WHERE KNOWLEDGE IS FREE

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum and creator of the widely acclaimed series, A History of the World in 100 Objects, *tells Brunswick's David Yelland about running the "lending library of the world"*

More than two centuries before the internet, the founders of the British Museum offered citizens free access to information from the entire world, in a forum free from political control. The museum has remained a catalyst for new thinking, rooted in the power of the object. Under Neil MacGregor, who has been director since 2002, the museum has now embraced another role: as the "lending library of the world," creating partnerships across the globe.

FREE ACCESS FOR ALL

"The point of the British Museum was to put the whole world in one place. It has never been about Britain, despite being the first public institution to be called *British*," says MacGregor. "From the beginning it aimed at universality, not only by representing the whole world in the collections but also by being freely available to 'all studious and curious persons native and foreign.'" MacGregor sees the museum as one of the surviving expressions of an 18th century optimism, which he describes as "a view that if humanity could look at itself, it would understand itself and peace and happiness would break out."

Global commerce was a key motivation in the creation of the first national museum in the world, says MacGregor. "Why does a parliament at that moment create a free museum and library? Naturally, this is connected with the fact that London was trading with the world. In order to trade effectively, we needed to understand the world. What concerned them was allowing the citizen free access to global information," he says. "Today, this is equivalent to saying that we need proper broadband access and an internet-competent public to compete in the world. The government believed it was in the national interest to have this kind of knowledge."

What was new and radical was that this was not a royal collection but a civic institution. "Elsewhere in Europe, there were princely collections or the Vatican Museums, which were more or less open to the public. In the British Museum you find for the first time a state buying a collection for its citizens rather than expropriating a royal

Photograph: Andrew Testa / The New York Times / Redux / eyevine

"WE DO NOT SEEK TO CREATE OUTPOSTS, RATHER TO BUILD PARTNERSHIPS"

one. The British Museum is an 'open university,' established when London did not have a university. We might say that this was the beginning of a knowledge economy."

The museum was founded in 1753 on the bequest of a vast collection of objects by Sir Hans Sloane, an Irish doctor and friend to Isaac Newton and George Frederic Handel. Sloane had used his considerable fortune to build an impressive library and collection from all around the world. "It was taking what was essentially a private collection and saying: 'this is the private collection of everybody.'" In acquiring Sloane's collection, the politicians showed that they understood the value of knowledge and information.

INDEPENDENCE OF MIND

The museum's founders made the far-sighted decision that government must not be able to control the organization that provides information. Instead of having the museum run by politicians, they created the trustee system. At the time, Members of Parliament had to belong to the Church of England, but the British Museum trustees very quickly included Catholics and non-conformist Christians.

"It is not just the first museum trust in the world, it is also the first parliamentary trust. That choice had one hugely important consequence: if it had been run as a department of state, only Anglicans would have been able to hold office," thus narrowing its intellectual scope, MacGregor says. "Sloane's collection included images of gods from different cultures, so comparative religion was built into collecting from the very beginning and that, of course, is a radical area." Meanwhile, the study of geology was transforming our understanding of time, and therefore challenging the notion of authority in scriptures.

"I think we have always believed in the exchange of ideas and the importance of presenting views without endorsement," says MacGregor. He reflects on the museum's illustrious history of accommodating radical voices: "We have Karl Marx, and later John Lennon, applying for their reader's tickets. London became the place where political dissidents came for asylum in the mid-19th century. And the library of the British Museum became the place where the politics of the 19th century were written. It is a necessary part of a political process."

THE POWER OF OBJECTS

In MacGregor's BBC Radio 4 series, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, he took pieces from the British Museum and told their story in a larger context. The power of these objects comes from what MacGregor calls "uncomfortable truths."

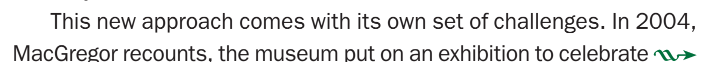
One of his favorite examples is a group of 16th century artefacts known as the Benin Bronzes (in fact made from brass) from Nigeria. When the bronzes arrived at the museum and could be properly studied in the late 1920s, "there became no question that western Africa had civilizations and material culture that were at the same level as the highest of Renaissance Europe or ancient China at that time. And a whole set of prejudiced assumptions had to collapse because of that. Such objects overturn the very basis on which their acquisition was made," he says.

In today's digital era, when information can be so easily distorted, objects continue to tell truths that are often inconvenient. "And that of course is the point – that these objects can't be falsified and the more you know about them the more they challenge the neat categories we want to have," says MacGregor. "As the museum grows and as new things arrive, new hypotheses have to come." Few objects have challenged categorization as effectively as the Cyrus Cylinder which the museum has now lent to both Iran and the US. (See page 67.)

