending mainly on the chance 'curiosities' brought home by travellers and explorers."¹¹ Much of the early collecting was orchestrated by Sir Joseph Banks. President of the Royal Society, a trustee of the British Museum and informal director of Kew Gardens, Banks sailed on Captain Cook's famous first voyage (1768–71). He arranged for the transfer of the Royal Society's "artificial curiosities" to the British Museum, and in 1780 he led officers and men from Cook's last voyage in the donation of a "very large Collection of Artificial Curiosities Utencils, dresses &c. from the South-Sea Islands, the West Coast of North America and Kamschatka lately visited by His Majesty's Ships the Resolution & the Discovery."¹² Sea captains and explorers regularly asked his advice on the disposal of collections they brought back to England. "I look up to you as the common Centre of

we discoverers," he was told by James King, another veteran of Cook's first voyage. Banks would advise them to direct artificial curiosities to the British Museum.

George Dixon—yet another veteran of the Cook voyages—brought back a typical mixed bag from the Northwest coast of America. Banks passed the artificial curiosities on to the British Museum. They are listed in the museum's minutes:

Various Articles from the N:W: Coast of America brought
by Capt. Dixon, and presented by Sr. Joseph Banks, viz
An Ornament worn by the women, on the under Lip.

A large Ladle made of horn, probably of the American
Buffaloe.

A Messing Bowl, or Porringer, in the form of an human
Figure.

Stones impregnated with Pyrites and fires of Plants, used
as flint, steel and Tinder.

A Stone of green Granite.

A Paper of Tobacco, such as the natives Chew.

A Piece of rock Crystal, and some Beads.

Thirty four small Cylinders of Wood, variously marked,
used in playing at a game.¹³

The British Museum's holdings were initially divided between three departments:

1. Manuscripts and coins. This included Sloane's books and manuscripts together with two other private collections. (The library of George III was added in 1823, doubling the size of the museum's library.)
2. "Artificial and natural productions." Drawn mostly from Sloane's collections, the "artificial productions" included artefacts from Mexico and Peru; a model of a Japanese temple; and a miscellany of baskets, pipes, hookahs, amulets and charms, instruments of punishment, classical sculptures, and "American idols."

3. "Modern curiosities." Here Sloane's tastes and prejudices were on full display. He scorned what he called sorcery and magic, and collected a variety of esoteric charms together with "articles in great esteem among many Roman Catholics, as relics."¹⁴ There were also Native American feather headdresses, Wampum beads and scalps; European bronzes and ivories; Chinese deities; "a cyclops pig, having only one eye, and that in the middle of the forehead"; and the horn of a horned lady.¹⁵

In 1807, the collections were reorganised into three largely independent baronies: the library, natural history, and "antiquities." The department of antiquities bought the Parthenon sculptures from Lord Elgin in 1816 and acquired magnificent Assyrian reliefs and statues excavated by Austen Henry Layard in 1847, but it had very little to show from China or India.¹⁶ (The East India Company set up an India museum in its premises in Leadenhall Street in 1801. Much of its substantial but poorly organised collection was transferred to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1880.) And most scandalously, the British Museum, the premier national museum, had a meagre collection of prehistoric British items. When Christian Jørgensen Thomsen, director of the National Museum of Denmark, visited the British Museum in 1843 he found "the British antiquities everywhere covered in dust and not much esteemed," and the curators ill-informed.¹⁷

Sloane's ethnographic collection was consigned at first to the department of natural history. It was greatly enhanced by Polynesian items collected by Captain Cook and Joseph Banks, and in 1778 "The Otaheiti or South Sea Room" was opened. Immediately popular with visitors, this was, however, another mixed bag. "In the left corner is the mourning dress of an Otaheitean lady; opposite are rich cloaks and helmets of feathers from the Sandwich Islands," a guidebook reported. "Over the fire place are the Cava bowls and, above them, battoons [i.e., batons, and] various other implements of war. The idols of the

various islands, present, in their hideous rudeness, a singular contrast with many of the works of art."¹⁸ Further donations of sculptures, weapons, clothing and assorted curiosities from West Africa, the Arctic, Mexico and Australia were gradually introduced into the South Sea room.¹⁹

In 1836, this sprawling, poorly documented, incoherent assemblage was transferred—together with other “artificial productions”—from the department of natural history to the department of antiquities. They were not a good fit, however, for a department dominated by Mediterranean and Near Eastern sculptures and monuments. Ethnology was shunted into a sub-department along with British Roman and medieval materials, constituting one half of a very odd couple: “ethnography and medieval antiquities.” The only thing that these two assemblages had in common was that they were both orphans in the storm. Scorned by the powerful librarian, Anthony Panizzi, the head of the museum, and looked down upon by the classicists, they were under constant threat of banishment.

In 1851, Augustus Wollaston Franks was appointed to take charge of this marginal section, with a particular brief to develop the museum’s holdings of pre-Roman and Roman Britain. “The choice of a young mathematics graduate with an interest in monumental brasses for such an appointment might now seem odd,” Jill Cook concedes, but she added that although Franks was not a classicist, he was a devoted collector of curiosities and “had shown a general interest in antiquities.”²⁰

As it turned out, what mattered rather more was that he had a large private income and moved easily in society. “At the time it was thought probable that I should succeed to a very considerable estate,” Franks recalled, “and I very well remember the grave consultation as to whether it would not be *infra dig* for me to take a post in the Museum.” Fortunately one of his father’s trustees “discovered that a Suffolk man (Mr. Barnwell) had been employed at the Museum; so it was decided that I might accept the appointment.”²¹

The young man turned out to have a talent for bureaucratic

infighting. This was vital as the various departments jostled in the more and more packed exhibition rooms of the museum, triggering a struggle for survival. The “ethnographical gallery,” opened in 1845, was soon packed to capacity. When Franks joined the department of antiquities in 1851 the British Museum held some 3,700 “ethnological” or “ethnographical” artefacts. When he retired in 1896 there were more than 38,000. Franks personally donated some 9,000 of these.²²

In the 1850s, the British Museum began a massive makeover. Its crowded old home was rebuilt and expanded. And it rebranded itself as a museum of civilisation (while embracing, or at least tolerating, its antithesis, the uncivilised). The museum’s new mission, its vision of its future, was set in stone. Completed in 1852, the reconstructed museum building was fronted by Ionic columns copied from the temple of Athena Polias at Priene. These were topped by a triangular pediment with an allegorical sculpture by Sir Richard Westmacott entitled *The Progress of Civilisation*. Westmacott, who studied under Antonio Canova in Rome, was a committed classicist. He advised the British Museum on the acquisition of Greek and Roman sculptures, and designed a special room for the first display of the Elgin Marbles. His pediment incorporated four female figures copied from the Parthenon, though he replaced their diaphanous tunics with heavy drapery.²³ As he himself explained in a letter to Sir Henry Ellis, a classicist and principal librarian (in effect, director) of the British Museum, the sculptured pediment told a story with a moral:

Commencing at the Eastern end, or angle of the Pediment, Man is represented emerging from a rude savage state through the influence of Religion. He is next personified as a Hunter, and a Tiller of the Earth, and labouring for his subsistence. Patriarchal simplicity then becomes invaded, and the worship of the true God defiled. Paganism prevails, and becomes diffused by means of the Arts.

