

# The Place of Wisdom and Enlightenment

## ---Exploration and Analysis on the Educational Function of Experiential Exhibition in British Museums

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**Abstract.** By analyzing the educational function of the experiential exhibition of British Museums, the far-reaching and profound influence of the enlightenment on British culture and education has been reflected. This paper discusses whether the exhibition of Chinese museum can start from the nature of museum, from the experience of audience, to pursue the authentic and appropriate planning and design scheme, which helps to realize the core function: the educational function of museum.

**Keywords:** The Enlightenment, British Museum, Experiential Exhibition, Educational Function of Museum.

### 1. Introduction

Modern museums are created by the Enlightenment. "The Enlightenment" generally refers to the ideological liberation movement of the anti-feudalism and anti-religion that originated in Europe from the 17th to 18th century, and in the meantime contributed to the rise of capitalism and socialism, which still has a far-reaching and profound impact on the world today. The Enlightenment was known as the Enlightenment in England. The Glorious Revolution and Newton's "Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy" were published before and after (1688)[1], until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (1860's), which was the most clear and active period of the ideological trend of British enlightenment.

China has rapidly changed from an agricultural country to an industrial country. However, the mindsets and moral concepts of Chinese have not been able to break away from the shackles of agricultural society to a large extent. The disconnection of production mode, system and people's intelligence will become an important obstacle to sustainable development for a long time. Britain was the only country that had not undergone the violent revolutionary but transited peacefully during that time, and it is also the origin of industrial revolution, which is not only the birthplace of the first modern museum, but also the country with the largest number of museums and biggest influence. British museums not only has the function of public education, but also are an important part of school education. It is of great reference value for the exhibition design of Chinese museum to study how the Enlightenment influenced the educational function that's exhibited by experiential display of British museums.

### 2. The Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Museum

Museum, which originated from Greek, means a place for the *Meusin*. *Meusin* is the God of learning before the Greek characters were created, and is the goddess that's in charge of art and technology in the ancient Greek mythology. Many thinkers of the Enlightenment show their admiration and reverence for *Meusin*, so museums are considered to show beauty and truth to the public, offering inspiration and stimulating reflection.

It is the objective of the Enlightenment to inspire people's wisdom, and "reason" is the key word of the Enlightenment. Kant summed up the core of the Enlightenment as: "dare to know! Have the courage to use your own reason!"[2] In order to eliminate people's ignorance and blind obedience under the autocratic rule and inspire individual thinking, the pioneers not only actively explore and open up various scientific fields, but also convey new knowledge to the public through a series of

ways and institutions such as writing and publishing, assembly and discussion, scientific research institutes, universities, libraries, etc. and modern museums are also important fresh things.

## 2.1 Cabinets of Curiosities -- Public Cognition Education of Natural Science

The Renaissance (14th-17th century) liberated people's curiosity about natural science. The elites in Europe rose to gather collections according to their personal preferences and display them in display cabinets and small exhibition halls. They are called *Cabinets of curiosities* or *Wonder rooms*. Curiosities represents human curiosity and thirst for knowledge. The engraving illustrations in "Dell's Natural History" written by Italian pharmacist Ferrante Imperato (1525? – 1615?) in 1599 are the earliest image materials so far, which can be seen in the display room of rare treasures at the end of the 16th century. At first, people showed all kinds of animal specimens according to the description of the Bible. The commentator pointed to the crocodile in the middle of the roof. Some people thought it was Leviathan, the monster mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. In the process of collection, arrangement, setting out and exhibition, people have a clear understanding of species.



Figure 1. Printed illustrations in Dell's Natural History Source: Wikipedia



Figure 2. Based on the classification of species or living environment, the house of rare treasures in which the exhibits are displayed have taken on the shape and scale of modern museums. Images from Wikimedia share

Britain established a global dominant position in the era of great navigation (15th-17th century), and became a global leader in science and fashion.[3] Through archaeology, trade and war around the world, it collected rare and precious objects from all over the world. The royal families, nobles, scholars, businessmen and institutions have countless collection showrooms. The most famous treasure house belongs to Ole Worm, a personal doctor of the king of Denmark in the 17th century. He used real animal collections to prove the mistakes of common sense of the society at that time. For example, at that time, people generally believed that long animal horns were all from unicorns and had the function of antidote. Worm used the real collection of unicorn whales to prove the fallacy of this view. These collected objects for the collection or research of the privileged class are gradually open to the public and become the predecessor of modern museums. By the 18th-19th century, botany and zoology had become independent subjects. To this day, the quantity and quality of the ancient cultural collections of British Museums still rank top of the world, and they are still the first class of public enlightenment of natural science.

