Touching Art

Touching Art:
The Poetics and the Politics
of Exhibiting the Tree of Life

By

Maria Emília Fonseca

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To the memory of my father.
To my homeland, Mozambique.
To my husband, Joaquim, and my son, Miguel.

“Works of art are made unnecessarily remote.”

Berger, 1972: 11

“The new type of art institute cannot be an art museum as it has been until now, but no museum at all. The new type will be more like a power station, a producer of energy.”

Alexander Dorner, 1947: 116

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FOREWORD

"No one who has ever loved Africa could ever escape it,"[1] assures Beryl Markham.

Born from Portuguese parents in Mozambique, I was brought up and educated in that country, where I also got married, gave birth to my son and witnessed Independence. I had, indeed, planned to keep on living there for as long as possible. Difficult circumstances and unexpected adversities, however, forced me to leave, much against my will.

Yet, as Beryl Markham says in *West with the Night*, "Africa has never left me; it is I who left Africa[2]" and I have carried *my* Africa in my heart all my life.

This work, therefore, came up as a corollary of both my inner journey towards Peace and Reconciliation with my homeland, and my academic interest and curiosity. I, therefore, devoted myself to it with true dedication and deep passion. To a certain extent, it was my very own way of healing my wounds while, at the same time, paying a tribute to the land to which I owe being the person I am.

I am now going back to Mozambique on a visit which will work at several different levels. On the one hand, it is going to be the logic closing of a circle that has been left open in my life; on the other hand, it is the opportunity to go one step further in my academic work, by researching into the development of the project analysed and described in this study. Moreover, it is going to function as the moment of "gratification[3]" to which Stuart Hall alludes, since I am going to present and make this work known to the people of Mozambique and, particularly, to all those involved in the *Transforming Arms into Tools* Project. They were, in fact, both the trigger to my research and my great inspiration.

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[1] Markham, Beryl, *West with the Night.* San Francisco: North Point Press 1983 [1942].
[2] Ibid.
[3] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" in Durham, M.G. and Kellner, D.M. (eds.) *Media and Cultural Studies*.

Beryl Markham was absolutely right. I haven't escaped Africa, I did not wish to, and I keep going back to it in different sorts of journeys, be it geographic, intellectual, affective or any other wise.

—Maria Emília Fonseca
October, 2010.

PREFACE

Maria Emilia Fonseca has contributed this fascinating study to a growing body of work–including film, performance and music as well as published books and articles–which are inspired in one way or another by two sculptures in the collections of the British Museum: the *Throne of Weapons* and the *Tree of Life*. In a few short years the *Throne* and the *Tree* have achieved iconic status around the world, undoubtedly helped by the combined marketing and publicity capabilities of the British Museum, Christian Aid (who supported the Arms into Tools project and helped to commission the *Tree*) and the BBC (who broadcast the film *Tree of Guns* and used the *Tree* on the title credits of its TV series *The Museum*). Fonseca's work examines in detail how the British Museum has interpreted the significance of the sculptures by the way in which they have been displayed, and how this articulation has contributed not only to a public understanding of the chain of events which led to their construction in Mozambique, but also to a public perception of Africa and of the British Museum's relationship with that continent, its peoples and history.

However, while it is important and enlightening to discuss the *Tree* in the context of continents, countries, large institutions and organisations, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that the sculpture represents individual people, and that these individuals are ultimately responsible for its creation–though we will never know more than a handful of them by name. Museums are more and more concerned with portraying intangible as well as tangible heritage as a way of building an emotional bridge with a past inhabited by people as well as by the objects they created, especially when charged with describing traumatic histories of warfare, slavery and the abuse of human rights. The *Throne of Weapons* and the *Tree of Life* helped the British Museum's public towards a wider and more profound understanding of the civil war in Mozambique, just as the artwork *La Bouche du Roi* by Romuald Hazoumé–also mentioned in Fonseca's work–helped towards a deeper realisation of the Atlantic Slave Trade's terrible legacy; in a very subtle way, the *South Africa Landscape* on the forecourt of the British Museum has painted a picture of the beauty of the land and its art against a backdrop of the troubled past of that country, particularly during the apartheid regime.