The worship of the heavenly bodies & their supposed influence led the Egyptians, Chaldeans, Assyrians and other nations to study Astronomy, typified by the centre statues; the key stone to the composition.

Civilisation is now presumed to have made considerable progress. Descending towards the Western side angle of the Pediment, is Mathematics; in allusion to science being now pursued on known sound principles. The Drama, Poetry, and Music balance the group of the Fine arts, on the Eastern side, the whole composition terminating with Natural History of which such objects or specimens only are represented as could be made most effective in sculpture.²⁴

Despite the expansion of the Bloomsbury site, it was generally agreed that the only solution to the space problem was to build a second museum, perhaps in South Kensington. But which collections might be sent away? Natural history was an obvious candidate, since it was large, growing fast, and did not interest the classically educated gentlemen who set the tone in the British Museum. However, ethnography was perhaps even more anomalous, and had fewer defenders. A parliamentary select committee on the British Museum met in 1860 and reported that it had "received evidence from every witness examined on this subject in favour of the removal of the ethnographical collections. Great additional space would be required, if it be intended that the British Museum should be the depository of a complete ethnographical collection, and it is probable that a more suitable receptacle might be found for it elsewhere."²⁵

The *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections* published by the British Museum in 1910 explained the rationale for keeping ethnography in Bloomsbury rather than sending it to South Kensington along with the natural history collections:

Want of space is a drawback for which there can be no compensation; yet there is some advantage in the exhibition

of ethnographical specimens under one roof with those illustrating the art and industry of the great ancient civilisations. It is now realised that these civilisations, even that of Greece, arose gradually from primitive stages of culture; the instruments and utensils of savage or barbarous peoples are therefore not without their relation to the study of antiquities. With prehistoric remains the points of comparison are numerous and are especially instructive in the case of stone implements.²⁶

Franks not only staved off the threat of expulsion. He kept his hodgepodge of collections together in the British Museum and greatly expanded their holdings. This was a tribute to his perseverance and diplomatic talents, but he also had two great pieces of luck. The first was that, after some vacillation, the formidable head of the natural history section, Professor Sir Richard Owen, decided to grasp the opportunity to transfer the collection to South Kensington, where he would be master of all he surveyed. This freed up a vast exhibition space in the British Museum's Bloomsbury headquarters. Franks's second piece of luck was the acquisition of the large, important, and generously funded Christy collection in 1865. This would eventually be moved into galleries vacated by the department of natural history.

Henry Christy, son of a Quaker manufacturer and banker, followed his father into the bank. In his forties, he began to collect folk art and fabrics from the Middle East, some of which were shown at London's Great Exhibition in 1851. Christy then broadened his range. In 1857 he met, by chance, on a bus in Havana, a young Englishman, Edward Burnett Tylor, who was travelling to get over a bout of illness. (Tylor heard one of the passengers talking English and using *thee* and *thou*, and realised that Christy was a fellow Quaker.) Together they visited archaeological sites in Mexico, and Christy smuggled some antiquities out of the country.²⁷

Tylor, one of the first curators of the Pitt Rivers Museum

in Oxford, was to become the intellectual leader of the founding generation of British anthropologists. Christy promoted the new field of European prehistory. This was a heroic moment in European archaeology. Excavations in France uncovered human remains and artefacts in ancient geological formations. In 1863, Christy supported Édouard Lartet's pioneering excavations in the Dordogne, but then, two years later, visiting prehistoric cave sites in Belgium, he contracted pneumonia and died. He left his collection in the care of four trustees, including Franks, with instructions to offer it to the British Museum. A generous endowment allowed Franks to purchase some 20,000 additional artefacts.²⁸

For two decades the collection was maintained in Christy's former home in Victoria Street, Westminster, where it was open to visitors one day a week. It was transferred to the premises of the British Museum only in 1883, when the natural history collections were at last moved to South Kensington. But Franks immediately gained credit for the Christy bonanza. In 1866, the year after Christy's death, he was promoted to the rank of keeper and put at the head of a new full section: "British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography."

Franks acknowledged that his new section was a muddle. He wrote to a correspondent that "it might with equal propriety be termed the Department of Miscellaneous Antiquities."²⁹

It consists of the following sections: 1. Prehistoric antiquities of all nations . . . In this of course are included prehistoric objects from Egypt and the East generally. 2. British Antiquities, vizt early British, Anglo Roman, and Anglo Saxon. 3. Medieval Antiquities, a small section here owing to the costly nature of the objects . . . 4. Glass and ceramic collection . . . includes objects in this material of all ages and countries . . . 5. Asiatic. This includes all the antiquities of India, illustrations of the Buddhist and Hindu religions, Chinese and Japanese works of art and pottery etc.

6. Ethnographical, including the productions of the uncivilized races of the whole world . . . 7. American antiquities. This is a very large subject and one to which very little attention has hitherto been paid in England . . . ³⁰

Franks's assistant (and in time his successor), Charles Hercules Read, remarked that in the eyes of the public "the ethnographical collections come next in interest to the Egyptian mummies."³¹ But visitors were not helped to make sense of what they were seeing. The exhibits were loosely arranged by geographical area, but disparate collections were bolted together, either because of constraints of space or else to accommodate the demands of family trusts. Writing to the keeper of antiquities in 1866, Franks explained why the Indian and Chinese collections were displayed in the "ethnographical room." "There was nowhere else physically for them to go. If only on security grounds, because the need to restrict access to locked cases meant that two departments could not easily own objects in the same case." Moreover, "separation of Indian antiquities and Ethnography would involve the breaking up of the Raffles collection from Java (contrary to its donor's wishes) and in any case, so far as Arabic inscriptions were concerned, there was little before the medieval period . . ."³² In 1921, "British and Medieval Antiquities" became a department in its own right. Ethnography remained behind, obliged to cohabit with oriental ceramics.³³

Meanwhile, ethnography and prehistory were being transformed by fresh discoveries and challenging new ideas. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833, laid down a new scientific paradigm. He established the great age of the earth. He also identified successive geological strata, which allowed for the relative dating of fossils and archaeological findings. Lyell's *Principles of Geology* accompanied the young Charles Darwin when he sailed on HMS *Beagle*. Excavations in continental Europe turned up human remains and artefacts in ancient geological formations and in association

with fossils of extinct animal species. It is "probable that man was old enough to have co-existed, at least, with the Siberian mammoth," Lyell told a major scientific gathering in 1859, after inspecting the excavations at Brixham cave.³⁴ Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published at the end of the same year.

