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Museum, Exhibition, Object:
Artefactual Narratives and Their Dilemmas
in the National Museum of Scotland

Alima Bucciantini

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Abstract

National museums are spaces where stories of the past are told through the display and interpretation of material culture. The narratives that are created in this way reflect the ways in which the nation wants to be seen at that particular moment, and are often embedded in the larger political and social contexts of that time. This thesis looks at the National Museum of Scotland as having three levels of narrative: that of the museum as a physical space and national institution, that of the temporary exhibitions it hosts and develops, and, most crucially, as a collection of important and iconic objects. By tracing the artefacts that were given a central role in various exhibitions over the life of the museum, the narratives of nation and history which were most valuable at that time can be uncovered.

The two permanent and five temporary exhibitions profiled in this work act as windows into the life of the museum, and the goals and challenges it had at that moment. The thesis begins with the story of museum history in Scotland, from the 1780 formation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to the debates in the 1990s about the potential form and contents of a new Museum of Scotland. From there we look at two temporary exhibitions in the 1980s which inspired the Museum of Scotland, before examining some more recent temporary and touring exhibitions – a pair that came to Scotland from Russia, and one that left Edinburgh to travel among other Scottish museums. The final chapter returns to the realm of what it means to have a national museum, as it investigates the 2006 rebranding that changed the Museum of Scotland into the National Museum of Scotland, and what the new nomenclature signals about the objects and narratives within. All together, this work is both the story of a particular national museum and an investigation into the ways in which national history is continuously made and remade for the public through the display of artefacts from the past.

Declaration

I declare that this work was composed entirely by me and is completely my own work. No part of it has been submitted for any other degree.

Alima Bucciantini

30 October 2009

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Introduction

Artefacts are at the heart of any museum. Institutions may deal with them differently, but they remain the central reason for the formation of a museum, and for the public visits that the institution relies upon. However, museums are not just storehouses for old things. They are spaces where narratives about identity and history are performed for the public through the medium of material culture. Each and every artefact in the museum is therefore subject to a continuous series of decisions about how and where it will be displayed, what it can be expected to say, and how important it is. The stories that museums are able to tell about the past depend on the collections and artefacts that they hold, but also on the ways in which those objects can be manipulated. Looking at the changing ways in which artefacts are used in museum narratives can allow a glimpse at the identities and histories that the museum is attempting to showcase at any given moment. This is useful, because as the national museum is one of the key arbitrators of the public's views on history and nationhood, the narratives within it reflect the aspirations and contexts of the culture it represents. Museum exhibitions and artefacts create stories not only about the past of the nation, but also about the nation as it wants to be seen in the present. Artefacts are perfect for embodying this dual role because of the wealth of stories they can simultaneously tell. However, their multivocality can also lead to conflict between the narratives the museum has tried to impose and the ones that the artefact would tell most naturally. Uncovering the way artefact narratives are constructed and contested can tell us much about the place of history in the nation, the role of material culture in public conceptions of identity, and the continuous struggle over who owns narratives of the past. Using the National Museum of Scotland, its exhibitions and artefacts as the heart, this thesis will investigate these issues and conflicts to see how artefact-based history has been presented at a time of great change in a nation, Scotland, that continues to negotiate its own identity and history.

Scholarly Antecedents

In order to look at artefacts and objects as part of museum-based narratives, the wider narratives of the field must be considered first. Museum Studies, an interdisciplinary field of study centred around current and historical conceptions of the museum, began in the late 1980s with scholars such as Susan Pearce and Peter Vergo deconstructing the ways in which museums and their objects had previously been examined. Vergo's edited volume *The New Museology* is especially important, as it served both to define the field and push its analysis forward. In his introduction, Vergo says that

Beyond the captions, the information panels, the accompanying catalogue, the press handout, there is a subtext comprising innumerable diverse, often contradictory strands, woven from the wishes and ambitions, the intellectual or political or social or educational aspirations and preconceptions of the museum director, the curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor – to say nothing of the society, the political or social or educational system which nurtured all these people and in so doing left its stamp upon them. Such considerations...are the subject matter of the new museology.¹

Untangling and examining this subtext – which can be discovered through investigation of exhibition captions, information panels, catalogues and press releases – is still a 'new' type of museology two decades after Vergo and his contributors began the dialogue. Though their work was soon followed by several other texts which are now at the centre of the discipline, much of the focus in the field has remained on the study the museum as a cultural institution, rather than on its constituent parts and makeup. The museum as a whole is inarguably important, but the whole is also made up of many objects, all of which have been arranged into exhibitions and displays. These levels of narrative construction then exist within, but separate from, the larger institution. Examining the parts and storylines which together compose the national museum provides a view that is both distinct from the existing literature and built upon it.

Tony Bennett wrote one of the first studies to consider the museum within both a historical and theoretical context.² He used the theory of Michel Foucault in order to

¹ Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London, 1989). 3.

examine the emergence of the museum in the nineteenth century. Central to this was analysis of how the form and contents of these new institutions reflected and enhanced existing ideas of surveillance, identity, and civilisation. This study remains a seminal text, and has influenced the approach to integrating history and theory when looking at the museum. Later work by Carol Duncan, Gordon Fyfe and Sharon MacDonald, and Nick Prior brought new theoretical viewpoints into the analysis of the museum.³ All of these studies have also helped to shape my own arguments, especially Duncan's critical examination of space and its meanings within the museum and Prior's use of the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu to understand the way in which museums are constructed, and the societal expectations placed on them and their visitors in the nineteenth century.⁴

However, all of these books focus on the museum as an institution, a space, or a building and say relatively little about what, for me, is the centre of the museum enterprise – the objects which they acquire, interpret, and display. The literatures on collecting and objects have remained largely detached from those of the museum, with the notable exception of Susan Pearce, who has focussed on museum collections and the role of objects within the museum for most of her career.⁵ Pearce, too, uses a mix of theory and history to examine these issues. She concentrates primarily on linguistic theory, most particularly the *langue/parole* distinction associated with the semiotics practiced by Ferdinand de Saussure. Outside of Pearce and her studies, though, there are few other established approaches to fusing object study with museology. Instead, the literatures of collecting and material culture more broadly allowed for the development of ideas about how objects can both create their own narratives and be used within existing ones. Russell Belk and Krzysztof Pomian

² Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995).

³ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London, 1995). And Sharon MacDonald and Gordon Fyfe, ed., *Theorizing Museums* (Oxford, 1996). And Nick Prior, *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, Prior, *Museums and Modernity*.

⁵ Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London, 1995), Susan M. Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* (London, 1998). Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (Washington DC, 1992). Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Museum Studies in Material Culture* (Leicester, 1989). Susan Pearce, ed., *Objects of Knowledge* (London, 1990).

have each written histories of collecting which trace its growth as a cultural phenomenon and a social act of the elites, and later of the masses.⁶ Personal collections of objects are the logical precursor to the modern museum, and understanding how collecting was conceived as a historical and social act is critical to being able to effectually examine the combination of careful consideration, acquisitiveness and historical accident that have led to the collections found in museums today. Others, such as John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, have looked at collecting in a more theoretical way, teasing out issues of how the process mirrors systems of understanding the world over time.⁷ Collections, by the nineteenth century, were not just about inspiring awe or about assembling a miniature version of the world, as the Medici princes did. Instead, there was a growing cultural assumption of connection ‘between events, places, and artefacts’.⁸ It is this change in thought that has allowed for the development of the artefactual narratives seen in exhibitions. As time went by, collections increasingly sought to tell a whole story - to produce a version of the past, as a recent study has claimed.⁹ Without the societal understanding, which is itself a recent phenomenon, that artefacts from the past can tell stories of the things they have ‘witnessed’, museums would contain only assemblages of unconnected things. Instead, museums and their exhibitions can construct narratives from objects which they can expect will be understood by visitors.¹⁰

There are also several studies which trace the more modern evolution of collecting and how it changed in the movement from private enterprise to public museum. Simon Knell and his contributors do this on a general scale in *Museums*

⁶ Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London, 1995). Krysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, Elizabeth Wiles-Portier trans. (Cambridge, 1990).

⁷ John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994).

⁸ Stana Nenadic, "Romanticism and the Urge to Consume in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester, 1999). 209.

⁹ Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz, eds., *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice 1700-1850* (Aldershot, 1999).

¹⁰ Several recent articles try to bring out the personal stories around objects, such as Tom G. Svensson, "Knowledge and Artifacts: People and Objects," *Museum Anthropology* 31(2) (September 2008). 85-104.

and the Future of Collecting,¹¹ and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the body which established the museum at the heart of this study, commissioned an edited volume for its bicentennial which has a wealth of contributions about artefacts, collections, and museums in Scotland.¹² This has provided me with both invaluable context, and detailed case studies about the people and passions that led to what is now the National Museum of Scotland. The narratives of the artefacts are inextricably linked with those of the people who placed them there, in both modern and historical exhibitions. Charles Waterston's *Collections in Context* provided similar details and background while focussing on the Royal Scottish Museum, now the more universal section of the National Museum.¹³ Together these volumes serve to elucidate larger issues around the development of museum collecting as well as its varied impacts in Scotland.

A collection is an amalgamation of objects, something that has both a unitary identity as a group, and also encompasses the multiple stories of the objects contained within it. Some objects have meaning in and of themselves as well. Examining the ways in which these solitary and group identities overlap is thus necessary. The work of Walter Benjamin has been central to my understanding of the object and its many narratives. These issues are addressed most strongly in his noted essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.¹⁴ It was here that Benjamin introduced the idea that particular objects or icons have 'aura', which he defines as the power to connect to ideas larger than themselves. Museums rely strongly on artefacts like this, which can relate a larger story to a viewer, to support their narratives. Questions about iconic objects and their place within the museum are central to everything that will follow in this present study. The objects which drive the narrative of the thesis and which serve as its organising feature have all been selected because they are icons of various types. This allows, and impels them,

¹¹ Simon J. Knell, ed., *Museums and the Future of Collecting* (Aldershot, 1999).

¹² Alan S. Bell, ed., *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to Mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and its Museum* (Edinburgh, 1981).

¹³ Charles D. Waterston, *Collections in Context: The Museum of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Inception of a National Museum for Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1997).

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1999).

to 'star' in their respective narratives. Benjamin has also been of use in looking at the functions of collections and the display of objects.¹⁵ Dean MacCannell has expanded, tested, and inverted many of Walter Benjamin's original ideas, leading to a very useful examination of many of the issues around heritage and tourism sites, which I have applied also to the museum and its artefacts.¹⁶ His work joins that of other useful theorists of material culture, including Roland Barthes, who investigated the myths that become associated with objects.¹⁷ One of the most important of these myths is that of 'authenticity'. Museum objects are implicitly considered to be authentic, but little attention is directed to how and why that is. Umberto Eco has examined authenticity in the context of the modern world and its entertainments though his conclusions, like those from many of the aforementioned studies, can easily be transferred into the space and context of the museum.¹⁸

The different locations of study seen here provide depth to an understanding of how objects and their narratives are present in various spaces. Arjun Appadurai popularised the idea of objects having a 'social biography' which is developed as they pass through the many spaces they encounter during their lives.¹⁹ He traces them as commodities, an important issue to consider in the supposedly non-commercial space of the national museum. Scott Lash and Celia Lury continue this theme of the lives of objects and their commodity value in their examination of the *Global Culture Industry*. They follow a series of untraditional objects through the

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1999). And Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland, and Kevin McLaughlin trans. (Cambridge, 1999).

¹⁶ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London, 1999). Dean MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers* (London, 1992), Dean MacCannell, and Juliet MacCannell, *The Time of the Sign: A Semiotic Approach to Modern Culture* (Bloomington, 1982).

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers trans. (London, 2000, originally 1972).