## 2.2 Ashmolean Museum—A Museum for University Education

In 1677, Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) [4]donated his personal collection of ancient coins, paintings and specimens to Oxford University. On May 24, 1683, the world's First University Museum and the first public museum in modern sense, the Ashmolean Museum, officially opened .

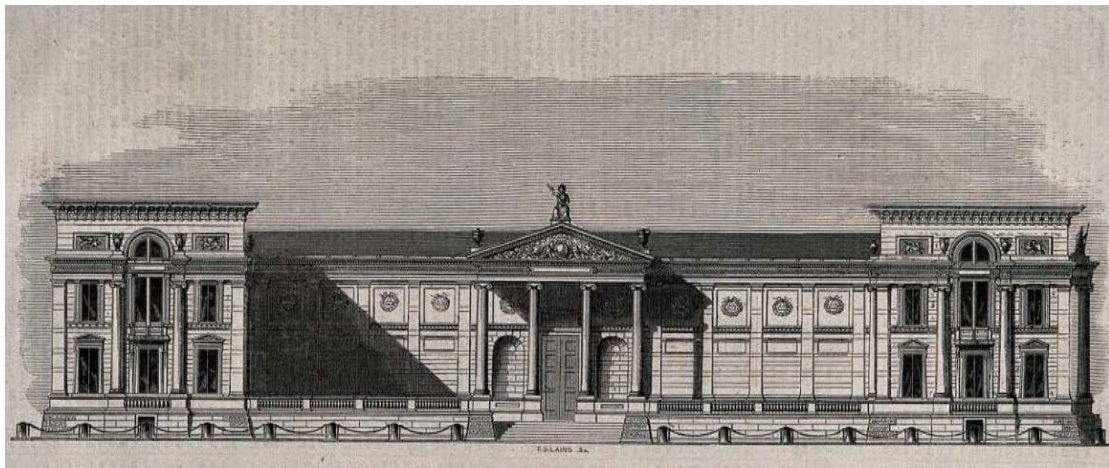


Figure 3. the new Ashmolean Museum is the first building built for the museum in the world. It was completed in 1860 and has been in use up to now. Photo source: Wikipedia

Ashmole's diary records his participation in the activities of the Free-Masons,[5] which is also considered to be the earliest documentary record of the Free-Masons.[6] Free Mason is the most famous philosophical thinking groups in the Enlightenment period. They respect rationality, science and humanity, and encourage members to gain wisdom and virtue through their own efforts. This mysterious organization originated in England in the 17th century and spread all over Europe and America in the 18th century. Its membership list includes the superstars in various fields such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hugo, Goethe, Schiller, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, George Washington, etc. The historical part of the Constitutions of the Free-Masons[7] can also prove that Oxford is a very active region of Free-Masons (A large number of "noble classical buildings" built in Oxford during this period are listed in the Constitutions). So we have reason to believe that the birth of the first modern museum in Oxford University is not accidental.

The personal collection showrooms of the privileged and the personal research rooms of the elites have evolved into a museum to show knowledge to the public and provide education and cultural experience. Education and enlightenment have gradually replaced collection and research as the function of top priority.

### 3. Enlightenment and Exhibition Design of Modern British Museum

British Museums today shoulder more responsibilities of general education for the public. In 1931, the British Education Commission issued *The Memorandum on Museums and Schools: The Increasing Possibility of Cooperation between Public museums and Public Education Institutions*. In 1988, the British *national curriculum* was issued. British museums need to develop various museum courses and activities for different teenagers at different ages.

Different from the museums in many developed countries, which are struggling with whether to become an ivory tower for research or a market-oriented Disneyland to entertain the public, the British Museums are very conservative in adhering to the theme of "The Liberal Arts of Education", which is guarded by the *Meusin*, valuing the full display of "truth" and "beauty", respecting the individual and sincere experience of each visitor and enlightening visitors to think and share.

#### 3.1 Open and Shared Display Design -- The Experience of Humanism

Empiricism, represented by Locke's sensory psychology and Newton's scientific methods, is one of the main foundations of the Enlightenment. The pioneers took the observation of the real world as the core of their research and thinking. Therefore, museums should try their best to show the authentic and beautiful things to the public, rather than the false objects without aesthetic value.