In 1863, Lyell's *Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* endorsed the new ideas about ice ages, evolution and the long history of the human species, all matters on which he had previously been a prominent sceptic. In the same year, Thomas Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature* drew attention to anatomical similarities between humans and apes, clear indications of a common ancestry. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin argued that the earliest human beings must have lived rather like African apes.

A revolution followed in archaeology. Human history could not be confined to the brief chronology of the Old Testament. It was now possible to arrange archaeological sites in a time series with reference to geological sequences. Once this was done, it seemed incontrovertible that civilisation was a very recent development. For most of their long history, human beings had been hunters and gatherers, dependent on tools made from stone, wood, shells and bones.

The epoch before the rise of civilisation was given a new name: it was the age of "pre-history."³⁵ The term was first coined to refer to pre-Roman Europe. It gained currency with the publication in 1865 of John Lubbock's *Pre-Historic Times*, which adapted the Scandinavian tripartite model of Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages. (According to Bruce Trigger, this was "almost certainly the most influential work dealing with archaeology published during the nineteenth century.")³⁶

Lubbock was Darwin's ally and his neighbour. He was also a member of parliament, where he promoted Darwin's projects. He bought the fields containing the Avebury ruins in order to protect them. In 1882 he masterminded the passage of the Ancient Monuments Protection Act (seven decades after

a similar act had been passed in Denmark). Lubbock's second—and much younger—wife was the daughter of the great collector General Pitt Rivers, and he saw to it that his father-in-law was appointed the first inspector of ancient monuments.

One of the four trustees of the Christy collection, Lubbock shared Christy's respect for Thomsen's three-stage theory of history. In 1861 Christy invited Thomsen's assistant, Carl Ludvig Steinhauer, to catalogue his collection, which he then arranged into Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age sections. Following Lubbock's lead, Christy accepted that hunter-gatherer tools from Australia and the Americas could shed light on the manufacture and use of prehistoric European artefacts, and he expanded his collection to include ethnographic specimens.

Yet visitors to the British Museum were not exposed to new ideas about "pre-history." Franks kept a careful distance from the epic debates around evolutionary theory that raged in the 1860s and 1870s in the learned societies of which he was a leading member. He was director of the Society of Antiquaries, a council member of the Ethnological Society, and later a vice president of its successor organisation, the very Darwinian Anthropological Institute.³⁷ In this milieu, there was no escaping debates about evolution. Franks's problem was that the new ideas were very controversial. Richard Owen, the influential keeper of natural history in the British Museum, was a leader of the scientific resistance to Darwinian theory. He stuck to the earlier orthodoxy that species were immutable, and he was even accused of hiding specimens that seemed to provide evidence of transmutation.

Church leaders also found Darwinian theory unsettling, even heretical. A vocal clerical opponent of Darwinism, Bishop Wilberforce, was a trustee of the British Museum. The Archbishop of Canterbury was a trustee *ex officio*. And they had weighty political backing. Some of the most influential, educated and worldly men in England were quite sure that the history of the world had been packed into a few thousand years, as testified by the book of Genesis. William Gladstone, who

served four terms as prime minister of Britain between 1868 and 1894, described Genesis 10, an account of the world after the flood, as "the most valuable document of ancient ethnography known to man."³⁸

So Franks had good reason to keep his head down. He could not, however, escape criticism from the evolutionist camp in the London Ethnological Society, spearheaded by Huxley, Lubbock and a formidable polemicist, General Pitt Rivers. A combative advocate of evolutionism, Pitt Rivers dismissed the British Museum as an "ethnological curiosity" in a "molluscus and invertebrate condition of development. For the education of the masses it is of no use whatsoever. It produces nothing but confusion in the minds of those who wander through its long galleries with but little knowledge of the periods to which the objects relate."³⁹

Born in 1827, Pitt Rivers—or Augustus Lane-Fox as he was named until he was in his middle fifties—was a younger son in a hard-up family with aristocratic connections. He became a military officer and rose in the ranks, mainly by buying promotions, as was customary, ending up as a general. It was probably a visit to the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, held in the purpose-built, ultra-modern, plate-glass and cast-iron Crystal Palace in London in 1851, that turned the general into a serious collector. The very first World's Fair, it attracted over 5 million visitors. (The Tory leader, Benjamin Disraeli, complained that it was "a godsend to the Government, diverting public attention from their blunders.")⁴⁰ Presided over by Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert, this great show was designed "to present a true test and living picture of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived . . . and a new starting-point, from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions."⁴¹ Over 13,000 exhibitors represented Britain, British colonies and forty-four foreign states.

Industrial machines and products were arranged according to a classification developed for the occasion by Lyon Playfair,

president of the Chemical Society, fellow of the Royal Society, gentleman usher to Prince Albert, and a Liberal member of parliament. Playfair had once been the manager of a calico works in Lancashire, and he settled on the common-sense categories of the industrialist: raw materials, machinery, manufactures and fine arts, each in turn subdivided. Every category of exhibits was arranged to demonstrate the progress of a particular branch of technology. Cumulatively, the exhibition would celebrate the advances made by humanity—most particularly, in Victoria's England. (The historian Asa Briggs remarked, however, that "many of the machines displayed were more clever than useful" instancing "an alarm bedstead, causing a person to arise at any given hour," and a "cricket catapult, for propelling the ball in the absence of a first-rate bowler.")⁴²

Also in 1851, the general served as a member of an army commission looking into rifle design. He now began to collect firearms, then all sorts of weapons, from boomerangs to spears, and, eventually, practically anything in the line of antiquities and ethnological artefacts. In time he became one of the great private collectors of antiquities and ethnography in England.

In 1879, completely unexpectedly, the general's fortunes were transformed: he inherited a large income and Cranborne Chase, a 32,000-acre estate in Wiltshire, from Lord Rivers, a cousin on his mother's side of the family. By the terms of the will he had to change his name, and he became Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers. Now he went into collecting overdrive, sourcing more and more ethnological and antiquarian objects from a network of agents, and excavating Roman and Saxon sites on his estate.

"The General was a man of fierce temper, not untinged with violence," according to a biographer, "unsociable with his peers, a domestic tyrant."⁴³ Bertrand Russell, the nephew of the general's put-upon wife, Alice Pitt Rivers, recalled that he "spent every penny he could spare on excavating antiquities, much to the annoyance of his large family. My Aunt Alice—presumably as a result of his expenditure—practised petty economies to an

almost incredible degree."⁴⁴ So the general was not a man to brook opposition to his designs, certainly not when it came to his great project, a museum of anthropology.

Pitt Rivers was determined to order his collection of ethnology and antiquities on a coherent plan, guided by a theory that, he imagined, was at once scientifically and ideologically correct. This was the conception of "evolution" or "progress" that he came across through Herbert Spencer, whom he knew personally, and then from the Darwinians, with whom he mingled in the Ethnological Society of London. He particularly liked the Darwinian insistence on slow, steady changes rather than sudden, revolutionary leaps. The general understood this doctrine to represent a scientific refutation of radical proposals for political reform. Revolution was contrary to the laws of nature. He designed public exhibitions of technological advances in order to demonstrate to the lower classes the inevitability of gradual progress and the folly of radical change.