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, William Weaver trans. (London, 1987).

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986).

world and investigate how their meanings change in various contexts and times.²⁰

Earlier work by Thomas Schlereth and Adrian Forty has examined the cultural importance and role of various types of artefacts in the American and British context respectively.²¹ Even though these books make little, if any, mention of museums they highlight many of the issues that became important for me as my study developed. Museum objects are not the only articles of material culture which have histories worthy of study, and understanding how other contexts impact objects and their stories allows for a closer examination of the parts of artefactual narrative which are particular to museums, and an identification of ones that are more universal.

Although it is important to understand the extent to which objects in collections and non-museum contexts differ from and echo those in museum space, the specific history and setting of the museum is also critical, as is that of the exhibitions that shape museum contents. Recent work by Catarina Albano has looked at narratives created with biographical objects in museum exhibitions,²² and Rachel Poliquin has examined how meanings are, and have been, mapped onto natural history specimens at different types of museums.²³ Edited collections such as *Exhibiting Cultures*,²⁴ *The Politics of Display*,²⁵ *Thinking About Exhibitions*²⁶ and the *Companion to Museum Studies*²⁷ have brought together some of the leading thinkers on general, though no less interesting and useful, topics related to the museum and the display traditions of contemporary exhibition practice, in both its

²⁰ Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge, 2007).

²¹ Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society since 1750* (London, 1986), Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville TN, 1980), Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville TN, 1982).

²² Catarina Albano, "Displaying Lives: The Narrative of Objects in Biographical Exhibitions," *Museum and Society* 5(1) (March 2007). 15-28.

²³ Rachel Poliquin, "The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy," *Museum and Society* 6(2) (July 2008). 123-134.

²⁴ Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine, ed., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (London, 1991).

²⁵ Sharon McDonald, ed., *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture* (London, 1998).

²⁶ Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne, ed., *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London, 1996).

²⁷ Sharon MacDonal, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Oxford, 2006).

temporary and permanent forms. Many scholars, including Sharon MacDonald and Stephen Greenblatt, have contributed essays which profile exhibitions and their meanings in ways that have laid the foundations for my own study here.

As the museum considered in most detail in my work is a national one, and many of the narratives portrayed within it are, and have been, notably national in scope, the emerging literatures on the intersection of nation and museum have informed my own thinking. Nationalism Studies as a modern interdisciplinary field of study developed similarly to Museum Studies. Edited collections such as *Heritage and Museums*²⁸ and *Representing the Nation*²⁹ have allowed for the development of scholarly research in the space between the two disciplines which is concerned with the ways in which narratives of national identity in the museum have been constructed. Rhiannon Mason's recent and substantial study on the national museums of Wales is a welcome addition to this field of research, as is earlier work by Elizabeth M. Crooke on Ireland and its museum.³⁰

Literature on nations more generally has also been of critical importance. Modernist theorists of nationalism focus strongly on the role of culture and the public understanding of history in the formation of nations and national identity. Museums, therefore, are an important component of national identity, and serve as one of the spaces in which it is most clearly elucidated and presented. Benedict Anderson, one of the first of these theorists, explicitly discussed the role of the museum, saying that the 'museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political'.³¹ While his scholarly focus was on the post-colonial nations of Southeast Asia, the statement has resonance much beyond these geographical and temporal boundaries. The process of building and filling a museum allows a nation

²⁸ J. M. Fladmark, ed., *Heritage and Museums: Shaping National Identity* (Shaftesbury, 2000).

²⁹ David Boswell and Jessica Evans, ed., *Representing the Nation: Histories, Heritage, and Museums* (London, 1999).

³⁰ Elizabeth M. Crooke, *Politics, Archaeology, and the Creation of a National Museum in Ireland: An Expression of National Life* (Dublin, 2000), Rhiannon Mason, *Museums, Nations, Identities: Wales and Its National Museums* (Cardiff, 2007).

³¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983). 178.

to define itself as having an ancient history and as encompassing and belonging to a particular group of people. The national past, whether it is newly created or just newly rediscovered, is crucial for Anderson in the formation of a nation. He recognised and agreed that that nation-states were new, but said that ‘the nations to which they give political expressions always loom out of an immemorial past’.³² In these ways a national museum creates what Anderson considered the very definition of a nation: that of ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.’³³

Anderson’s contemporary Ernest Gellner did not explicitly engage with national museums in his most iconic text, *Nations and Nationalism*, though ideas similar to those of Anderson underlie many of his theories about the ways in which nations both desire and need a sense of national history.³⁴ Late in his career, Gellner did mention museums as an important force in the creation of a modern nation, using the example of the Ethnographic Museum set up by a newly national Estonian population to bolster his claim that nationalisms can emerge suddenly when given the right combination of political and cultural factors. For him, the museum was crucial both to the public recognition of Estonian nationalism and the ongoing support of it.³⁵ Both Gellner and Anderson served as the intellectual trailblazers for the critical study of the modern forces behind manifestations of national identity, and their importance is hard to overstate. More recently, theorists such as Rogers Brubaker have taken these original ideas farther,³⁶ and others such as Anthony Smith have tried to challenge them,³⁷ both approaches that have been useful in expanding the field of enquiry.

³² Ibid. 11.

³³ Ibid. 6.

³⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983).

³⁵ See “The Warwick Debates on Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 2(3) 1996. 350-377.

