

1 A Modern Yearning

1.1 The Guze Kannon

The monks of the Hōryūji Temple protested loudly. For over a thousand years, they had guarded the shrine in the octagonal Hall of Dreams. Hidden behind its walls was the Guze Kannon, a seventh-century bodhisattva (Figure 1). Entering would be sacrilege. Thunder and lightning, the monks warned, might strike intruders, or an earthquake destroy the temple. But the bearded American, Ernest Fenollosa, and his young Japanese companion, Okakura Kakuzō, nonetheless insisted. They worked for the Art Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Education and were on a mission, exploring temples and shrines in the western region of Japan. The aim was to document and register historical artworks. Now, in the summer of 1884, they had reached the Hōryūji Temple. Over the monks' protests, they made their way into the shrine. Fenollosa later recalled:

I shall never forget our feelings as the long disused key rattled in the rusty lock. Within the shrine appeared a tall mass closely wrapped about in swathing bands of cotton cloth upon which the dust of ages had gathered. It was no light task to unwrap the contents, some 500 yards of cloth having been used, and our eyes and nostrils were in danger of being choked with the pungent dust. But at last the final folds of the covering fell away, and this marvellous statue, unique in the world, came forth to human sight for the first time in centuries.¹

The statue was not just exquisite craftsmanship, carved life-size in a single piece of camphor wood and covered in gold, but a witness. It testified immediately, as they unwrapped it. 'We saw at once', Fenollosa remembered, 'that it was the supreme masterpiece of Korean creation, and must have proved a most powerful model to the artists of Suiko', Without the statue, he claimed, scholars 'could only conjecture as to the height reached by the peninsula creations'. Now, the greatness of early Korean art had revealed itself and simultaneously delivered a missing link in the history of Japanese art. The sacrilege had transformed the statue from a sacred object into a thing of the past. To Fenollosa, if not to the monks, it was no longer mediating between the human and the divine, but instead between past and present. The old commitments of religion and tradition had given way to the new and more important commitments of historical scholarship. 'Fortunately', Okakura dryly remarked, 'the thunder did not appear'.²

¹ Fenollosa, *Epochs*, vol. I, pp. 50–51. Also, Tanaka, *New Times*, pp. 104–8; Storm, 'Excavating'.

² Fenollosa, *Epochs*, vol. I, p. 50. Okakura in Tanaka, *New Times*, p. 106. The statue, scholars later concluded, was probably made in Japan, but inspired by Korean art, Weinstein, 'Yumedono Kannon'.



Figure 1 Seventh-century bodhisattva, Guze Kannon (179 cm), in the Hall of Dreams, where Ernest Fenollosa and Okakura Kakuzō encountered the statue in 1884 and where it remains today. Unknown artist. Photo by Askaen Co.
Courtesy The Hōryūji Temple, Japan.

1.2 Knowing Things

This Element is about scholars engaging with and trying to understand the past. It differs from most discussions of historical scholarship. The primary focus is not the printed books and articles that are the outcome of scholarship. Instead, it

investigates the process that leads to these works, the encounter between scholars and the material remains of the past. An inspiration has been studies of antiquarianism, traditions of collecting and appreciating old things. In the mid twentieth century, Arnaldo Momigliano showed how modern historical scholarship was indebted to earlier European antiquarianism. In recent decades, Peter N. Miller, Alain Schnapp, and others have not only deepened and expanded Momigliano's investigations but also uncovered different antiquarian traditions in other parts of the world and continuing until today.³ The Element adds to this research by investigating how the transition from antiquarianism to historical scholarship changed our relationship to the things.

Everywhere and always, the studies of antiquarianism have shown, people have collected old things. In royal courts and sacred sites, such as the Hōryūji Temple, antiquities have affirmed similarities between past and present. Monuments, and other remains, have structured and perpetuated collective memory. They have sustained bonds to ancestors, upheld local and national identity, and confirmed the unchangeable order of society. With the changes of the modern world, the need for such confirmation has only increased, inspiring new attention to conservation, preservation, and material heritage. Many are haunted by nostalgia and dream of a better time before modern disruptions. The world may have lost its way, but the material remains promise the restoration of order. These ways of engaging, however, are possible without scholarly handbooks and museum catalogues, comprehensive registers and surveys, critical footnotes and source editions. The desire for old things existed long before modern historical scholarship and, most likely, would be with us today, even if historical scholarship had never emerged. Heritage and history, as David Lowenthal points out, are not the same.⁴

Historical scholarship enabled another relationship to old things. It transformed them, as Fenollosa and Okakura did with the Guze Kannon, into things of the past. As things of the past, the artefacts were remains of an entirely different world beyond. Historians, philologists, and archaeologists, of course, are human beings and suffer from the same fears and longings as their contemporaries. Many have looked for similarities between past and present, and some have succumbed to nostalgia. But what distinguished historical scholarship from other ways of engaging with old things, and revolutionized our relationship to the past, was the emphasis on differences. The past was not the same as the present, or a better version of the present, but

³ On the methodological approach, Eskildsen, *Modern Historiography*, pp. 1–15. On antiquarianism, Momigliano, 'Ancient History'; Miller, *Momigliano*; Miller, *History*; Schnapp, *conquête, World Antiquarianism, histoire universelle*.