Pitt Rivers was particularly fascinated, even obsessed, by weapons, but he divided all human productions—ancient and modern, native and exotic—into types, according to their uses or functions. Indeed, he claimed that he was the first person to use the term "typology" for a system of classification of human productions.⁴⁵ Objects within each type were to be ordered in a series from the simplest to the most complex, to illustrate the universal process of gradual improvement.

The guiding principles behind Pitt Rivers' typology were familiar enough, a mix of Linnaean taxonomy and Herbert Spencer's organic analogy. Ideas and techniques could be classified in the same way as natural species and they advanced exactly as natural species evolved. "Human ideas, as represented by the various products of human industry, are capable of classification into genera, species, and varieties in the same manner as products of the vegetable and animal kingdoms, and in their development from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous they obey the same laws," Pitt Rivers wrote.⁴⁶

This may recall Jomard's "Plan d'une Classification Ethno-

graphique.” William Ryan Chapman has established that Jomard’s plan was familiar to the small British community of ethnologists. Pitt Rivers himself had met and talked with Jomard on several occasions. However, Chapman is inclined to accept Pitt Rivers’ own claim that Jomard’s model merely confirmed an idea he had arrived at independently. “Given the popularity of biological schemes at that time, there is little reason to believe otherwise.”⁴⁷

Since the Jomard/Siebold dialogue in the 1840s, there were two competing models for a museum of ethnography. It could be arranged on evolutionist principles, or on a geographical plan. Franks defaulted to a geographical arrangement, though he was sometimes frustrated by stipulations that large donations should not be split up. Pitt Rivers tried to imagine how typological and geographical displays might be combined. At one time he envisaged what he called a rotunda arrangement. Items would be classified by function (weapons, musical instruments, etc.), then arranged longitudinally to demonstrate technical advances, and, finally, divided horizontally by region of origin.⁴⁸

The general’s collection soon took over his London house. In 1874, he loaned a large selection of artefacts to the Bethnal Green annexe of the South Kensington museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) on condition that they were arranged in accordance with his typology. As he compulsively delivered more and more specimens, the museum rebelled. Pitt Rivers then offered to donate his collection to the nation.

A government commission considered the matter. Franks was a member. He put it on record that he was “placed in a somewhat delicate position, for as Keeper of the National Collection of Ethnography I should naturally view with some dissatisfaction the ultimate creation of a second government collection, having much the same scope as our own, even though arranged on a system different from that adopted in the national collection, as such a result might lead to grave complications.”⁴⁹ In other words, the collection would come encumbered with

the general's evolutionist baggage. Lubbock and Huxley, also members of the commission, both close allies of Darwin, were inclined to accept Pitt Rivers' conditions, but the responsible parliamentary committee decided against them.

In 1884, Pitt Rivers persuaded Oxford University to take the bulk of his collection and to exhibit it in perpetuity, on the typological-ideological lines that he had developed, in an institution to be called the Pitt Rivers Museum.⁵⁰ He added a clause in his deed of gift that "a Lecturer shall be appointed . . . who shall yearly give Lectures at Oxford on Anthropology." Edward Burnett Tylor, Christy's old travelling companion, was appointed, and he held the post of "reader in anthropology" from 1884 to 1895. This was the first position in anthropology in a British university.

The Pitt Rivers Museum duly installed typological, evolutionary displays that covered almost every imaginable field of human activity—including a display case that became a favourite of visitors, "On the treatment of dead enemies," with items ranging from shrunken heads from Ecuador to skulls and scalps from Papua New Guinea, South Sudan, Nagaland, North America and Brazil.

The first curator of the museum, Henry Balfour, was not committed to the grand vision of Pitt Rivers. Indeed he was sceptical of all big ideas. "I don't want to theorize and shall stick to description as far as possible," he wrote in September 1898 to his friend Baldwin Spencer, a pioneering ethnographer of Australia. "The more I go on the more I see that it is still dangerous to form theories, and I prefer to collect and collate and leave the theories to fit themselves onto masses of facts."⁵¹

Pitt Rivers complained that Oxford had let him down.

I soon found out that it was quite impossible that a method communicated by one person should be worked out effectively by others . . . Oxford was not the place for it, and I should never have sent it there if I had not been ill at the time and anxious to find a resting-place for it of some

kind in the future. I have always regretted it, and my new museum [on his estate] at Farnham, Dorset, represents my views on the subject much better.⁵²

The museum at Farnham kept going until the 1960s, when the family sold the collection.

In 1963, Bernard Fagg, the director of the National Museum of Nigeria, was appointed curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Oxford University was considering moving the collection to a new site on the Banbury road. Fagg embraced the opportunity to reimagine the museum in a new custom-built home that would also accommodate the university's departments of social and biological anthropology.

Fagg was inspired by the general's plan for a rotunda. The celebrated engineer Pierre Luigi Nervi produced a mock-up of a modernist, concrete rotunda design.⁵³ It was topped by a dome under which tropical and subtropical plants were to be grown. Two floors would contain separate galleries for ethnology and prehistory. "A visitor taking a circular path around the planned ethnological floor would find the original display by type of object preserved, the largest (such as canoes) being on the outermost concentric circle, the smallest (jewellery) on the innermost," explains Michael O'Hanlon, director of the Pitt Rivers Museum from 1998 to 2015. Moving inwards to the centre of the rotunda, the visitor "would find collections arrayed by geographic region, each wedge-shaped segment of the rotunda displaying all the items from a particular cultural area." On the prehistory floor the wedges would also be geographical, but the visitor would move outwards and onward in time from the oldest items, which were at the apex of the wedge.⁵⁴

The building was budgeted to cost £3 million. The university refused to underwrite it. In 1968, Fagg had a stroke. Deprived of his leadership, the project lost impetus. There was in any case resistance from various quarters against upsetting the long-established arrangement of specimens. The cramped

old showcases were familiar, even hallowed. So the great change never happened.

It has sometimes been argued that the terms of the general's deed of gift prohibited Oxford University from making any changes to the arrangement of his collection. The relevant article in the original "Indenture" provided that:

The general mode of arrangement at present adopted in the said Collection shall be maintained and no changes shall be made in details during the life time of the said August Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers without his consent and any changes in details which may be made after the death of the said August Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers shall be such only as shall be necessitated by the advance of knowledge and shall not affect the general principle originated by the said August Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers.

That may appear to offer an ample get-out. However, the deed has been invoked again and again to discourage any change. In consequence, the Pitt Rivers Museum is perhaps the most perfect example of a museum that belongs in a museum.