The book *A Different Kind of War Story* by the anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (1997) explores the many different voices of those who were involved in Mozambique's brutal civil war, allowing them to tell through poetry, prose and pictures the stories of those who were the real heroes as well as the victims of the war. The history books tell us that Frelimo finally won the war and that peace was brokered by the United Nations, but in fact peace was achieved in the main by people who, though unarmed, were brave enough to reject the culture of violence and the addiction to the gun which had taken hold of the country. In this context the *Tree* has a particular significance, because–as mentioned in Fonseca's study– it was beneath trees that schools, hospitals and churches would be set up when the buildings which originally housed them had been destroyed. The *Throne* and the *Tree* are memorials to those brave people– they are war memorials but they celebrate another kind of courage and another kind of victory. They teach lessons which all the world can learn, and the extraordinary tour of the *Throne* has brought their message to many thousands of people around the United Kingdom and beyond.

The *Tree* and the *Throne* also contain the stories of the individual artists who made them, and of those, including myself, who had the privilege to be involved in the way in which the sculptures were displayed so that these stories could begin to be told to a global audience, an objective to which this study is a significant contribution. I can only tell certain elements of that story from my point of view, but to readers of this book it may provide a useful context in which to appreciate the discussion which follows.

On a cold, grey day in January 2002 I headed along the Thames on my way to an exhibition at the Oxo Tower. I heard it was concerned with re-cycled metal sculpture from Mozambique, but that did not prepare me in any way for what I saw in the gallery. A strange array of objects was on show: birds, reptiles and animals of every description; men and women dancing, embracing, playing musical instruments, tilling the fields. Then there were everyday objects: cars, buses, furniture of all types. These sculptures were evidently made with skill and humour, though it was not this element which was the most remarkable thing about them–it was that they were all made from guns. One work amongst all these extraordinary sculptures seemed to stand out. It was a large throne, apparently made entirely of AK47s, though later I discovered that many other guns had been used in its construction. Two ammunition magazines formed a gracefully arching back above which the butts, drilled with holes to take carrying straps, seemed to suggest the eyes and mouths of two faces crying in pain.

This was my first encounter with the Transforming Arms into Tools (TAE) project and the work of its artists. I bought the throne for the British Museum and in the following weeks I began to find out more about the project. It was established in 1995, three years after the long civil war in Mozambique had come to an end, though the guns which had been used in the conflict were still out in the countryside, hidden in homes or buried in the bush. As Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane, the founder of the project and Chairman of the Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM) says:

> "I tell people that sleeping with a gun in your bedroom is like sleeping with a snake–one day it will turn round and bite you. We tell people we are not disarming you. We are transforming your guns into ploughshares, so you can cultivate your land and get your daily bread".

The project was very successful, so much so that, although an estimated 7 million guns remain hidden, to date half a million have been given up in return for tools, bicycles, sewing machines–even a tractor. The artists who originally created sculptures from these weapons at Maputo's renowned art college, the *Núcleo de Arte*, now work in a specially equipped centre provided by CCM.

In 2003 I travelled with my friends from Christian Aid to Mozambique to meet Bishop Sengulane and the artists of TAE to discuss a collaborative project which Christian Aid had generously agreed to support. We had looked at a particular site in the African galleries in which I hoped the artists of TAE might create a "site specific" sculpture. Armed with a film of the galleries, we had a brainstorming session in Maputo with the artists, with Bishop Sengulane and with Albino Forquilha who was the organiser of the project and had himself been a child soldier. I also talked with museum colleagues in Maputo and met with some of Mozambique's internationally known artists, in particular Malangatana, whose paintings during the civil war helped to feed the voices of protest which eventually led to peace in 1992.