The quality, type and quantity of the collection as well as the depth of research on the collection are the foundation of the museum. Choosing what kind of exhibits to show to the public reflects the vision and mind of the museum. Kant believes that as long as the collection is given freedom, it is completely possible for the self enlightenment of the public to take place.

The function of modern museum has changed from displaying "things" to serving "people"[8], giving up the attachment to "things" and reflecting the respect for "people". On the eve of the festival of All Souls Day in 1840, the National Gallery of fine arts faced a difficult choice: whether to leave the treasures in Trafalgar Square, the dirtiest place in the world at that time, to welcome 14,000 audiences that were mainly made up of poor people, or to move to Kensington. Justice Coleridge, a high court judge, said: "Even if the work remains as it is, it will be destroyed faster than if it were moved to Kensington, it doesn't explain anything. The existence of the works is not for collection, but for the lofty enjoyment of the audience. "[9]In the end, the works of collection remain in Trafalgar Square and becomes a famous case in the museum world. Ashmolean Museum and many other museums have been damaged for various reasons, but even at the expense of expensive restoration, British Museums insist on encouraging the closest contact between the audience and the exhibits, the public is trusted and respected, and the improvement of the quality of the audience and the better cherishing of the exhibits will bring about a win-win situation of mutual promotion.

Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, believes that there is more than one "truth" in the exhibits. It is the responsibility of the museum to present these "truths" to the audience as comprehensively as possible. The family workshop of Jewelry Smith and Pepper is the most important collection of the Museum of the Jewelry Quarter. The whole space completely retains the original appearance of the factory owner when he retired and left in 1981, and has not been modified or beautified, or no tangible content of display design has been added to it. The audience can understand the people and things that have happened in this space by listening to the explanations. Under the guidance of the guide, they can watch freely in the room, touch the materials used by the jeweler, try the processing machine under the guidance, try the tea made in the teapot left by the factory owner, and smell the chemicals. Through the most natural and appropriate experience of five senses, the audience has a real-world understanding of the jewelry industry and handicraft workshops in the 20th century of Birmingham.



Figure 4. Museum of the Jewelry Quarter in Birmingham puts the audience in a completely real historical scene. Photo source: taken by the author

### 3.2 Display of Authenticity and Beauty -- The Enlightenment of Science and Art

It's the display design strategies of many British Museums to restore the real state of the collection as much as possible and encourage the audience to observe it in various ways. "Over-design" is not a good way of museum display design. It is not advisable to entertain the audience and educate the audience too formally. "Paternalistic and invisible entertainment autocracy" is the most unpopular way , [10]"authenticity" and "beauty" are always worthy of promotion.

In 1860, the natural history collection of Ashmolean Museum was transferred to another private donation to the Pitt Rivers Museum of Oxford University. Instead of displaying items in chronological order, Pitt Rivers creatively classified them according to the way they were used, and has maintained the form of museum display during the Enlightenment period: traditional static display cabinet, and collection display of ultra-high density. However, space designers and display designers demonstrate a deep aesthetic quality, using simple space language and display methods to create the beautiful and quiet museum space that shocks the author most.



Figure 5. The Pitt Rivas Museum is well placed in strict order, looking classical and quiet, which gives the audience an extraordinary aesthetic experience. Photo source: taken by the author



Figure 6. Exhibition cabinet of the museum. The density of similar exhibits can be compared with that of house of rare treasures. The picture composition, color matching and lighting reflect the superb level of modern museum display.

### 3.3 Diversified Display Planning -- Speculation Education

The correct positioning of museum function is the basis of exhibition planning. Who is the main service object of the museum and what kind of viewing experience does it provide? Through the independent thinking of managers, we can present diversified results. Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, believes that all levels of society should have the basic right of having access to "comfort" from great works. The Ashmolean Museum has given priority to courses such as art history at Oxford University. In 2012, it hired three teaching curators to participate in the transformation to meet the teaching needs. But John Walsh[11], an American scholar, is full of antipathy to the exhibition arrangement of teaching, preferring to provide low-density and less interference experience of immersive viewing to improve the level of audience's appreciation.

Although many schools of thoughts and different views emerged in the Enlightenment period, a common belief is held: human progress needs to be realized through the exchange of ideas, and people must always have the freedom to use their own rationality openly, and only in this way can it bring about enlightenment to human. "I don't agree with you, but I will defend your right to speak to the death " is the famous words of the Enlightenment period.