THE WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION, 1893

The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago marked the four-hundredth anniversary of the voyage of Christopher Columbus to the Americas. Chicago had to beat off competition from New York to stage this ambitious, hugely expensive, patriotic blowout. Its benchmark was the Paris Fair of 1889, and Chicago was determined to surpass Paris. To fund the Exposition, the State of Illinois chartered a company with an initial \$5 million stock issue. The federal government authorised \$1.5 million for official exhibits.¹

The centrepieces of both fairs were prodigies of industrial innovation. The Paris Fair had the brand-new Eiffel Tower, 324 metres (1,063 ft) high. Chicago had the first Ferris wheel. It was just 80.4 metres (264 ft) high, but it offered thirty-six passenger cars, each with forty revolving chairs. (Chief Standing Bear, a Ponca chief and a champion of Indian land rights, rode the Ferris wheel, wearing a full headdress.)² In Chicago, Edison's Kinetoscope showed the first moving pictures. Also on display were the first zip fastener; a new breakfast cereal, Shredded Wheat; and a flavoured chewing gum, Juicy Fruit.³

The Chicago Fair was housed in the purpose-built "White City." Leading architects were commissioned to design the pavilions; the landscape genius Frederick Law Olmsted laid out the park and gardens; Walt Disney's father was one of the building contractors. Set on the shore of Lake Michigan, the site came equipped with brand-new mod cons: electric street

lights, public lavatories, and a day-care centre for the children of visitors.

But it was not all about technical wonders, civic boosterism, product placing, advertising and entertainment. There really had to be an educational purpose, some more elevated, world-historical theme, some *message*, if Chicago was to beat Paris at its own game. The planning committee approached George Brown Goode, the director of the U.S. National Museum, to draw up a blueprint. In his "First Draft of a System of Classification for the World's Columbian Exposition" Goode suggested that the fair should illustrate "the steps of progress of civilization and its arts in successive centuries, and in all lands up to the present time." It would be "in fact, *an illustrated encyclopedia of civilization*."⁴ Back in Washington, Goode submitted a plan to Congress for the Smithsonian's ethnological display in Chicago. (This drew on Mason's enthusiastic reports of the 1889 Paris Exposition.)⁵

Putnam also had a plan. In a letter to the *Chicago Tribune* in May 1890, he advised that the theme of the Exposition should be "the stages of the development of man on the American continent."⁶ He told a Chicago audience that it was necessary to show "the low cultural base" of the Americas at the time of Columbus in order to bring out, by contrast, "the material prosperity and the development of our race in the arts and in culture."⁷ This approach would have further benefits. It would introduce the American public to the new science of anthropology and prepare the way for a future Chicago museum, which would be even better than New York's Museum of Natural History.

Serious people admitted that important lessons were on offer on the shores of Lake Michigan. An entire chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* was devoted to the Chicago Exposition.⁸ Adams visited the White City twice, spending every day there for a fortnight on the second occasion, "absorbed in it."

He found matter of study to fill a hundred years . . . educational game started like rabbits from every building . . .

Paris had never approached it . . . no such Babel of loose and ill-joined, such vague and ill-defined and unrelated thoughts and half-thoughts and experimental outcries as the Exposition, had ever ruffled the surface of the Lakes . . . That the Exposition should be a natural growth and product of the Northwest offered a step in evolution to startle Darwin . . . Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving . . . he decided that the American people probably knew no more than he did . . . Chicago was the first expression of American thought as a unity; one must start there.⁹

A Congress on Evolution was organised at the fair, as part of a World's Parliament of Religion. Providing an "Intellectual and Moral Exposition of the Progress of Mankind," and bringing "all the departments of human progress into harmonious relations with each other," it aimed to reconcile evolution and Christianity. Herbert Spencer delivered the keynote address. Introduced as "the Columbus of the new epoch," he urged Congress to agree that egoism should be combined with altruism.¹⁰

So Chicago's message to the world was about evolution, progress and civilisation. The same had been true in Paris. And in both Paris and Chicago the civilised world was cast against its mirror opposite: the uncivilised. A journalist remarked that in Chicago the American Indian "is everywhere."¹¹ There were ethnographic exhibits in provincial and national pavilions in the State Building. American Indian crafts were displayed in the Shoe and Leather Building, the Transportation Building, the Fisheries Building and (curated by Otis Mason) in the Women's Building.¹² As in Paris, there were live exhibits of native peoples in stagey villages.

National conferences of anthropologists and historians hosted lectures on the past and future of "primitive peoples," with particular reference to North America. At a meeting of the American Historical Association, a young historian, Frederick J.

Turner, presented a paper which would reverberate through American historiography for several generations: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."¹³ It offered a vision of the future of the West, Native Americans, and, indeed, the United States.

Turner began by quoting the superintendent of the census: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line." For Turner, this marked a decisive historical break. Up to that point, the frontier had been "the meeting point between savagery and civilisation." Settlers raised in a European tradition adopted the native way of life. The frontier

strips off the garments of civilization and arrays [the settler] in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier, the environment is at first too strong for the man.

But little by little the settler tamed the wilderness. There followed a process of "most rapid and effective Americanization." The settlers became models of American individualism and democratic sensibility.

So what happened to the American Indians? First of all, trade. "Long before the pioneer farmer appeared on the scene, primitive Indian life had passed away. The farmers met Indians armed with guns." As settlers moved West, "The Indian was a common danger, demanding united action." But once defeated, the future of the native peoples was settled: assimilation. The settler had once adopted an Indian way of life. Now the Indian would have to learn to live like an American. And, no longer a constant threat, their old way of life could be romanticised.

Native peoples from the Americas were not the only foil to American civilisation on show in Chicago. "It would not be too much to say that the World's Columbian Exposition was one vast anthropological revelation," Mason boasted. "Not all mankind were there, but either in persons or pictures their representatives were."¹⁴ The fair's honky-tonk fringe, the vibrant, free-enterprise Midway, had a cosmopolitan cast of dancers, musicians and acrobats who put an alluring Orient on display.

Putnam was head of the department of ethnology. Boas was his right-hand man. They organised a large and eclectic exhibit in the anthropology building. Their Smithsonian rivals, led by Mason, had their own show on the ground floor of the government building. So the Harvard Peabody Museum was pitted against the Smithsonian Institution. Their rivalry was particularly sharp because it looked as though either Putnam or the Smithsonian party would take charge of ethnology in the new Chicago museum to be built after the fair.

The two parties delivered very different images of anthropology, but these did not fit the stereotype of Smithsonian generalists versus Boasian regionalists. On the contrary. The Smithsonian mounted a focused, regional presentation of North American ethnography. Putnam and Boas presided over a loosely arranged and opportunistically assembled sample of global ethnography, plus a display of skulls and skeletons and tables of measurements of the bodies of schoolchildren and American Indians.

