Romanticism on the Net
An open access journal devoted to British Romantic literature

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Numéro 70, spring 2018

Recollecting the Nineteenth-Century Museum

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074441ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1074441ar

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Éditeur(s)

Université de Montréal

ISSN

2563-2582 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Thomas, S. (2018). Introduction – A Tour, a Text, a Body, a Building, a Model: Some (Fore-)words for the Nineteenth-Century Museum. *Romanticism on the Net*, (70), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.7202/1074441ar

Romanticism on the Net #70 (Spring 2018). Special issue on 'Recollecting the Nineteenth-Century Museum.' Guest-edited by Sophie Thomas (Ryerson University)

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Introduction -- A Tour, a Text, a Body, a Building, a Model: Some (Fore-)words for the Nineteenth-Century Museum

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Biographical Note

Sophie Thomas is Professor of English at Ryerson University in Toronto, where she teaches eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature. She is the author of *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (Routledge, 2008), and of articles and chapters that address the crosscurrents between literature, material culture, and visual culture in the Romantic period. She is currently completing a book on objects, collections, and museums at the turn of the nineteenth century and beginning a new project on Romanticism, museums, and the poetics of sculpture. She would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for ongoing support for these projects.

1. Those interested in the museums of the long nineteenth century are likely to experience, to rework that old adage, both feast and famine. In the UK alone, from the British Museum to the National Gallery to the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, the period witnessed the establishment and growth of a number of large, public facing museums whose historical, scientific, and cultural importance only continues to grow. At the same time, in the nooks and crannies as well as the wide open spaces of Georgian and Victorian England, a number of lesser known experiments in early museology, many the products of committed collectors, have largely come and gone. Some of these were popular commercial ventures, such as William Bullock's London Museum in Piccadilly, which in its later incarnation—the Egyptian Hall—remained a site for ephemeral and exotic entertainments right though the nineteenth century; some, for more carefully "curated" audiences, reflected the professional preoccupations of their creators—John Hunter's anatomical preparations, John Soane's evocative architectural fragments—and served both personal and educative functions; and still others occupy spaces somewhere in the middle, such as Du Bourg's Museum of Cork Models, which offered to a curious public the edifying experience (no pun intended) of a tour through a room full of classical monuments, painstakingly replicated.

2. The topic and title of this special issue, "Recollecting the Nineteenth-Century Museum," is drawn from a conference held at Ryerson University in Toronto, at which two of the papers it includes saw their first iterations. The broader intentions behind that event, which brought together researchers from university and museum communities, are very much active here: to recollect the museums of the long nineteenth century, and situate them, or at least the ideas and practices that shaped them, in conversation with one another. "Recollecting" implies acts of memory, and research on early museums often involves bringing forgotten institutions, or their overlooked

features, back into focus. The point of the exercise, however, is not to "museumify" them in turn, as objects of further collection, but rather to situate them as active agents in expanding fields of inquiry, shaping as well as shaped by emerging bodies of knowledge in the nineteenth century. To that end, it is perhaps not surprising that a pedagogical imperative is central to all of the projects that animate these essays, which are at the same time alert to how museums reflect the state of the nation, and more pointedly, the nation's knowledge.

3. As an entity that aimed to communicate a rich body of classical and antiquarian knowledge to a diverse public, Richard De Bourg's Museum of Cork Models makes an excellent starting point. Although its earliest iteration dates from 1776, Rees Arnott-Davies attends to the period from 1802 to its sale in 1819, during which time it was located in London's Lower Grosvenor Street. His essay uses a print depicting the disposition of cork models in its interior—models of primarily Roman monuments, many in ruin—as a starting point for a "reading" of the museum that unpacks the myriad ways display methods, techniques for reproduction, and for constituting and addressing an audience, were "strategically composed and recomposed" over its long lifetime. Arnott-Davies's analysis conveys a clear sense of how representations of classical antiquity circulated in London's ever vibrant exhibitionary culture, and its associated media ecology, while capturing how the display, to survive, needed both to instruct and amuse: to gratify curiosity, offer an experience of the marvellous (which the impressive verisimilitude of De Bourg's models amply provided), and capitalize on the public's appetite for intellectual "improvement."