Galleries of Justice Museum, which is located in the hall of shire, was first used for administrative functions such as taxation. Based on the documents, it can be traced back to 1375 when it was used as a court, and 1449 when it was used as a prison. As the gold medal winner of 2014 Britain's Best Museum of tourism and education as a museum of heritage, its exhibition planning runs through the whole exhibition process in the form of role-playing. The audience finds the criminal they will play according to the red number plate they receive. After hearing a judge (played by the guide) tell the story of the trial, they experience the process of punishment and imprisonment in line with the crime and the law at that time. The male and female prison officers (played by the guide) will guide the audience to experience the stories that happen in the prison from the perspective of the criminal. In the process of experiencing and watching the exhibition, the audience constantly think about various problems that they encounter After reading all the content, the audience will use the number plate in their hands to vote on "whether the hanging of the murderer should be cancelled?" and they will be invited to answer: "what does freedom mean to you?" (Figure 3) Each expressed point of view is respected, which makes it the best way to encourage people to think.

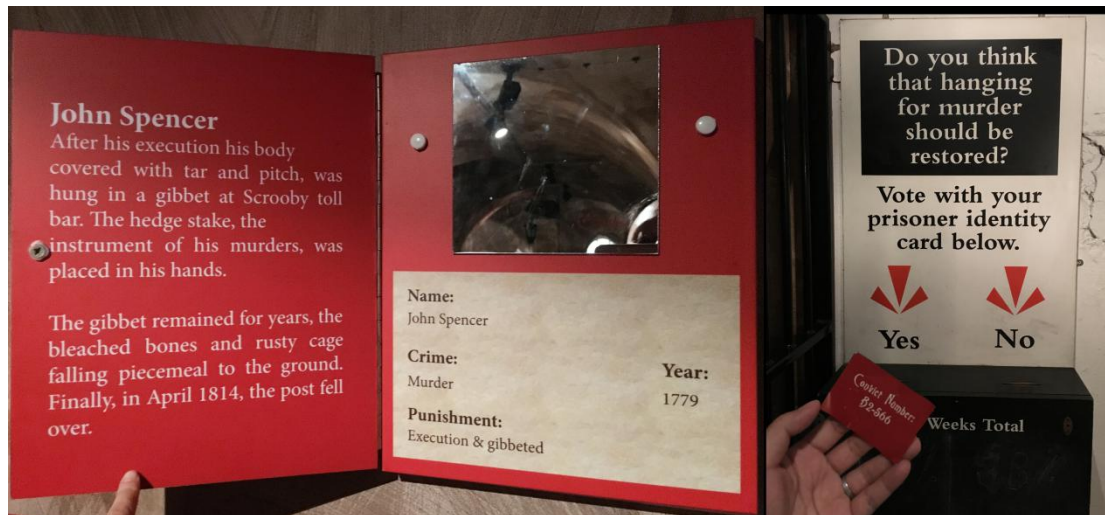


Figure 7. At Galleries of Justice Museum, the audience receives the number plate at the entrance, which can guide the audience to play the role of the real criminals in history, simulating the prison life and punishment; at the exit, the number plate can also be used for voting. Photo source: taken by the author

Many British Museums still keep the traditional form of exhibition, but never stop developing in display planning and design quality. They always adhere to the core idea of the enlightenment and inspire the rational thinking and aesthetic experience of the audience. By inspiring and respecting the thinking ability, cultural understanding ability and innovation ability of the citizens, Britain has become one of the most active and competitive countries in the global art and design activities.

#### 4. Inspiration of the Enlightenment on Exhibition Design of Chinese Museums

During the development of China, many people with great insight and vision have taken the museum as an important part of the education and rejuvenation of the country. In recent years, with a large amount of national investment in people's livelihood projects, the development of museums in China presents a trend of explosive development, and many colleges and universities are also building school museums.[12] In the process of rapid development, the building area has increased dramatically, but it's worth our caution and vigilance to watch out these phenomenon such as the insufficient collection and research, the pompous designs, and the enthusiasm for new technology. A large number of museums with low quality do no good to the public education and school education.

The planning and design of museum exhibition need to complete a proper and elegant translation between exhibits, research results and audience, whose purpose is not to simply attract and please the audience, but to better display works, convey information, provide emotional experience, inspire rational thinking, and offer support for public education of high quality.

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