The Smithsonian exhibition combined the resources of the Bureau of American Ethnology and the U.S. National Museum. Mason had spent three years making preparations. Powell's map of the distribution of native American languages, now unveiled at last, blown up to 16 × 12 feet (approximately 5 × 4 metres), was the centrepiece. Powell and his team had identified fifty-seven linguistic groupings in North America. Mason highlighted sixteen "great families." The original plan was to illustrate the map with vignettes of American Indian tribes, but the language

groupings did not correspond with particular styles of material culture. The distribution of crafts and implements made a better fit with ecological regions identified in a biogeographic map of North America that had recently been published by the department of agriculture. Mason concluded that "the materialistic activities were controlled by the environment."¹⁵

This was in line with the approach of Boas's old professor, Adolf Bastian. Boas should, in principle, have been impressed. As usual, however, Mason hedged his bets. "I have arranged the costumes and art productions of these families in separate alcoves, so that the student taking his position in one of them may have before his eye a practical solution of some of the theoretical questions which have recently arisen concerning the connection between race and language and industries and philosophies." On the other hand, "In order to afford the student another point of view from which to look at the same set of phenomena, a few alcoves have been arranged upon another plan, in which a topical industry is made the primary classific concept, tribe or nationality the second concept, and linguistic affinities the third concept."¹⁶

The most successful exhibits were the "life groups," plaster mannequins, dressed in traditional costume, busily doing craft-work or performing rituals, an innovation that Mason had admired at the Paris Exposition. The groups were prepared by a rising star of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Powell's protégé, an artist turned archaeologist, William Henry Holmes. "Nothing draws the crowd like the groups," Mason commented. "No part of the Exposition is more frequented."¹⁷

Over at the Anthropological Building, Putnam claimed that he had brought to Chicago "the first scientific anthropological exhibit in this country." He inscribed his message in stone. "The Legend over the main entrance, 'Anthropological Building, Man and his Works,' is very comprehensive and indicates the scope of the department, which not only treats of the moral, mental and physical characteristics of man, but also shows the

beginnings of his great achievements in art, in architecture and in manufactures."¹⁸ The promise was grandiose, the plan poorly thought out, the execution chaotic.

Between 1891 and 1893, Putnam deployed fifty-five field assistants to collect materials for the exhibition, and he sent out a general call for materials. Too general. The response was overwhelming. Nancy Fagin writes that "mugs from Mesa Verde were shipped by the dozen, several cave-dried mummies arrived from Colorado, an entire model of a mesa village came from New Mexico, and the State Historical Society of Ohio contributed large plaster models of Fort Ancient and Serpent Mound. Room was allotted for the many miscellaneous donations from individuals who sent only a single artefact or case." Many objects were poorly documented. "The Department's informal method of receiving specimens made for a backlog of artefacts and curios . . . Putnam, Boas, and the staff faced crates of incoming specimens without an adequate acquisition form to produce descriptive labels, to catalogue, or to form meaningful groupings . . . Artefacts were stacked one on top of another and inside one another and hung from the ceiling by clotheslines."¹⁹ In November 1892, Boas wrote to his parents: "in short, everything in a jumble and Putnam in despair."²⁰

Since the aim was to represent American Indians as they were at the time of Columbus, the ethnographic artefacts came on the whole from the more isolated regions, particularly the Northwest and the West. "The Indians east of the Rocky mountains have been so much modified by contact with the white that, taken as a whole, a small amount of material only has been gathered," Boas noted.²¹ As for the archaeological exhibits, they were designed to illustrate the unreliable theories of Putnam about the early appearance of Stone Age peoples in North America, and the supposedly European roots of the Aztec, Inca and Mayan civilisations. "The much-disputed paleolithic implements are fully represented," Boas remarked, evidently doing his best to be tactful. Models of earth mounds were on display, but "we must not imagine the mound-builders to have been a

people very far in advance of the Indian tribes at the time of their discovery . . . their culture was on a similar level."²² Reconstructions of Central American and Mayan monuments took pride of place in front of the anthropology building, but Boas did not mention Putnam's theory that these civilisations were diffused from Europe.

Boas was designated chief assistant in charge of physical anthropology. While Putnam's field assistants were busy collecting Indian arts and crafts for the exhibitions, Boas deployed some seventy university students to make measurements of 90,000 schoolchildren and 17,000 American Indians. There were three laboratories in the anthropology building. "A very full collection of crania and skeletons illustrates the anatomy of human races," Boas wrote in a special issue of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*.²³ Statues represented idealised young men of different races. Visitors could have their measurements taken by Boas and his assistants.²⁴

There was no time to catalogue the materials pouring in, and the promised anthropology building was not ready when the fair opened on 1 May 1893. It did not become available until July. Meanwhile the collections were stored in a dairy barn, but at a critical moment they had to be moved to make way for a cheese exhibition.²⁵ Putnam himself was forced to move his office nine times. On one occasion

without my knowledge or notice from anyone, a force of workmen was put into my office during my absence since Saturday; and partitions have been torn down and plastering removed without any care being taken of all the records and valuable property belonging to my department of the exposition. . . . disgraceful and arbitrary . . . a deep insult to me personally as well as to the position which I hold at the Exposition.²⁶

The New York Times mocked "Prof. Putnam's Hard Luck" (*The New York Times*, 22 May 1893).

There is one very important section of the World's Fair which, because of its inaccessibility and distance from the main buildings, is likely to be overlooked by nine out of every ten visitors. And yet there are grouped in this territory sights which would repay even the long and tedious tramp in sand ankle deep to get to them . . . the Anthropological Building is the furthest in the rear, the most forlorn in its exterior and interior, and pre-eminently the one with the most promise of being a failure.

Though conceding that "no other chief of a department at the World's Fair has had so much to contend with and so much criticism to meet as Prof. F. W. Putnam, Chief of the Department of Ethnology," the reporter piled insult on injury. Putnam was

an active and an erudite little man, but he seems to be a sufferer from that great drawback of scientific and professional persons—lack of practicability . . . Consequently he has got into snarls and imbroglios and has been buffeted about by more worldly and self-assertive chiefs of departments, who got things done while Mr. Putnam had to wait, and as a consequence his building at this date is unfinished, his ethnological exhibits, many of them, are between here and Patagonia, and the poor scientist has to carry a load of detraction, criticism, and denunciation which culminated a few days ago in the expression of opinion by a Chicago newspaper that the anthropological department was a myth and Prof. Putnam as much an uncertainty as some of the archaeological problems he has been years in trying to solve.

This was over the top, but it could not be denied that Putnam's project was in bad shape and that he himself was responsible for many of its problems. His plans were overly ambitious, and he spent only part of his time in Chicago, since he was still very busy with the Harvard Museum and his work with the American

Association for the Advancement of Science. The fair's administrators were soon fed up with him. The director, Harlow N. Higginbotham, refused even to set foot in the anthropology building when it was, belatedly, completed.