We looked at the film from every angle, then someone suggested that as there is already one "tree" in the African galleries (a metal 'tree'of pots), so how about another? Good idea, but what sort of tree–mango? baobab? cashew?–mangos are sexy, baobabs are spooky, cashews mean money - or maybe a symbolic tree? A symbolic tree–it was then that the idea of the *Tree of Life* was born. We left feeling both elated at the possibilities of the project and sombre at the suffering from which it had grown. Soon after our return, e-mails and drawings began flying backwards and forwards between Maputo and London. What design? How heavy? Would it fit? Then pictures arrived showing the *Tree* under

construction, and at that point I think we all knew that this was actually going to happen. The following year we made a second visit to Maputo, this time to witness guns being unearthed and handed in, to meet some of the war veterans who had benefited from the project–and, of course, to see the completed sculpture. The first sight of the *Tree of Life* in the courtyard of TAE was a wonderfully exciting and moving moment, as it was to meet the artists again who had so skilfully constructed it: Cristóvão Canhavato (Kester), Hilário Nhatugueja, Fiel dos Santos and Adelino Maté. They had made it in three sections, with a separate base, trunk and branches, the latter causing particular problems as Adelino recalls: "As for the foliage, that was another discussion. We had to find light pieces. Then we found the part of the AK47 which sits above the barrel."

Creating the *Tree of Life* proved a particularly emotional experience for them, as Fiel recalls, "We had some sad moments, thinking of what those guns did. They killed people, children, old people, women."

"How many guns are there in the *Tree*?" asked Hilário. "When you think that every AK47 magazine takes 36 bullets, and every bullet can take a life." Some of the horror of what they were describing was brought home by our trips into the bush to speak to people in and around the villages of Boane and Matutuine. Here we met men who had lost many of their family and friends during the war, and who themselves had been seriously injured and were benefiting from the project. We also saw the process of unearthing buried weapons and handing them to the team from TAE.

Yet it was back in Maputo that two of the most moving events of the trip took place. One evening the artists loaded the *Tree* into a pickup truck and drove it to a nearby open space known as Peace Park. There they set up the *Tree* as the local people walked home through the park at sunset: those who had fought in the war, who had lost friends and family, and those who were not born or who were too young to remember. Reading and hearing about some of the history of the so-called "civil war" in Mozambique had made me increasingly aware that this was a war almost entirely created by external forces, forces which were in many ways represented by the guns, manufactured all over the world, from which the *Tree of Life* is made. I was also becoming aware that peace was achieved not so much by soldiers and politicians but by the refusal of the people of Mozambique to submit to a culture of violence, and that the *Tree of Life* had become a kind of war memorial, symbolising the bravery and creativity of Mozambicans who had helped to make peace possible. A few days later the *Tree* was in another part of Maputo, though this time with political and religious leaders gathered beneath its branches to sign a commitment to peace on the National Day of Peace and Reconciliation.

"We artists want to turn the situation around, change the story" said Hilário, addressing the assembled crowd, "changing these instruments of death into hope, life and prosperity. This *Tree* symbolises life, symbolises a future, symbolises hope".

I hope that the *Tree* has inspired some of Hilário's optimism amongst the many people from around the world who have seen it over the past five years; I also hope that, like the *Throne of Weapons*, it has been an object to make us all consider deeply our part in the inter-linked human family, and the way our thoughts and actions may profoundly affect the lives of other people around the world. The *Tree of Life* is a vital, positive symbol in the mythology and creation stories of many cultures, though it is also inseparably linked to the Tree of Knowledge, with its capacity to do incalculable evil as well as good. Therein lies the peculiar ambivalence of both the *Throne* and the *Tree* as symbols of peace. The AK47 which appears on the flag of independent Mozambique is intended to symbolise the liberty which it helped to achieve, but at the same time this weapon is a major component of sculptures which symbolise the peace and freedom from oppression which may only come from the destruction of all guns. In this sense, Maria Emília Fonseca's book is, no doubt, an important contribution towards the understanding of this unique and very powerful and vital issue.

—Christopher Spring
Curator, Sainsbury African Galleries
Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas
The British Museum
October, 2010.

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I owe much to many people for their help, encouragement and support in making this work possible. Chronologically following the course of this project, first, I must thank my colleague Paula Horta for having laid under my eyes the article in *The Telegraph* on the *Tree of Life* which actually triggered this dissertation, and for the long hours of discussion, exchange of ideas and sharing of information. Without that first push I might never have started this project.