⁴ Lowenthal, *Heritage Crusade, Past*. Also, on nostalgia and debates about heritage, Becker, *Yesterday*.

foreign and strange.⁵ By reconnecting the present with this foreign and strange past, the investigations still had consequences in the world. Historical scholarship was never neutral, or detached from the contemporary world, despite claims to the contrary. However, its peculiar power was the power of anachronism, the baring and bridging of differences in time.

The strangeness emphasized the need for things, making the differences accessible and intelligible. Without, as Fenollosa claimed, people ‘could only conjecture’.⁶ The remains did not do so by themselves, but in connection and comparison to other artefacts, revealing historical context and development. The Guze Kannon only testified because Fenollosa and Okakura already were familiar with numerous artworks, in Korea and Japan as well as in the rest of the world. Historical scholarship hereby both intensified and diversified antiquarian interests. Even remains with no relation to the present, and no nostalgic appeal, became cherished as pieces in the puzzle of the past. Artefacts that did not belong to one’s family, city, nation, or religion still mattered as historical sources. By the end of the nineteenth century, when Fenollosa and Okakura arrived at the Hōryūji Temple, the yearning for things of the past had become all-consuming. Scholars were searching for remains everywhere, even if it demanded the violation of sacred shrines and the disruption of traditions that they once preserved.

For many, including Okakura as explained later, disruption was the purpose. Their work, deciphering ancient writings and forgotten languages, exploring ruins and muddy archaeological sites, and arguing with angry monks in distant temples, was a service to modernity. The past was important because it unsettled, rather than confirmed, collective memories and shared values and beliefs. By uncovering its strangeness, historical scholarship proved that the present was only a passing moment in time, that contemporary habits and convictions were not eternal, and that other ways of living and thinking were possible. It revealed that the order of society was not unchangeable. So, the approach was not just different from other ways of engaging with old things, but a refutation. Historical scholarship disproved continuities, denied similarities, and, consequently, accelerated the changes of the modern world.

1.3 Debating Things

The yearning for things of the past not only prompted scholars to search for remains, but also to amass artefacts from around the world in museums, primarily in Europe and North America. These efforts remain controversial.

⁵ For some recent discussions, Lorenz, *Breaking up*. On the early modern origins, Fasolt, *Limits*. On the connection to modern conceptions of time, Phillips, *Historical Distance*; Hartog, *Régimes*; Fritzsche, *Stranded*; Koselleck, *Vergangener Zukunft*.

⁶ Fenollosa, *Epochs*, p. 50.

Debates about acquisition and restitution, the return of artefacts to their places of origin, continue to divide the museum community today. This Element only mentions some of the many controversies in passing. The reader should look elsewhere for more thorough treatments of, say, the British Royal Marines' looting of the ancient African Kingdom of Benin in 1897 or discussions about the return of the so-called Elgin marbles from the British Museum to the Parthenon in Athens.⁷ The Element instead explores how and why scholars, all over the world, developed an obsession with material remains. This exploration may help explain some of the passions and persuasions of the contemporary debates.

In the museum debates, a central distinction has been between 'universalist' and 'nationalist' approaches to the ownership and preservation of artefacts. From a 'universalist' viewpoint, material remains belong to all humankind. They have been traded and exchanged over borders for centuries and originated in cultures and countries that no longer exist. Why should a contemporary Muslim Egyptian have any special claims to the great monuments of the Pharaohs, who spoke a different language and believed in different Gods? From a 'nationalist' viewpoint, modern collections represent earlier injustices and inequalities. The continued trade with antiquities promotes looting and the destruction of archaeological sites and further contributes to the unequal distribution of artefacts across the world. What entitles a few museums in Europe and North America to so many of the world's historical artefacts?⁸ The distinction between 'universalist' and 'nationalist' approaches is based upon twentieth-century cultural property laws and rooted in the belief that old things are things of the past. Both positions assume that material remains reveal the past, that the past is relevant to the contemporary world, and that the artefacts therefore must be preserved and exhibited. There are, of course, other arguments for and against restitution. Some want to restore and revive traditions. All over the world, people are now obsessed with heritage and haunted by nostalgia. Others worry about the standards of care, and level of appreciation, in 'source' countries. However, historical scholarship helped frame the debates.