Putnam himself was particularly interested in the exhibits on show in the courtyard in front of the anthropology building. Here were facsimile Mayan ruins, Inuit skin tents, Northwest coast plank houses, an Iroquois longhouse, a bark wigwam and a pioneer cabin.²⁷ The Smithsonian crowd had their plaster "live" groups. Putnam and Boas brought in flesh and blood American Indians to occupy the village. Putnam called it the "Sub-department for the representation of the Native Peoples of America." The pseudo villagers were dressed in ersatz traditional clothes. (It was impossible to find native dressmakers who could fabricate yucca fibre clothes.)²⁸ Occasionally they would perform dances and ceremonies. Unfortunately, the anthropology building was close to the noisy elevated railway, which, Putnam complained, "greatly mars the picturesque effect." When Boas presented a show of Kwakiutl dancers he had to use sheets to block out the Leather and Shoe Trades Building in the background.²⁹

Boas directed his field assistant, George Hunt, to acquire a large Kwakiutl house and to commission artisans to carve a miniaturised village. Hunt also brought nine native men, five women and two children to Chicago. Putnam told the *Springfield Daily Republican* (20 August 1892):

We have offered every possible inducement to native tribes in North, South, and Central America to make their own exhibits at the fair, that is, to come at their own expenses and depend upon the sale of their peculiar trinkets for sufficient revenue to meet the outlay. In some cases this will be done, in others we will have to bring the natives to Chicago ourselves, while in still other cases they will be sent by the governments of which they are subjects.

A Navaho contingent sponsored by the State of Colorado soon decamped to join the commercial strip on the Midway. Labrador Inuit families were imported to occupy an "Esquimaux Village" but most of them walked out, formed the Esquimaux Exhibition Company, and set up their own village just outside the fairgrounds, near Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. (Excluded from the Midway, the Wild West Show was situated beyond the fringe of the fairgrounds, but it was immensely popular and profitable.)³⁰

Boas later vowed "never again to play circus impresario."³¹ Putnam, however, expressed pride in this "little colony of native people." It was "not intended for a side show for the amusement of the visitor, but for a scientific study of the first historic people of America," he wrote in an official history of the Columbian Exposition. "Moreover these people are treated with kindness and consideration and are allowed every opportunity for improvement by observations of the benefits of civilization and education. The Indian Schoolhouse nearby, which is conducted by the United States Government, shows to the world what the Indian is capable of when allowed such advantages."

In fact, nobody would make a serious study of "this little colony." And what sort of study did Putnam have in mind? What was the message? Thomas Jefferson Morgan, commissioner of Indian Affairs, had no doubt what was wanted. The Indian Schoolhouse should represent the promised assimilation of native peoples to the American way of life. Putnam explained that his displays represented the American Indian "in his primitive conditions," whereas the Bureau of Indian Affairs would show him "on his road to civilization."

Emma Sickles, head of the Indian committee of the Universal Peace Union, a political appointee in Putnam's anthropology section, and a former government teacher at the Pine Ridge reservation, denounced Putnam's stage village in *The New York Times*. The exhibition depicted "savagery in the most repulsive form, participated in by only the lowest specimens of the Indian race." Indeed, it represented "one of the darkest conspiracies ever

conceived against the Indian race." It "has been used to work up sentiment against the Indian by showing that he is either savage or can be educated only by Government agencies." Putnam fired Sickles. The fair's administrators reinstated her.³²

Putnam suffered another embarrassment. His "Department of Ethnology, Archaeology, History, Cartography, Latin-American Bureau, Collective and Isolated Exhibits" was initially given responsibility for the Midway. This outdoor entertainment hub, built around the Ferris wheel, operated by concessionaires, was billed by the organisers as an "open mart and caravansary of nations." There were "Egyptians and Sudanese, Indonesians in a Javanese village, fifty-eight Eskimos from Labrador, a party of bare-breasted Dahomeans in a West African setting, as well as Malays, Samoans, Fijians, Japanese, and Chinese."³³ A popular promenade, the "Street in Cairo," had won a gold prize at the Paris Fair. An Egyptian Temple and a Persian Temple of Eros had also featured at Paris. Other "Oriental" sideshows included Turkish, Algerian and Tunisian villages.³⁴ There were belly dancers. There were swimming races every Friday, featuring Zulus, Dahomeans, Turks and South American Indians. There was even a grand "Ball of the Midway Freaks" to which the leading officials of the fair were invited.³⁵

This was not really Putnam's sort of thing. "What shall we say of the 'Street in Cairo,'" he wrote, "with its confusion of life: Arabs, Egyptians, Nubians and Soudanese in varying and characteristic costumes; jugglers, swordsmen, venders, donkey boys, and camel drivers?"³⁶ The fair's administrators had their own answer to this rhetorical question. They sidelined Putnam. Sol Bloom, a nineteen-year-old entrepreneur, took over the management of the Midway. He remarked that putting Professor Putnam in charge was like "making Albert Einstein manager of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus."³⁷ (Oddly enough, between 1883 and 1885 Barnum and Bailey had toured the country with a "Grand Ethnological Congress of Strange and Savage People.")³⁸

The fair closed on the last day of October. Boas then spent nine months overseeing the transfer of the collections from the anthropology building to the Palace of Fine Arts, which was to house Chicago's new Columbian Museum. He and Putnam also bought ethnographic materials from exhibitors. Captain Jacobsen, on whose Northwest coast collection Boas had worked in his graduate student days in Berlin, was eager to sell off artefacts he had brought to Chicago. Boas and Putnam knew that he was desperate to save on transport costs, and coolly waited him out. Jacobson complained that "the Yankees" got "a brilliant collection for a pittance."³⁹

Funding for the new museum had been in doubt, but a last-minute donation of \$1 million from the department store mogul Marshall Field secured its future. Putnam and Boas expected to be given leadership roles, but they were outmanoeuvred by the Smithsonian people and their local allies.⁴⁰ Holmes was appointed to head the ethnology department in what became the Field Museum. "I immediately packed up and have left the Museum for good," Boas wrote to Putnam. "I am now, of course, adrift and shall appreciate whatever you may be able to do for me. You know I have nothing to fall back upon."⁴¹ Putnam assured him that he was pursuing opportunities for them both in New York.

"All our Chicago ships have gone aground," Boas wrote to his parents.⁴² In February 1894 he wrote to Putnam: "The delays in the completion of the Anthropological Building were used to best advantage against you and your administrative ability was assailed in every way. I was charged with lack of administrative ability again on account of the delay in getting the Anthropological Building into shape."⁴³

Holmes and the Smithsonian men were left feeling rather awkward about the way in which Boas had his hopes dashed. Boas himself remarked that after the Chicago debacle he found the Smithsonian folk "surprisingly sympathetic." Even Holmes was conciliatory. "The Washington people felt uncomfortable," Boas reported to Putnam. "Therefore I know, they will be willing to do for me a good deal that they might otherwise

not do.”⁴⁴ McGee asked him to help catalogue Northwest coast material in the National Museum. Mason invited him to provide the National Museum with a “pretty complete collection illustrating the whole winter dance ceremonial of [the Northwest coast] tribes.” (This commission led Boas to undertake what Ira Jacknis calls “the most intensive participant-observation work of his career.”)⁴⁵ Powell offered Boas a position at the Bureau of American Ethnology for editorial work, with time for his own research. Boas was even contracted to take charge of the signature project of the bureau, the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. He remade it to his own liking, eventually published two volumes, the first in 1911, the second only in 1922, and then let it drop, unfinished.