Then, and above all, I am deeply grateful to the Post-Graduation Coordinator of Culture Studies, Professor Álvaro Pina, who was also my Supervisor, for having trusted me from the very first moment, encouraged me to proceed with this work and accepted the challenge of giving me guidance. I am profoundly indebted to him for his constant willingness to help, for the enlightened knowledge he has always provided, for the advice he never failed to give at the right time and when I most needed it, for the unfailing encouragement when unexpected adversities made me falter.

I am also particularly grateful to Professors Adelaide Meira Serras, Júlio Carlos Viana Ferreira and Teresa Malafaia, who were in charge of the seminars I took, and with whom I learnt so much. It was a privilege to have had the opportunity of being introduced into areas of knowledge which were totally new to me and to engage in very profitable debates which I feel have enriched me intellectually and personally. Their willingness to share their immense knowledge and experience, their openness, their patience, their advice, their sensibility to understand problems and to offer the adequate support in each occasion were crucial throughout these years. They were, in fact, not only teachers, but also much respected friends who were always ready to help, to encourage and to motivate me whenever I needed.

Then I must thank all my colleagues for the stimulating and generous exchange of ideas and for the companionship and support I always got from them. A special word is due to Carla Gomes, my young colleague in all the seminars, with whom I shared ideas, anxieties, doubts, joys and concerns. In her youth and commitment to work, she made all the difference in this process.

My work would not have been possible without the precious contribution of long conversations with Christopher Spring, the curator of the Sainsbury

African Galleries, Hannah Boulton, Communications Manager of the British Museum, and Kati Dshedshorov, Christian Aid Project Manager for *Transforming Arms into Tools*, who also provided me with important material such as photographs, videos, museum publications, leaflets, newsletters and reports.

With regards to the production and exhibition of the *Tree of Life* in Mozambique before it was dispatched to Britain, and considering I could not see it as it was on display in Maputo, very important data were also obtained from Christian Aid staff members connected to the project, from photographs taken by David Rose, from an intense exchange of e-mails with Hilário Nhatugueja, one of the artists who created the sculpture, as well as from information and photographs provided by friends living in Maputo, especially Mário Gomes, to whom I am deeply thankful.

I would also like to thank Nuno Antunes, photojournalist, for the precious help he gave me with the editing and production of the photographs I used in this work

John Elliott was particularly helpful with editorial suggestions at the final stage of my work. I am profoundly thankful to him for the pains he went to in checking every sentence and for having spent his time and given his patience to this unpleasant task.

Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my husband and my son for the support they gave me, for helping me to see this project to the end in the midst of other commitments and unexpected difficulties, for forgiving my absence and my omissions within family life, for taking the responsibility of many of the domestic chores in my place, and for putting up with my outbursts of bad temper and lack of patience. In fact, they contributed in ways much beyond and too numerous to mention.

To all, my sincere gratitude.

INTRODUCTION

THE *TREE OF LIFE*

The *Tree of Life*, a sculpture. Different sized gun barrels, butts and magazines sprinkled here and there with triggers, trigger guards and even complete pistols shape themselves into a bark. Stiff angular branches sculptured from gun barrels taper into a thick foliage of leaves laced from sliced, opened out and flattened metal sections from gun barrels and magazines. This is how dismantled, chopped off weapons are made unusable for its original functions and exhibited as artworks in museums. The *Tree of Life*, commissioned by the British Museum and created in Mozambique to commemorate peace, is the object of analysis of this work.

Seen in London by 4,600,000 people during 2005 alone, the *Tree of Life* was first on exhibition between February and October in the Great Court as the symbol of the 'Africa 2005' season of cultural events celebrating African art and cultures, having been removed at the end of that year to the Sainsbury African Galleries, to the specific site for which it was originally commissioned and where it stands now.

Created by four artists of the group *Núcleo de Arte*, in Maputo– Cristóvão Canhavoto (Kester), Hilário Nhatugueja, Fiel dos Santos and Adelino Serafim Maté–among whom some are former child-soldiers, produced within the innovative *Transforming Arms into Tools* project founded by Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane, Chairman of the Christian Council of Mozambique, and sponsored by Christian Aid and the British Museum, this complex, thought-provoking and intellectually challenging sculpture raises issues of aesthetic, cultural, social, and political nature unleashing academic interest and curiosity and, in particular, serving as a dais for this dissertation.