³⁶ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996). Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, 2006). See also John A. Hall, ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

³⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986). Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford, 1999). See also Ernest Gellner and

Miroslav Hroch has also contributed notably to modernist nationalism theory in ways that resonate strongly for studies such as this one about culture, history, and museums.³⁸ His system of the stages through which every nationalism movement goes can be applied usefully to look at the characters and ways in which interest in national history and its artefacts emerged in Scotland. He identifies three distinct and interconnected sections in the development of national sentiment. Phase A, the ‘period of scholarly interest’³⁹, is clearly visible in the Enlightenment Edinburgh of the 11th Earl of Buchan and his 1780 founding of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. This association was made up of the intellectual and social elite of the city and was dedicated to the study of the Scottish past, as well as the collection of important historical artefacts, a topic covered in more depth in Chapter One of this work. Hroch’s next stage of a national movement is Phase B, which he terms ‘the period of patriotic agitation’.⁴⁰ He further elaborates on the importance of this stage by saying that

In the course of this phase the agitation of the patriots sooner or later influenced a growing number of members of the oppressed nationality, who began to consider their membership in the nation as more than a simple natural fact...⁴¹

It is important to clarify here that Scotland was not in the same ‘oppressed’ political situation as many of the cases that Hroch profiles. However, if the comparison is thought of in the context of Scottish museum and heritage studies, his theory sheds intriguing light on the later developments of the Society of Antiquaries and their museum, their changing relationship with the British state, and the move from Scottish material culture heritage being in the hands of a civic association to being in the hands of the nation as a whole. The deceptive similarities between the missions of the eighteenth-century Society of Antiquaries and the modern National Museum

Anthony D. Smith, "The Nation: Real or Imagined? The Warwick Debates on Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 2(3) (1996). 267-370.

³⁸ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of Nationalist Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations*, Ben Fowkes trans., 2nd ed. (New York, 2000).

³⁹ *Ibid.* 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

of Scotland – both concerned with preserving and displaying the important artefacts of the Scottish past – belie the fact that as institutions they represent the difference between Phase A and Phase B, or between an elite and a more mass national movement.

The last stage of Hroch's triptych is Phase C, 'the rise of a mass national movement'.⁴² Some nations, in Hroch's estimation, never progress to this final stage. Identifying whether or not Scotland has is somewhat out of the scope of the current study, but it is interesting and illuminating to question what the differences are between the start of a state-supported national museum in the nineteenth-century and the currently evolving National Museum of Scotland in its devolved Scottish state. Was the agitation for a national museum in 1850 the same as that which resurfaced in the 1990s? Did this later incarnation reflect a change from Phase B to Phase C? Or will only a national museum seated within a wholly independent Scottish state fulfil the dictates of this final stage of nation-ness? Questions like these are why Hroch's work is so integral to the theoretical framework of this thesis, and they will provide theoretical underpinning for much of the work to follow.

As useful as Hroch can be, he is not concerned with issues specifically related to either heritage or Scotland. For this, different specialists have to be consulted. Scholars such as Tom Nairn,⁴³ Graeme Morton,⁴⁴ Linda Colley,⁴⁵ and David McCrone⁴⁶ are amongst those who have looked at issues of history and nationhood in a specifically Scottish and British context. Robert Hewison,⁴⁷ David Lowenthal,⁴⁸ and Patrick Wright⁴⁹ have all looked at national heritage and its

⁴² Ibid. 23.

⁴³ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London, 1977). Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London, 1997). Tom Nairn, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London, 2000).

⁴⁴ Graeme Morton, *Unionist-Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland 1830-1860* (East Linton, 1999).

⁴⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1992).

⁴⁶ David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London, 1992).

⁴⁷ Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987).

⁴⁸ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985).

political emergence in modern Britain, providing useful information about the wider spheres in which museums operate, and a helpful reminder of the importance of the chronological and political context on what is happening in the museum, even as cultural institutions try to present themselves as outside the reach of politics.

Theoretical Contexts

It is important to keep the wider historical, political, and social context in mind while looking at the museum and its contents. However, the majority of the work in this thesis has been inspired by some much smaller stories – those of the objects which star in the museums and exhibitions and which, through their presentation, mirror the contexts around them. In looking at these artefacts and their stories historically, other disciplines and theories have been useful in deepening analysis and clarifying the complex and often inappropriate elision of history and public perception that surrounds the museum. Throughout this thesis I use various types of cultural theory to underpin larger points and to illuminate the specific issues surrounding these iconic objects and their settings.

The first idea that needs to be untangled is that of how, and why, objects acquire the power of narrative once ensconced in museum space. The clearest voice here belongs to Walter Benjamin. In his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin introduces the concept of aura. Aura is the power that the object has because of ‘its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject through the time of its existence.’⁵⁰ Objects have aura, for Benjamin, because they have seen many things, and also because they can convey those things to the viewer, while still holding that viewer at a distance. Artefacts in a museum experience the aura that Benjamin discussed to an even greater degree than ordinary objects. The events that the artefact has witnessed are a critical factor in earning them a place in public collections, and are highlighted in their labelling and placement once they are put on display. Uniqueness and rarity,

⁴⁹ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985).

⁵⁰ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 214.

crucial to the development of aura, is prized by the museum. Also, though the museum is often the best space to come into contact with rare and valuable objects, there is an embedded distance between the displayed object and the awe-filled viewer. The many barriers, actual and cultural, between the two belie their possible proximity in space.

All these factors mean that the museum is a space that both collects objects naturally imbued with Benjamin-ian aura, and also heightens it once the objects are there. Artefacts filled with aura are also the ones that have the ability to project stories about themselves most strongly. Benjamin calls these stories the *authenticity* of the object. For him ‘The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.’⁵¹ This is the natural narrative held by the iconic object, and is a central part of the narratives presented by those objects in the various museum contexts in which they will be found throughout their lives. By their physical presence the objects portray themselves to the audience as rare and unique items, things that exist outside the normal realm of material goods and are thus special and original witnesses to history. They are, as Benjamin says, embedded in the ‘fabric of tradition’.⁵²

However, the stories of individual authenticity are not the only narratives that come to be connected with objects. Depending on how they are displayed once they are in the museum, new and different stories can be told. Walter Benjamin himself acknowledged this, saying that

An ancient statue of Venus...stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura.⁵³

This mutability highlights one of the factors that make the narratives of material culture so interesting – multivocality. Each object in the collections of a museum can tell more than one story. When an object is put on display, one of its many possible

⁵¹ Ibid. 215.

⁵² Ibid. 217.