The Element explores how the discussions developed over time, together with the development of historical scholarship. Section 2 shows how the encounter with people in other parts of the world, and their material remains, challenged Europeans to reconsider their views of world history. This, as described in Section 3, prompted the need for 'universal' or 'encyclopaedic'

⁷ On Benin, Phillips, *Loot*. On the Elgin marbles, Robertson, *Who Owns*. For arguments for restitution, Sarr and Savoy, *Restituer*; D. Hicks, *British Museums*. For different perspectives, Jacobs, *Plunder?*; Grau, *Under discussion*; Cuno, *Whose Culture, Who Owns*.

⁸ Merryman, 'Two Ways'; Cuno, *Who Owns*.

museums, with artefacts from all over the world. The museums also inspired scholars outside of Europe to reconsider the artefacts that remained. These scholars were not necessarily ‘nationalists’, in the sense of the current museum debates. However, most were convinced of the benefits of historical scholarship and therefore wanted to preserve some artefacts in local museums. Section 4 shows how these convictions in the mid twentieth century inspired early debates about acquisition and restitution. Finally, Sections 1 and 5 explore connections between the global engagement with material remains and visions of modernity. So, the Element is not intended as an intervention into the museum debates, but as an investigation of ideas and practices, informing everyone. This investigation reveals not only downsides of historical scholarship, and its obsession with things, but also why it mattered.

1.4 Exhibiting the Past

An acute observer of the European relationship to things was the Japanese scholar Kume Kunitake, who between 1871 and 1873 travelled across North America and Europe with a government delegation. The mission was part of a larger effort to modernize the country. For more than two centuries the Tokugawa Shogunate had partly isolated Japan from the surrounding world. In 1853, the American navy forced the country to open its ports. After a period of unrest, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 not only reinstated imperial power, but also started a process of rapid reform. The delegation, which included several high government officials, should prepare these reforms and document what it meant to be modern. Kume served as clerk and record keeper.

In Europe, Kume was especially fascinated by the many large institutions – archives, libraries, and museums – dedicated to preserving, exploring, and exhibiting the past. The delegation visited several such institutions, and he repeatedly commented on the oddity. In the library of the British Museum, he noted that some of the books ‘have bloodstains on them; some have been retrieved from the embers of fires. Even remnants of incomplete and damaged books have been collected and are kept in glass cases’. In the crammed galleries on the first floor, he saw British pottery and bronze artefacts, Scandinavian prehistoric stone tools, and many Egyptian objects, including ‘ancient coffins and mummies four thousand years old’ (Figure 2). Some objects, he remarked, had been ‘excavated from the earth’, but European archaeologists ‘admire and value all such objects and will not discard any of them’. Later, at the museum of the French National Library, he remarked that while the Japanese hurried to ‘throw out the old and bring in the new’, Europeans were ‘slow to discard old artefacts’.⁹

⁹ Kume, *Iwakura Embassy*, vol. II, pp. 108–9, vol. III, p. 59.



Figure 2 The First Egyptian Room on the first floor the British Museum, as it looked when Kume Kunitake visited. Photo by Frederick York, 1875. Courtesy The Trustees of the British Museum, United Kingdom.

Kume's comments may seem unjust to his countrymen. Japan possessed many great collections of historical artefacts, some, like at the Hōryūji Temple, older and larger than most of those found in Europe. Since the Middle Ages, Japanese writers and artists had celebrated the aesthetic qualities of the worn and the aged. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a strong antiquarian culture had emerged with private gatherings, exhibits, and societies.¹⁰ Revering old things was not strange to the Japanese.

The European relationship to the things, nonetheless, seemed to differ in significant ways. Museums did not just store artefacts that were valuable or beautiful or carried symbolic or religious significance, but, as Kume noted, almost everything surviving. The purpose was not primarily to admire or worship the artefacts, but to make the past available to contemporaries. They were presented together with other remains from the same period and place, allowing for an understanding of historical context, and in chronological series, offering an overview of historical developments. The museums, by bringing things together in space, allowed for travels through time. Going through the

¹⁰ Suzuki, *Antiquarians*.

galleries of the British Museum (Figure 3), Kume reported, ‘the sequence of stages of civilization . . . are immediately apparent to the eye’.¹¹ The collections, moreover, were open to the public. They not just benefitted individual collectors, religious institutions, or royal households but presented the past to society at large.