As for Holmes himself, he soon regretted his decision to remain in Chicago. He detested the commercial pressures in the Field Museum and as soon as he could, he returned to Washington and the Smithsonian. After Powell’s death in 1902, he became director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, but this also did not go well. The new secretary of the Smithsonian, Langley, purged the bureau and brought it firmly under his control.⁴⁶

On the last day of 1893, Boas looked back on the year: “A rushing rat-race, great uneasiness, and unsatisfactory work have been its watchwords.”⁴⁷ To cap it all, the fair had an apocalyptic aftermath. The United States was in the middle of an economic depression. On 28 October, just days before the fair was dismantled, Chicago’s mayor, Carter Harrison IV, was assassinated. Most of the buildings in the White City were then razed to the ground by rioting employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company.

But Putnam fell on his feet. Despite the bad publicity in *The New York Times*, he landed a position as director of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and he saw to it that Boas was appointed assistant curator of ethnology and somatology. (Putnam treated the position as part-time. He retained his chair in Harvard and was in New York only one week a month.)

Launched in 1869, the American Museum of Natural History was supported by New York's financial and political elite. Money was not a problem. Its trustees included the bankers J. P. Morgan and Morris K. Jesup and the father of President Teddy Roosevelt. A massive gothic pile backing on to Central Park was built to house the museum. Albert S. Bickmore, a former colleague of Putnam, a fellow rebel against Agassiz, was brought in to provide scientific leadership. However, the bankers and the curators did not always agree on priorities. Jesup chaired the board of trustees and micromanaged everything. Boas was soon complaining that Jesup was too keen on publicity, too fond of Herbert Spencer's evolutionist ideas, and too ready to impose his own ideas of museum displays. It particularly irked Boas that he occupied a rather lowly position in the hierarchy and could not deal directly with Jesup.

Boas did try to set up exhibits that would appeal to a broad public. Arranged on a functional, developmental plan, very much like the one he had criticised at the Smithsonian, they were designed to show "how the most primitive tribes depend entirely upon the products of their home, and how with the progress of civilisation wider and wider areas are made to contribute to the needs of man." Boas also claimed that the exhibits "would become of great interest to the tradesman . . . showing the development of the trades of the carpenter, the blacksmith, the weaver, etc. in different cultural areas."⁴⁸

But Boas was a reluctant populariser. He irritated the administration by refusing to approve labels unless they were backed by monographic studies. And he rather disapproved of the visitors to the museum. Most "do not want anything beyond entertainment."⁴⁹ They required careful management. If there was a central aisle flanked with cases, visitors would "wander from right to left without order and it is impossible to compel them to see the collections in such a manner that they will have the greatest possible benefit from a short visit. . . . By dividing the Hall into two longitudinal halves . . . visitors are compelled to see the collections in their natural sequence, and even if they

pass through only one half of the Hall will be more benefited than when seeing one alcove here, one there." Boas's English was still awkward, but his repeated use of "compel" is surely telling.⁵⁰

While Boas was prepared to play along with Jesup to some extent, he was frustrated, and on the lookout for other opportunities. In 1901, there was an opening in the Hearst Museum at Berkeley. Boas had hopes but Putnam snaffled the position, again on a part-time basis. Boas wrote to Putnam that he had suffered "many sleepless nights," and that it would be a struggle "to regain our old harmonious relations."⁵¹

In fact, Boas was turning against museum anthropology. In 1899, he began to teach part-time at Columbia University. In 1902, he wrote in a letter to Langley, secretary of the Smithsonian, that the study of anthropology could not be confined to museums. It requires "that those lines of human activities that do *not* find expression in material objects—namely language, thought, customs, and I may add, anthropometric measurements—be investigated thoroughly and carefully."⁵² In his final essay on museum anthropology, reflecting on two decades of work in Germany and America, he concluded that "the psychological as well as the historical relations of cultures, which are the only objects of anthropological inquiry, cannot be expressed by any arrangement based on so small a portion of the manifestation of ethnic life as is presented by specimens."⁵³ This was, ironically, precisely the argument Powell had made against Boas in 1887, concluding that "an anthropological museum, therefore, is an impossibility."⁵⁴

Boas was not only turning away from the museum settings in which he had been working. He was breaking definitively with the American anthropological establishment, ensconced in its museum fortresses. In 1904, he delivered a lecture on the history of anthropology at an international conference. The theme was the struggle between three models of cultural development: one, which Boas associated with Tylor, postulated a universal course of cultural progress towards a civilised condition; a

second, associated with Bastian, identified universal "elementary ideas," which found local expression, adapted to the environment; the third, promoted by the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, emphasised migration and borrowing. But, as Joan Mark writes, the striking feature of this lecture was that it "dropped a whole generation of American anthropologists from the historical record. There was no mention of Lewis Henry Morgan, no mention of John Wesley Powell, William Henry Holmes, Frank Hamilton Cushing, Alice G. Fletcher . . . and no mention of the man to whom Boas owed so much, F. W. Putnam."⁵⁵

William Sturtevant, long-serving curator of American ethnology at the U.S. National Museum dated what he called "the Museum Period of anthropology" from the 1840s to "about 1890."⁵⁶ The pioneer generation passed on. Goode died in 1896, Powell and Virchow in 1902, Bastian in 1905, Mason and Hamy in 1908. When, in 1905, Boas left the American Museum of Natural History to take up a full-time professorship at Columbia University, this coincided with a shift of the centre of gravity of anthropology from the museums to the universities.

The final episode of the Boas-Smithsonian relationship played out during the First World War. Boas and his circle opposed America's participation in what they saw as a quarrel between European empires. Holmes and the Smithsonian party supported the war. In 1919, Boas wrote a letter to *The Nation*, denouncing men who "have prostituted science by using it as a cover for their activities as spies."⁵⁷ He did not name names, but his main target was a well-known archaeologist, Sylvanus G. Morley, who collected information for U.S. Naval Intelligence while engaged in research in Mexico. Holmes was furious, complaining to an associate about "the traitorous article by Boas," blasting "Prussian control of Anthropology in this country," and demanding an end to "the Hun regime."⁵⁸ Boas was censured at the next meeting of the American Anthropological Association and narrowly escaped expulsion. But by then Boas and his students had begun to establish their hold on the emerging

university departments of anthropology. At the same time, the influence of the museum anthropologists was waning. However, a simmering hostility between the two parties endured for a generation, and Boas remained a target for xenophobic and anti-Semitic slurs.⁵⁹