LENDING LIBRARY OF THE WORLD

Objects present a multi-faced narrative that carry with them ideas beyond the culture they represent. They therefore have a significant role to play in international cultural relations. "The British Museum lends far more than any other major museum. We are becoming the lending library of the world," says MacGregor. "We do not seek to create outposts, but rather to build partnerships. We have a long-running partnership with the Shanghai Museum, for example. If the public in China are to see artefacts from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, these have to come from somewhere else. This is part of becoming citizens of the world, in the same way that Britain did in the 18th century. Our partnerships also involve training, the exchange of curators and exhibitions, and joint collecting so that this becomes, in a very real sense, a resource for the world."

This new approach comes with its own set of challenges. In 2004, MacGregor recounts, the museum put on an exhibition to celebrate



Neil MacGregor has been Director of the British Museum since 2002. He read languages at Oxford, philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and law at the University of Edinburgh. He studied 17th- and 19th-century art at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and later lectured there. He sits on the boards of the UK's National Theatre and the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. In 1981 he became Editor of the arts periodical, *The Burlington Magazine*, and in 1987 became Director of London's National Gallery.

the centenary of the National Museum in Khartoum, Sudan. "It demonstrated that for thousands of years there has been a big divide between north and south Sudan and effectively you have a geopolitical fault line somewhere south of Khartoum," he says.

With controversy raging over atrocities in Darfur, in western Sudan, a month before the exhibition, "We had to decide whether we were actually willing to put on an exhibition identified with the government," MacGregor says. "But we decided that it was more important than ever for the public here to try to understand the country's long history." The special exhibition had no financial sponsor and the museum faced having to charge for admission. "But the trustees, I think very admirably, decided that we must take off the entrance charge and simply find the funds to do it, and instead ask visitors to make a contribution to Save The Children and Oxfam's work in Darfur. That was the right decision."

Decisions such as this are not uncommon, says MacGregor. "One of the great 18th century ideals was the notion of the republic of letters, the community of inquiry. This was nothing to do with politics or rulers, but simply people of good faith inquiring and working together. I think the museum has to fight very hard to preserve that community now, even if it means working with colleagues from regimes of which we disapprove, or which are behaving badly. To work with those colleagues on a scientific basis is not to condone that activity. There obviously is a point at which you have to stop. But I think you should put that boundary as far away as possible to keep the exchange going. Iran has been a very good case in point."

It is important to encourage the exchange of ideas and opinions so we can understand, as MacGregor says, "The people with whom we most disagree," and to "hear why the world looks to them the way it does. Our job is to promote an understanding. It is a constant and difficult balancing act that you are going to get wrong, but you have got to try."

David Yelland is a Partner in Brunswick's London office.
Additional reporting by **David Lasserson** of Brunswick Arts.

For more than a decade, the British Museum has been a client of **Brunswick Arts**, an international communications consultancy dedicated to managing the reputation and interests of arts, cultural and charitable organizations around the world.

CHINA, 1960S

CHAIRMAN MAO PIN

An estimated 5bn pins were made during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). They were worn as an expression of loyalty to Chairman Mao and the Communist Party of China and almost every Chinese person wore one, from party leaders to children.

The striking imagery and powerful language of the Cultural Revolution permeated every aspect of life in China during this period and these button badges or pins celebrate that.

This pin shows Mao's portrait on a red globe above a lighthouse shining out over a stormy sea. The inscription on the back reads "Mao Zedong: Thought is the lighthouse for world revolution."

Neil MacGregor: "We wanted to look at Mao, the phenomenon and iconography, to see the changing attitudes towards Mao over time. We've got a wonderful collection of buttons. More contemporary ones even feature Mao urging you to buy shares on the stock market. They allow you to see how China has transformed while maintaining the language of its past."

BABYLON, SOUTHERN IRAQ, ABOUT 539-530 BC
A DECLARATION OF GOOD KINGSHIP

CYRUS CYLINDER

The British Museum has in its collection the Cyrus Cylinder, one of the most famous objects to have survived from the ancient world. Often referred to as the first charter of human rights, it is valued as a symbol of tolerance and respect for different peoples and different faiths. In 2010, the cylinder was loaned to Iran, a country formerly ruled by Cyrus, where it was enthusiastically received.

This clay cylinder is inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform with an account by Cyrus, King of Persia (559-530 BC) of his conquest of Babylon and capture of Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king. Under Cyrus, the Persian empire became the largest kingdom the world had ever seen, stretching across the Middle East and unifying many tribes, languages and cultures. The king's declaration, placed at the base of a building in ancient Babylon in what is now modern Iraq, was found in 1878 during a British Museum excavation.