This work on the *Tree of Life* develops within a twofold approach: on the one hand, the study of the internal articulation and production of meaning(s) within the exhibition and, on the other hand, the analysis of the role played by exhibitionary institutions in the creation of social knowledge. It further aims to provide a contribution to the ongoing debate on how the conventional patterns of dealing with works of art from Africa has been changing as a result of a new discourse on the exhibition of contemporary

art which questions and challenges both curatorial practices and cultural concepts of collecting, displaying and interpreting art objects, and negotiating meaning. Particular attention is given to the description of the different practices and sites of exhibition of this sculpture in Britain and in Mozambique, in an attempt to understand the cultural differences and the implications thereof which determine and/or condition the specific approaches used in the two different cultural contexts within which it was exhibited.

I draw on the critical and theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall and Tony Bennett, whose works provide useful insight into questions dealing with the production and articulation of meaning(s) by sets of practices of representation mediating personal and social relationships, with the process of selection and exhibition of objects and the way it shapes knowledge, and with the role of museums as cultural instruments. The works of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Henrietta Lidchi have, on the one hand, enlightened my perspectives on the interpretation of visual culture and my understanding of museum practices in the representation of other cultures and, on the other hand, widened my reflections on the current role of both museums and exhibitions within the global arena in the 21st-century. Tobias Döring, Andrew McClellan and Emma Barker have structured my analysis of the two-pronged articulation of African art and cultures and the museum, as well as that of the increasing importance of audiences for exhibitionary institutions in this millennium.

The structure of the work reflects the objectives of this study and is therefore organised–besides the Introduction–into three main chapters, each of them divided into themed sections. The first chapter focusses on the exhibition of the *Tree of Life* in the British Museum, and it unfolds into four sections. The first deals with the history and activities of the British Museum, shedding some light on the role played by this institution–and its importance–within the cultural and the arts fields both in Britain and throughout the world, while assessing its relevance as a site of exhibition of the *Tree of Life*. The second part of this chapter describes the wide programme of activities developed within the 'Africa 2005' event, providing a backdrop for the unveiling of the sculpture. The following section analyses how the sculpture was encoded by the British Museum in consonance with the discourse of the museum for 'Africa 2005', highlighting how the *Tree of Life* was displayed in the specific place where it stood and supported by information offered by materials of various kinds. Finally, the last part of this chapter focusses on the poetics and the politics of the exhibition of the *Tree of Life*, both in the Great Court and in

the Sainsbury African Galleries of the British Museum. Questions are raised about how meaning(s) is/are produced by the display of the sculpture and the objects surrounding it, signalling the interface between power and knowledge underlying the museum's curatorial practice.

The second chapter focusses mainly on the object itself, the *Tree of Life*, dealing with four different fundamental aspects for the understanding of this unique artwork. The first part considers the project *Transforming Arms into Tools*, stressing the production of the sculpture underpinned by the transnational interconnectedness of people, organisations and activities. It further deals with the relevance of this project within the context of post-war Mozambique, underlining its effectiveness in promoting a culture of peace after years of conflict. The following section analyses the commissioning of the sculpture for the British Museum, singling out the current importance of the role of curators within the art scene, especially regarding artworks from Africa. The selection and exclusion of objects as a response to the present-day demands of both museums and audiences also call for analysis. Central to this chapter is the production of the *Tree of Life*, and the implied discursive aspect of encoding/decoding processes resulting from the specificity of the materials used to create the sculpture: weapons. This chapter ends with an analysis of the two different sites of display of the *Tree of Life* in Maputo, with particular importance given to the history and the role of museums in Africa, to the current practices of displaying artworks in Africa, and to the specificities of the two sites of exhibition within the African context. Special attention is also given to the circumstances in which it was displayed and to the significance of the meaning(s) assigned to this artwork within the cultural context in which it was produced.

Finally, the fourth chapter concentrates on the different gazes directed at the *Tree of Life* in Britain and in Mozambique, and it unfolds into two sections dedicated to each of the two practices. Drawing on Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's idea of the "post-museum" and on Henrietta Lidchi's hypothesis of the "futures of exhibiting", this chapter compares the Western/European and the African modes of exhibiting the *Tree of Life*, discussing the current concerns with–and challenging–the hegemony of sight in the exhibition of artworks. It dwells on innovative curatorial approaches now being experimented within museums in the West, which are embracing a closer interaction between artworks and audiences as part of their cultural mandates and promoting the enactment of other senses rather than merely sight, a common practice of display and interactivity used in Africa.