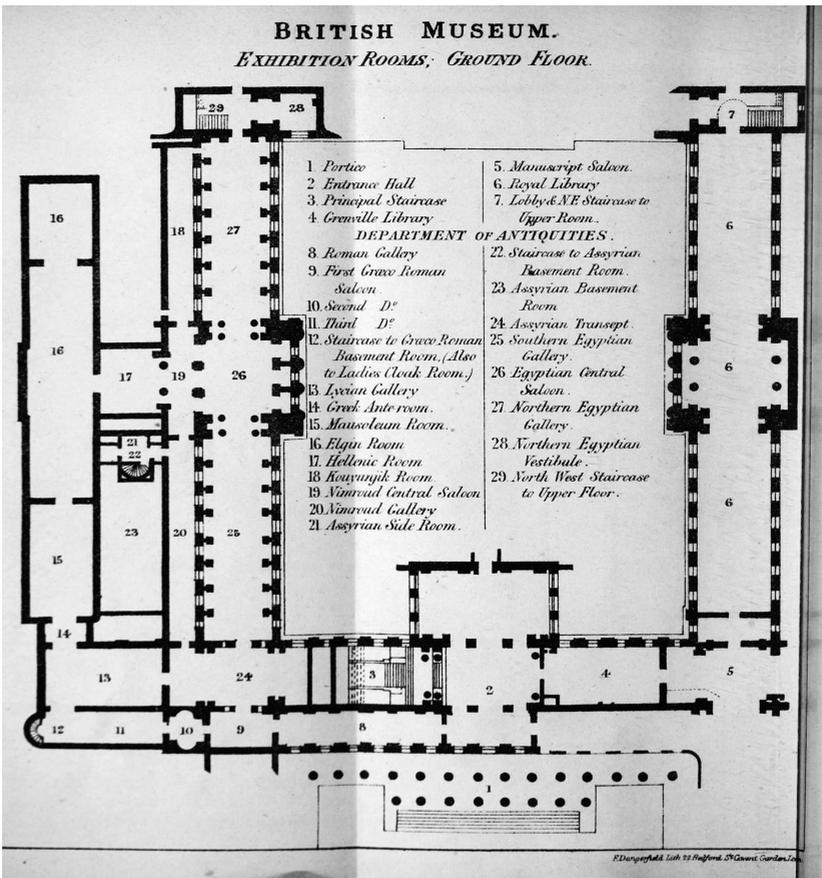


Figure 3 Plan of the galleries of the Department of Antiquities on the ground floor of the British Museum that Kume Kunitake walked through, following the ‘stages of civilization’. *A Guide to the Exhibition Rooms of the Departments of Natural History and Antiquities* (London: Printed by order of the Trustees, 1871), p. v. Courtesy Biodiversity Heritage Library, United States of America.

¹¹ Kume, *Iwakura Embassy*, vol. II, p. 109.

1.5 A Recent Yearning

This obsession with reviving and exhibiting the past was recent. After visiting the South Kensington Museum, later the Victoria and Albert Museum, Kume remarked that it ‘had not been very long established’.¹² He continued to admonish his Japanese readers not to overestimate the antiquity of European institutions. Only during last forty years, he claimed, European countries had developed into their current shape. At the beginning of the century, great industrial cities like Liverpool and Glasgow had fewer than a hundred thousand inhabitants. Trade only boomed with the introduction of steamships and railways. Many great fortunes had been created in the last decades. The same could be said for historical museums. Like the Japanese, Europeans had always collected and many of the objects in contemporary museums came from these collections. However, only recently large public museums had been created, or reorganized, with the specific purpose of reviving and exhibiting the past.

Few of the museums that Kume visited were older than the industrial towns of Northern England and Scotland. The British Museum, often considered the oldest such museum in the world, was established in 1753 and opened to the public in 1759. However, the institution was not initially a historical museum, but primarily a collection of books, manuscripts, and specimens of natural history, from the eclectic private collection of the physician Sir Hans Sloane. The museum subsequently amassed more historical artefacts and established an independent Department of Antiquities in 1807. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the museum rapidly expanded its collection, partly thanks to British wars and colonial conquests. Its large collection of Egyptian antiquities was established after the defeat of Napoleon’s army in 1801 at Alexandria, where the British captured many boxes filled with statues and other antiquities, ready to be shipped to Paris. Others were acquired by traders, diplomats, and private collectors. A British diplomat to Constantinople, Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, dismantled the marbles from the Parthenon in Athens and sold them to the British government in 1816.¹³

At first, curators at the British Museum disagreed whether they should organize the many new acquisitions according to aesthetic or historical principles. Only gradually the many antiquities were placed in historical context and chronological series.¹⁴ The engagement with the past, moreover, was an ongoing process, demanding constant reordering. Still in 1852, the Hungarian exile politician and polymath Frenec Pulszky critically observed about the British Museum:

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 57. ¹³ Miller, *Noble Cabinet*. ¹⁴ Jenkins, *Archaeologists*.