Neil MacGregor: "The cylinder shows how the Persians ran their empire. When they conquered Babylon they allowed the captive peoples to go back to their homes and, most importantly, allowed the restoration of all the different religions. Freedom of peoples and the freedom of religion is what this document is. In modern Iran, the cylinder has become especially important as the country seeks to present itself as having the greatest freedom of religious expression in the Middle East. It has synagogues and churches and this has become a subversive document in many different ways.

What I find fascinating about this object is that it undermines assumptions and raises controversy in all kinds of areas. For many people it comes as a surprise that the Persians, whom we know through the Greeks and whom many of us had been taught to regard as barbarians, actually had an extremely sophisticated notion of freedoms and differences.

When we lent the cylinder to Tehran it was seen by nearly 1m people and soon became the focus of an extraordinary debate about the true nature of the Iranian identity, causing people to question whether the essential character of Iran and its history was Islamic or pre-Islamic. After the exhibition, the Iranians returned it exactly as promised without any difficulty at all, but the country was still left with controversy, presumably because it left behind a very 18th century question about the relationship between faith and the state."

THE CYRUS CYLINDER IS TOURING THE US IN 2013

- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
  — June 20-August 4
- Asian Art Museum, San Francisco
  — August 9-September 22
- J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa, Los Angeles
  — October 2-December 2

UNITED KINGDOM, 1903

SUFFRAGETTE-DEFACED PENNIES

The women's suffrage movement in Britain grew in the early 20th century with increasing civil disobedience, rallies and demonstrations. These coins – minted in 1903 – were used as part of this campaign. Stamped by supporters with the slogan "votes for women," they were put back into circulation to spread the message of the suffragettes.

At the time, defacing a coin was a serious criminal offence, and the perpetrators risked a prison sentence had they been caught. Defacing small change rather than a silver coin meant that it was less likely to be taken out of circulation by the banks and the message could have circulated for many years. The law giving women the same voting rights as men was passed in 1928.

GRAYSON PERRY, BRITISH ARTIST, 1960-
FROM THE EXHIBITION "THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN CRAFTSMAN"

THE ROSETTA VASE

Prize-winning contemporary artist Grayson Perry collaborated with the British Museum to create an exhibition where he chose 170 objects from its collection – made by unknown men and women throughout history – alongside 30 works of his own creation. Vases made by Perry, such as this, and covered in witty captions, were displayed alongside objects from the past 2m years of culture and civilization. Visitors were taken on a journey to his imaginary world, exploring themes connected with notions of craftsmanship and sacred journeys.

Grayson Perry: "The exhibition was a memorial to all the anonymous craftsmen that over the centuries have fashioned the man-made wonders of the world … The craftsman's anonymity I find especially resonant in an age of the celebrity artist."

The Rosetta Vase by Grayson Perry, courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London, © Grayson Perry, photograph © Stephen White.
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NIGERIA, EDO PEOPLES, 16TH CENTURY

BENIN BRONZES: ENCOUNTER WITH EUROPEANS

These brass plaques show aspects of Benin court rituals in the 16th century, shortly after Europe's first contact with West Africa. They also celebrate major historical events and convey representations associated with kingship.

The figure at the center of this plaque is the *Oba* – the king of Benin in Nigeria. Two attendants kneel beside him and in the background on either side are two tiny figures, identified as Portuguese traders, characterized by their long hair and European-style hats. The composition can be seen as depicting how the Oba and his officials manage and control European trade.

When these plaques were first seen in Europe in the late 1890s they astounded art critics who couldn't believe that such technically accomplished sculptures were created by African artists.

POLYNESIA, 18TH CENTURY

HAWAIIAN FEATHER HELMET

Explorer Captain James Cook went on a voyage to find the passage connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans but instead he and his crew explored the Pacific and landed in Hawaii. Upon arrival they were presented with gifts from the king, among them chieftains' helmets – *mahioles* – rare and precious objects made of red and yellow feathers, including this one.

This object now stands as a vivid emblem of the kind of fatal misunderstandings that have featured throughout European contact with people across the globe.

Upon arrival, Cook was given these sacred items and treated like a chieftain with godly status. He and his men spent a month repairing their ship and participating in a local festival devoted to the season of peace. Shortly after they left, a storm forced them back to the island where the seasons had changed; it was now the season of war. Violence broke out and Cook was killed at the hands of the same people who gave him the helmet.

Feathers were associated with divinity and were the Hawaiian's most valuable raw material. It is believed that nearly 200 people would have been dedicated to collecting and storing the materials and manufacturing these helmets, sometimes taking generations to produce the final product.