CHAPTER ONE

EXHIBITION OF THE *TREE OF LIFE* AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

PART I

THE BRITISH MUSEUM: A HOST WITH HISTORY

The British Museum is seen as a benchmark within the cultural and the artistic fields, both in Britain and worldwide. Therefore, I will look into this museum, its history and activities in an endeavour to facilitate our understanding of the importance of this institution in spreading knowledge and culture, its hegemonic position within the context of museums in Britain and the world, its function in promoting and giving visibility to art works, and its role as the site for the exhibition of the *Tree of Life* sculpture.

Let us start by looking at the official discourse about the museum and at how it introduces the British Museum to the world. The web page for 10 Downing Street, in its newsroom media centre link, states that "the British Museum holds in trust for the nation and the world a collection of art and antiquities from ancient and living cultures"[1] and that "the British Museum illuminates to present and future generations the histories of cultures."[2] On the one hand, the first statement enunciates the position of the British Museum as the rightful keeper of knowledge and that it sees itself as a world museum in the sense that its collection was drawn *from* across the world, making it a showcase for the power of the British Empire. On the other hand, the latter statement proclaims its renewed role as an irradiating centre of that same knowledge, as a museum *for* the world and *for* the future, heralding a global heritage to an increasing number of visitors coming from within the UK, as well as from all continents, thereby strengthening its continued pivotal position. This illustrates the connections between culture and the state, which grew largely in the nineteenth-century with the purpose of assigning to institutions of high culture the mission of civilising–and regulating–the populations, and exercising a new

[1] "10 Downing Street" , <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page 7866.asp
[2] "10 Downing Street", <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page 5058.asp

kind of power within which a self-monitoring and self-regulating citizenry could be produced. It is important to bear in mind that the British Museum falls within that category of exhibitionary institutions administered by a Board of Trustees appointed by the state, highlighting its central position within the modern state as an agent with educational and civilising functions.[3] This further emphasises the hegemonic role of the British Museum as an ideal context for the display of power/knowledge,[4] through its mission of showing and telling the story of human achievement throughout the ages and across cultures. In fact, this role is immediately proclaimed to all those who come near its imposing façade by means of the sculptures on the pediment atop the colossal Greek columns representing mankind's evolution from primitiveness to civilisation and progress, inviting visitors to share the accomplishments of the civilising process achieved by imperialism and colonisation.

The British Museum, the first national public museum in the world to belong to a nation rather than to a monarch or a patron, was sanctioned by an Act of Parliament in 1753 premised on the "universal understanding through the arts, natural history and science in a public museum."[5] It was, thus, established for the benefit of the nation and its citizens to whom its collections were available, free of charge, regardless of rank or class, having the state as host and redefining visitors by investing them with the statute of shareholders in that state and therefore with citizenry.[6] The British Museum Act received Royal Assent and provided for a public lottery to be held to raise the necessary funds for the acquisition of Sir Hans Sloane's collection of natural history items, books, manuscripts and antiquities, the Harley Collection of manuscripts, and the Cottonian collection of books and manuscripts, as well as an adequate building to house them. In 1754, the Trustees bought the Montague House in Bloomsbury and, in 1756, the first museum staff under a Principal Librarian, Gowin Knight, were appointed. The British Museum opened on 15th January 1759. Until the beginning of the nineteenth-century, however, the British Museum was more of a repository for collection after collection received by gift or bequest, with no concern for a much-needed organisation, classification and identification of its acquisitions in the light of the growing interest in botanic, zoological or mineralogical materials

[3] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*, 73.
[4] Foucault, *Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*.
[5] "The British Museum", <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/aboutus
[6] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 38.

triggered by the Enlightenment's project of scientific development. Sir Joseph Banks' bequest of his remarkable scientific collection (1820) only congested the unsuitable building even more, in spite of its gradual extension into adjacent annexes and the eventual replacement of Montague House by a new structure through a long process of construction under Sir Robert Smirke's responsibility, which lasted from 1823 to 1852.[7] The new premises would later allow for a different organisation of the museum and for a significant change into an orderly and effective display of its exhibits. In fact, in the second half of the nineteenth-century, the development of new principles of scientific rationality introduced by the increasingly significant triumph of science over religion assigned the Museum a prominent role in the discovery, conservation and categorisation of works of art. A considerable investment was also made in the preservation and restoration of the world's antiquities resulting in the creation of a temporary research laboratory (1920), which, in turn, would become the permanent Research Laboratory in 1931, the first of its kind in the world.