⁵³ Ibid.

narratives is privileged, but the others still remain under the surface. No matter which story is most visible at any given time, though, the object remains full of aura – full of the power to draw visitors and viewers into its story and to connect them to ideas bigger than itself. New narratives can be placed on top of the object by changing spatial and social contexts, or by it experiencing new things as it lives out its life in the museum, but it will never be without some type of narrative and some amount of aura.

Benjamin feared that as modernity, the technology of mechanical reproduction and the commoditisation of art increased aura would be lost.⁵⁴ Given his emphasis on the power of the unique and individual, it is perhaps logical to suppose that when an object was merely one of many replicas its power would decrease. After all, the modern museum is a space of commodities as much as it is a shrine to rarity.⁵⁵ The gift shop is a space as integral to the museum experience as the display hall. The most common content of these retail spaces are replicas of the objects the viewer has already encountered in the galleries. With the purchase of a replica the distance between object and viewer that Benjamin deemed crucial to the development of aura is eliminated, and the object on display is no longer unique. Whether the replica purchased is pewter, resin, or chocolate, meant for display on a shelf or on a necktie the outcome, according to Benjamin, would be the same. The artefact as seen in the museum would no longer hold narrative power, and its value to the museum would be lost.

The survival of museum narrative and the iconic object in the age of commodities and the museum shop would seem to disprove this aspect of Benjamin's theories, even as other parts of it remain valid. Dean MacCannell, a cultural theorist working fifty years later, has produced the best explanation for why Benjamin failed to foresee the persistence of aura in the face of replication. MacCannell says that

[Benjamin] should have reversed his terms. The work becomes 'authentic' only after the first copy of it is produced. The

⁵⁴ Ibid. 215.

⁵⁵ This point is argued well by theorists such as Appadurai, who have looked at objects as economic commodities, both inside and outside the museum. See Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*.

reproductions *are* the aura, and the ritual, far from being a point of origin, *derives* from the relationship between the original object and its socially constructed importance.⁵⁶

For MacCannell, the aura of the object remains, and may even increase when there are multiple replicas of it in circulation. In fact, the replication, for MacCannell, is the first stage to creating aura – that power that the object holds to draw in the visitor and connect them with its story.

It is the mechanical reproduction phase of sacralization that is most responsible for setting the tourist in motion on his journey to find the true object. And he is not disappointed. Alongside the copies of it, it has to be The Real Thing.⁵⁷

The fact that the replicas have been seen actually increases the desire in the viewer to see the original. No one confuses the original with the replica, and despite Benjamin's thoughts, they still recognise something within the original that they cannot get anywhere else. Standing out from among the mass of objects known to be copies, the original speaks louder than ever, and has in fact acquired the ability to hold even more narratives than before, as each pilgrim who seeks it out will expect a different story from the original as they stand in reverence before it.

Having established that objects continue to hold their narrative power even in the face of replication, MacCannell and others go on to theorise about how these narratives are presented to the public. MacCannell sees authenticity and the establishment of the public stories that this can build around artefacts as a process rather than a fixed truth. Firstly, objects have to be marked off from similar objects as 'worthy of preservation', which often entails reports from experts 'testifying to the object's aesthetic, historical, monetary, recreational, and social values'.⁵⁸ This is what is known as artefact *provenance*. Provenance, a story about the history of the object before it came into the hands of the museum, was the main archival source that I had expected to consult in order to build up the social biographies of the iconic objects profiled in this study. However, textual evidence of provenance is uneven, and the way in which it is archived in Scotland has depended in large part on the

⁵⁶ MacCannell, *The Tourist*. 47-48.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 45.

⁵⁸ Both quotes from Ibid. 44.

particular curator in charge when the object was accessioned, or taken into the collection. This lack of records does not mean that the object is in-authentic. However, it does shed light on an interesting feature of museums – that they often remain wedded to archiving, cataloguing and accession systems developed by individual curators in the beginning of the museum's life. The system in place at the National Museum of Scotland, for example, still catalogues on the system developed by Daniel Wilson, who created the first comprehensive survey of the collections in 1849.⁵⁹

Provenance is more than a paper-trail, though. It is also the result of scientific testing, as will be seen with some of the objects profiled later in the thesis. And provenance is not the only issue considered when building narratives of history and authenticity. The second stage of the framework that MacCannell produced for the creation of authentic narrative is 'framing and elevation'. Here the object is physically and tangibly removed from the ordinary sphere that it used to occupy. This is what happens when an 'object' becomes an 'artefact'. Though I use the terms interchangeably when discussing items already in museum collections, more generally in material culture theory, an 'object' is any physical article used in daily life, while an 'artefact' has moved beyond these original quotidian contexts and entered the collections of a museum. Once there it becomes framed as part of its new group – the museum collection - rather than the one it used to occupy in its earlier life. Elevation, the other half of this stage, is the placing on display of an object in a case, or on a plinth, and framing is the action taken to either protect or enhance the object once it is on display. This can be as simple as a sheet of glass or a velvet cordon, or a pair of strategically placed spotlights. 'Protective' measures of this sort also end up acting as enhancers. Even if not originally intended to do so, the protection marks the object out as something requiring special attention.⁶⁰ Therefore, it enhances the Benjamin-ian aura of the object by imposing distance between the object and the viewer.

⁵⁹ Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, *Catalogue of Antiquities in the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 1849.

⁶⁰ MacCannell, *The Tourist*. 44.

Carol Duncan, another museum studies scholar, concentrates on this element of object theory, with a focus on the aura-heightening qualities of empty space. For Duncan ‘the more “aesthetic” the installation – the fewer the objects and the emptier the surrounding walls – the more sacralized the museum space.’⁶¹ The other, unstated, outcome of this lack of context for the individual object is that whatever is left on display has its power heightened immensely as all the attention of the viewer has to be focussed solely on it. This increases the level of authenticity and the power of the narrative that the object is seen to have. In a way, though only authentic objects come into the museum’s collections, the object only *becomes* authentic when it is accessioned. Because museums are seen to hold only the authentic, by the mere action of being put into a collection the objects are imbued with authenticity and its authority.