4. Emma Peacocke's essay takes up the pedagogic potential of the museum by linking it to curricula in the sciences, and to teaching practices at Oxford in the nineteenth century. The first part makes a strong case for the influence of William Paley's *Natural Theology*, and of William Buckland's

work in the field of minerology, while the focus of the second part is on how their writing and pedagogy informed the creation of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (just as Paley's work had shaped the Ashmolean before it), in large measure through their impact on a generation of students that included John Ruskin and Henry Acland, both strong advocates of the project and the values it enshrined. Peacocke offers a fine-grained account of how the teaching of geology and natural history in particular shaped attitudes to the museum—its necessity, purpose and design—and thus contributed to its realized, material form. Architecture and design are themselves potentially powerful pedagogic tools, and indeed the museum's decorative program was designed to enable the visitor to "read" the museum as they might the bible or the "book of nature." This illustrative power (illustrative of the museum-as-text) was harnessed of course by other didactic enterprises keen to make knowledge visible, such as the Museum of Practical Geology, established in 1851.

5. Although the Oxford Museum is noted for its impact on Victorian ferrovitreous architecture, the regard of figures such as Ruskin for the building's "medieval" qualities—its natural synthesis of the physical world, the written word, and material fabric—provides a suggestive link to the essay by Janine Rogers and John Holmes, who also view the museum as a composed, interpretive space. For them, it is profoundly structured by the activities of reading and writing—by literary culture, broadly understood—as well as by the emerging practices of visual and material culture. Literary culture is here situated in a broader history that reaches back to medieval (cultural) practices, and indeed the medievalism of the Gothic Revival, and its impact on the fabric of Victorian natural history museums, offers a vehicle for reassessing how the biological sciences, and their engagement with the evolutionary past, were framed in inherently literary terms. A variety of such museums (the examples are drawn from London, Vienna and Toronto) are examined from

the perspective of their marginal decorations—figures of plants and animals, both carved and painted—that so suggestively reference the pages of medieval manuscripts. Figures such as monkeys in the margins and borders, along with the neo-gothic buildings that contain them, capture and reflect a worldview with deep roots in the "building-as-book" tradition that effectively layers new knowledge onto old, investing science and its display with both values and vocabularies drawn from religion, art and literature.

6. Richard De Bourg, like many other museum entrepreneurs, accompanied his exhibits with descriptive catalogues that offered extended textual explanations of the models on display—or rather, of the originals that informed them—as instances of embodied antiquity (and De Bourg frequently served as tour guide, a "virtual *cicerone*," conducting visitors through the collection himself). Verity Burke's essay also investigates the extent to which museums are textualized spaces, by drawing out analogies between narrative procedures and material order that are both intriguing and formative. The anatomical collections of the surgeon John Hunter, which would later be reconstituted as the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons in London, were—like many other anatomical collections—deeply intermedial. Hermeneutically composed, first of all, in the form of panel text, catalogues and guidebooks, and extended by periodical accounts of the museum in journals such as *Household Words* in the mid-nineteenth century (Burke examines in particular two essays by Frederick Knight Hunt), the narration of specimens can be seen as a strategy for supplementing as well as consolidating the knowledge they quite literally embody. That embodied knowledge was, moreover, articulated through a variety of media—not only text, but also through lectures and images. The specimens *and* the museum goer's encounters with them were thus "constructed both materially and textually," and Burke attends to the relatively understudied use of literary devices in these texts that in turn recreate the

spaces, objects and experiences to be "found" in a museum. In a case such as the Hunterian, this effort repositions it as a site of information for the wider public, as well as a scene of (potentially horrified) amusement.

7. A tour, a text, a body, a building, a model—these are just a few of the terms that have found their way (along with a few monkeys) into this issue, or rather, into the language these essays use in connection with the broader entity we call the museum. Metaphorically speaking, they each capture something distinctive about how museums enter cultural discourse in the nineteenth century, but at the same time, they speak in more than metaphorical ways to each other. They draw our attention to the synergies, both poetical and actual, between buildings and their contents, between texts and things, between *formativity* (if such a word may be coined) and function. Although the instances "recollected" here are necessarily selective, they make their way into an ongoing conversation about what—and who—the museum is for, to which one reply, at least, might be: readers.