During the first half of the nineteenth-century, political concerns about public behaviour and social unrest gave rise to heated parliamentary debates over free admittance to the British Museum, whose ticket admission system had been abolished in 1810, and an investigation was conducted by several committees of the House of Commons between 1835 and 1836. The liberal ideas regarding education for all which reached their peak in the 1830s and 1840s, albeit not devoid of political interest in the exercise of a disciplinary power over crowds,[8] ultimately resulted in more and more democratic measures of admittance to the Museum, which opened for the first time on a bank holiday, on Easter Monday, 1837.

The increasing numbers of visitors to the British Museum only emphasised the much-needed improvement of its premises and Sir Robert Smirke's building went through a process of amelioration and expansion under a project by Sir Antonio Panizzi for the construction of the Round Reading Room, which took place under Sydney Smirke's responsibility– Sir Robert Smirke's younger brother–between 1854 and 1857. Further expansion works followed from 1882 onwards, with the White Wing, facing Montague Street, opening in 1885, and with King Edward VII's Galleries, on the former Bedford Estates facing Montague Place, being opened by King George V and Queen Mary in 1914. With the onset of World War I and the threat of bombings, the British Museum closed and moved parts of its collections to safety. The Duveen Gallery, specially

[7] Altick, "National Monuments" in Boswell, D. and Evans, J. (eds.), *Representing the Nation. A Reader–Histories, Heritage and Museums*, 241.
[8] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 40.

built to house the Elgin Marbles, was completed in 1939, when the museum was faced with yet another difficult period. World War II placed London under heavy bombardment, leading to the evacuation of the British Museum's collections to a protected underground facility at Bradford-on-Avon started precisely in 1939. In 1941, the building was seriously hit in an incendiary raid, but its valuable contents outlived adversity in the safety of its secret shelter. The New Wing was constructed between 1975 and 1978, and formally opened in 1980.

In the meantime, internal changes and this gradual addition of new buildings allowed for a reorganisation of the items under the trust of the British Museum. Furthermore, a concern had been voiced through a debate on the importance of separating the collections into two distinct categories: one essentially intended to be displayed, whereas the other was meant for research purposes.[9] Hooper-Greenhill also refers to this when she reflects on the need for private spaces for the production of knowledge inevitably separated from public spaces for consumption of that same knowledge.[10] This resulted in significant changes which, despite their having started in the late nineteenth-century, only became effective during the post-war period, when the first discussions held in 1943 focussed on the idea of splitting off the museum's library. The first important move took place from 1880 to 1883, when the natural history collections were transferred to a new building in South Kensington, which later became the British National History Museum, having only been formally separated from the British Museum by the New British Museum Act of 1963. The next relevant change occurred in 1972, when the museum library was finally created as a separate body by an Act of Parliament establishing the British Library, which moved into a new facility in St Pancras in 1997.

A note should be made regarding the relevance of the site of the British Museum within the urban layout of London, bearing in mind Sir James Silk Buckingham's (1849) or Benjamin Ward Richardson's (1876) plans for a model city which could promote "a higher state of existence" and offer its dwellers harmonious arrangements, architectural beauty, well organised spaces, much in line with the early nineteenth-century ideas regarding the tasks of government.[11] A concern for this particular aspect is shown in a document on *The British Museum Public Policy*[12] which states

[9] Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 41.
[10] Hooper-Greenhill, "Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning" in Carbonell, B.M. (ed.) *Museum Studies*, 560.
[11] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 17-18.
[12] "The British Museum", <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.british-museum.ac.uk/corporate/guidance/Public.pdf