Authenticity has become so much a part of modern life, so expected and so normally fabricated or heightened, that it can also be overly constructed. Umberto Eco introduced a theory of ‘hyperreality’, where an object or an experience becomes too authentic – more real-seeming than the actual item it is attempting to mimic.⁶² Locations like Walt Disney’s Epcot World Showcase - where eleven countries are represented in 1.3 miles by ‘typical’ pavilions, restaurants and entertainment - which present a simplified and condensed version of the tourist experience are common sites of hyperreality.⁶³ These types of studies about current tourism and its associated theories are especially useful because of the ways in which authenticity, and the search for it, has become part of modernity and the museum in particular. After all, we have seen through Dean MacCannell that the need for the authentic is what drives tourists on ‘pilgrimage’ to the historic site or museum. The ways in which authenticity is constructed, whether it is seen through MacCannell’s system of stages or the more organic form studied by Eco, is crucial to the understanding of museum icons and their roles in the narratives there.

⁶¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*. 17.

⁶² Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*.

⁶³ Corinne A. Kratz and Ivan Karp, "Wonder and Worth: Disney Museums in World Showcase," *Museum Anthropology* 17(3) (October 1993), 32-42. Lawrence Mintz, "Simulated Tourism at Busch Gardens: The Old Country and Disney's World Showcase, Epcot Center," *Journal of Popular Culture* 32(3) (Winter 1998). 47-58.

To some extent, as Duncan and MacCannell note, it is the specific space of the museum that allows these varied and powerful narratives to form and be presented by the objects. They are able to say things and we the viewers are open to hearing them because we encounter them within a very specific space. Henri Lefebvre was one of the main theorists to have investigated space and its meanings. He defined three types of space, one of which creates continuity, one which imposes order and another that acts as a symbol in and of itself. The museum is all of these three simultaneously. It produces spatial practice, which creates a sense of cohesion and guarantees a 'level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*' [emphasis original].⁶⁴ This reflects the expectations that visitors have of the museum and the truth that they will encounter there. It is also a space of representation, where order is imposed on the relationships and objects contained within it, as it creates order in the collections, and uses that to create an understandable narrative. Simultaneously, however, it is also the third type – a representational space. This is a space that is a symbol all of its own, that within itself holds a reflection of the shape of social life.⁶⁵ For Lefebvre, then, it is not just the objects within museum space that have narrative expectations on them, but the museum itself. This only increases the multivocality of museum artefacts, as they speak not only for themselves but also for the context in which they are seen.

Both authenticity and its creation, as articulated by Benjamin and his followers, and space and its manipulation, for Lefebvre and those who have adapted his theories, thus have a large impact on the narratives that the objects hold and the way in which those narratives can be read by visitors. It is these factors which make museum narratives based on the artefacts possessed – which is the design strategy taken by the institution at the heart of this study, the National Museum of Scotland – interesting and useful to both curators and visitors. Listening to what the objects say allows for degrees of narrative flexibility not seen in museums that have chosen to use their objects primarily as illustrations to stories already created. However, these artefactual, or artefact-centred, narratives also leave themselves open to alternate and

⁶⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith trans. (Oxford, 1991). 33.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 34.

sometimes conflict-ridden reading. Throughout this thesis, stories of moments in the history of a museum are told, and at the heart of them are embedded stories of the iconic objects that played an important role in that moment. The narratives of these artefacts are far from simple. They have all acquired their narrative power in different ways, and have been put to different use in different contexts of time and place. This changeability leads to dilemmas of interpretation. If an object can be used to fit any narrative that is needed, what is its intrinsic story? Does it become just a canvas on which larger ideas can be projected? To what extent is there a curatorial obligation to be 'true' to the object? When uncovering the various narratives that have come from, or been placed upon, the artefact, these are the issues to consider as well. Though it can act much like a text, material culture is open to issues of interpretation not often seen in two-dimensional narratives. Cultural theorists such as Benjamin, MacCannell, Duncan, and Lefebvre, and semioticians like Eco and Peirce can help to illuminate the causes and effects of these contested narratives. However, much like the authenticity of the object, the authentic story of these created and challenged narratives has to be investigated with individual examples, not generalisations. I have tried to create a scholarly work that addresses the broad issues, but also one that has at its heart a series of unique examples that will illuminate the whole.

Approaching Interdisciplinarity

With a background in nationalism studies and the social sciences, I became increasingly interested in the cultural presentation of national identity. Too often culture has been divorced from the study of national identity, with scholars focussing instead on its overtly political manifestations, and leaving its traces in other spheres unexamined. However, after investigating the development of national sentiment in the *Waverley* novels of Sir Walter Scott,⁶⁶ I became convinced that these supposedly less-political stages for the performance of identity were crucial to the formation of political ideology, as well as being a way in which national ideas could be embedded in the social consciousness of groups. Miroslav Hroch, Ernest Gellner, Benedict

⁶⁶ This was the topic of my undergraduate honours thesis at Mount Holyoke College in 2004.

Anderson, and other modernist theorists of nationalism have written at length about the importance of history and its mass understanding to the development of movements for national self-determination. With this in mind, I started to appreciate that national museums, with their monopoly on the 'authentic' story of the nation, are one of the predominant places in which the nation is created and presented for the edification of viewers.

Many temporary exhibitions have been controversial and contested, but the general narrative contents of museums are not often subjected to wholesale challenge. The idea that national museums have authority over the history of the nation is so widespread as to be accepted without thought. Because of the power of this authoritative voice the stories and identities which are being produced and consumed within the museum can tell the observer how the nation sees itself at any particular moment in time, as well as how it would like to be perceived.

Scotland provides an especially intriguing space of study for questions of national identity and museums, as the last decade and a half has brought both a new national museum and a newly devolved state to serve a historically separate nation. The chronological coincidence of nearly simultaneous museum-building and Parliament-re-establishing allows greater scrutiny of the forces behind these developments, and permits more understanding of the ways in which societal divisions such as nationhood have become natural and fixed. When I first began examining the building of a new national museum in Scotland in the age of devolution I had expected to find very clear political narratives both in the museum and in the minds of the curators who created it. When these did not emerge in vivid highlight I was taken aback. However, like so many academic quandaries, the absence of overt political nationalism within the museum became notable in its own right. If history is so critical to national identity, and thus also to the political manifestation of that identity, and the museum is the authenticator of national history, how were the narratives within it created, if not with an underlying, conspicuously national, storyline?

The answer seemed to lie with the artefacts themselves. They were placed at the centre of narratives in the new Museum of Scotland (now called the *National* Museum of Scotland, an issue which is covered in chapter 6), and were supported by

only the most general of overarching series of themes and chronologies. This had been done purposely by curatorial staff because the objects within the museum were expected to tell the story of Scotland themselves. The artefacts acted as signposts within otherwise largely unspoken museological and national narratives, which allowed each visitor to interpret storylines as they wished. Certain ‘iconic’ objects were especially crucial to narratives in the museum, and I had originally planned to tell the stories of the museum and its national narratives primarily by constructing ‘social biographies’ for a set of iconic artefacts. However, separating them from the web of narratives in which they are continually immersed – at the level of the display case, the exhibition hall, and the museum as a whole – served to unnecessarily distance the objects from many of the ways in which they acquire meaning and power.

Objects have meanings that are intrinsic to them, but more interesting than those is the way in which they can be arranged into narratives, in the same ways that words are arranged into sentences. As my research progressed it became clear that the most nuanced way to analyse the narratives created and supported by iconic objects was not just to look at the objects themselves but to examine them within the context of the stories that they have helped produce. Iconic objects help tell the stories associated with national museums on an institutional level, by being used in marketing material and gift shops, and their presence on these stages often help to induce visitors in the doors. However, they are only given these more abstract roles because of their visible presence in the smaller narrative spaces of museum galleries and exhibitions.

In addition to the largely fixed narratives of their permanent galleries, modern museums also host and produce numbers of temporary exhibitions, many of them supported strongly by the same iconic objects which anchor larger permanent narratives. The temporary exhibition has become an increasingly important mechanism of display and marketing for large national museums.⁶⁷ To create a good

⁶⁷ Emma Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: The Blockbuster Show," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (London, 1999), Tom Csaszar, "The Spectacular Record-Breaking Sold-Out Smash-Hit Blockbuster Super-show! A Phenomenon of Museum Culture," *New Art Examiner* 24(4) (1996). 22-27.

temporary exhibition a suitable subject matter, loan institution, host space, and collection must be brought together.⁶⁸ The final narrative of the exhibition depends on these factors, and also on the particular outside contexts of the time in which it was presented – what was going on in the political and social sphere both within and without the loan and host institutions. The finished exhibition reflects an amalgamation of all these factors, using certain objects throughout the material narrative to produce certain ideas in the mind of the visitor. However, it is not always a completely different set of objects for each exhibition. Oftentimes the same objects are used again and again as parts of very disparate exhibitions and shows. The way in which the object's stories can be manipulated in order to fit into these myriad narrative arcs is one of the most intriguing aspects of the life of iconic objects and serves to highlight the utility they have for the museum.

The ability given by temporary exhibitions to uncover the varying, and sometimes conflicting, stories that can be told by these objects, and the way they can and have been used by the museum to say something about the history of the nation it represents make these exhibitions an obvious location from which to look at larger ideas of museum, nation, history, and identity without losing the focus on artefacts and their narrative power.

As windows into the life of the museum, exhibitions also provide materials of study not seen at other times. The exhibition catalogue is a key object that is produced for most major shows today. These textual and visual accompaniments provide a vision of the exhibition which is meant to mirror the real experience, but also one that removes many of the spatial cues that heighten and change meaning when seen *in situ*. It presents the exhibition for those who were not there, but it also shows the aspirations, hope, and hype which surrounded the event when it was first produced. Catalogues are increasingly becoming desirable iconic objects themselves, and the ways in which they are designed and constructed can say as much as the text they contain. Conventional media provides more ephemeral material of study related to exhibitions. Reviews and other news coverage can provide a sense of how exhibitions and their objects have been received outside the museum world. These

⁶⁸ Lothar P. Wittenborg for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, *Good Show! A Practical Guide for Temporary Exhibitions*, 2nd ed. (London, 1991).

shows are events that break the fixity of the permanent galleries and allow for more levels of experimentation and receptivity to existing political and social conditions, which attracts more attention to the museum. The exhibitions profiled in this work were chosen because they were all influential in their own ways. Most were incredibly popular with the public and critics. All showcased a part of the museum collection or a way of analysing the past that was new and different. And each brings to the surface both the ways in which the National Museum of Scotland is a unique institution in a unique national context, and the ways that the global museum and heritage industry works along similar paths regardless of individual context. The tension between universal patterns and individual museum contexts is just one of the ambiguities that surround issues of nation and heritage and that can be illuminated by close examination.

The confluence of a Scottish setting, narratives of identity based on iconic artefacts, and a changing slate of temporary exhibitions can be found at several major museums in Scotland, most notably the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum and the Burrell Collection, both in Glasgow, and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. All of these institutions share modern foundation dates or recent and ongoing renovation projects with the National Museum as well.⁶⁹ However, these surface similarities obscure many deeper differences that I believe would have blurred the central arguments to be made around the unique history and national narratives of the National Museum of Scotland.

The story of that museum is one which is explicitly tied to that of the nation, through the Enlightenment context of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the connections which the founders of that group made between historical artefacts and national pride. Both the Burrell and Kelvingrove, in contrast, are first and foremost *civic* institutions, tied closely to the city of Glasgow even as their contents and narratives reach beyond these bounds. This is not to say that these institutions do not speak to larger Scottish national themes. However, their local history inextricably

⁶⁹ The Burrell Collection, donated to the city of Glasgow in 1944, was not opened to the public until 1983. Kelvingrove underwent a major renovation and re-hang from 2003 to 2006. The Portrait Gallery closed in April 2009 and is being completely renovated and reorganised over the next two years.

alters their collections and thus the stories that are told there. Another important point in which the National Museum of Scotland differs not only from its Glasgow counterparts but also from the Portrait Gallery, is in the type of objects displayed. While art objects and natural history specimens can, and have been, displayed as historical artefacts, they are also quite different from the type of material culture seen in most of the National Museum displays. Paintings, and particularly portraits, have a very different sort of iconic value than do historical items. Audiences and curators thus interact with art and its narratives differently, and attempting to compare the narratives built out of the two varying objects is a complicated task. In order to keep the many forces acting upon the narratives of the temporary exhibitions profiled here as clear and identifiable as possible, and also to recognise the many unique features of the National Museum of Scotland, no broad comparison with these other institutions will be undertaken. Instead, the Burrell, Kelvingrove, the Portrait Gallery, and other sites will appear as needed for small-scale analysis to illuminate larger points.

Thesis Structure and Aims

This thesis examines how identities and narratives are mapped onto iconic objects, and how these objects are presented and re-presented in museum exhibitions that each reflect the social, political, and cultural contexts of the time and space in which they are mounted. Often, these large narratives of nation and material culture appear from the outside to be continuous and unbroken. However, this façade of meta-organisation belies the realities, which are filled with fragmentation, chaos, and luck. Concentrating on the large unitary narratives often make things seem more settled, static, and predetermined than they are. To avoid doing this, I have refrained from creating one sole storyline about museums, objects, identity, and narrative. Instead, I have looked at six important moments in the life of the National Museum of Scotland. Between them, these windows into the heart of the museum encompass permanent exhibitions, temporary exhibitions hosted from other international institutions, and ones organised from within the Scottish collections and displayed elsewhere. The exhibitions have occupied spaces from traditional to post-modern, and covered themes from the national to the international to the local. Each show is

very different as far as context and particulars are concerned, but taken together they shed light on how it is that iconic objects are manipulated and contested throughout their lives in the museum.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by looking at the process of creating a national museum for Scotland from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries. Analysing the objects, narratives, and spaces that were called upon to create a new museum helps to situate the arguments that will be carried throughout the rest of the work. Even as the rhetoric surrounding the Museum of Scotland loudly proclaimed the project to be a new national museum for Scotland, there were antecedents abounding – previous incarnations of ideas about collecting, display, and the nation. Looking at those helps to show the weight of history that had to be considered while building the new visions of the collections, and the particular pressures of the political time in which the museum was created. A study of the Newcomen Engine is in the heart of this first chapter, as it is at the heart of the museum. Looking at the engine and other objects that were placed in positions of power in the very unique space of the new Museum of Scotland says much about the ways that Scottish identity and history were being negotiated at that time.

The first chapter introduces many of the theories and methods that have informed the whole of the project. Much of the material analysed there comes from a series of oral history interviews with the curators and consultants who were most intimately involved in the National Museum project. Oral history developed as a methodology in order to better capture the process by which actual event becomes memory, memory becomes myth, and eventually myth enters public consciousness.⁷⁰ History and memory are nearly as multi-layered as the object stories profiled here, so it makes sense to employ a method of research and study that acknowledges that. Paul Thompson has said that oral history is useful because it ‘...allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated.’⁷¹ In the often-chaotic and sometimes-contentious environment of exhibition planning and execution it is useful to be able

⁷⁰ See Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990), Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992).

⁷¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1988). 5.

to gather a variety of information from a selection of sources – including, where possible, the personal recollections of those individuals most intimately involved. The chapter also makes considerable use of theories of nationalism, and seeks to weave together traditional history with more interdisciplinary approaches to create a fuller picture of where museum narrative in Scotland was in 1998, as well as where it had come from and what types of objects it was centred on.

From that point we go back in time to look at several exhibitions that inspired the outcome of the Museum of Scotland Project. Chapter 2 takes as its focus a major temporary exhibition that came to Edinburgh from the American national museum system, the Smithsonian Institution, in 1984. This exhibition, held in the Royal Scottish Museum for the Edinburgh International Festival, was one of the only big ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions to be mounted in Scotland at the time, and it served as a source of inspiration for future shows. The American exhibition was successful not only in terms of visitor numbers, but also in showing how national identity can be presented through the display of important and iconic objects. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History, opened in 1964,⁷² has always focussed on this sort of display – largely choosing to tell the story of the nation through objects that have explicit connections to people whether mundane or famous. With the exhibition in Edinburgh this display technique was transported to a very new space, context, and audience. Objects such as a walking stick that had belonged to both Benjamin Franklin and George Washington managed to create narratives that fused their normal mode of presentation in America with the expectations of a radically different audience. Judy Garland’s ruby slippers from the *Wizard of Oz* film drew viewers in with their more popular frame of reference and contributed to the overwhelming success of the exhibition enterprise. The positive way in which this innovative mode of presentation was received inspired new visions for the Scottish collections, and new ways of thinking about the connections between identity and material culture.

⁷² It is worth noting here that although the building and collection opened in 1964 at that point it was known as the Museum of History and Technology. It only became the National Museum of American History in 1980, just before its objects came to display the nation in Edinburgh.

It is in Chapter 2 that space – an issue raised in architectural contexts in the first chapter – gets re-evaluated at a more interior level. The space inside a museum is ‘national’ space, in almost the same way as parliament halls or embassies. It is an area in which the nation is articulated. How much of this is due to the expectations that the visitor has of the space and how much is due to the inherent ‘national-ness’ of the objects is hard to quantify. However, if it were the space that imbued the objects with the gravitas of the nation, the objects would be cut adrift from their identity once they left their usual space and travelled into another. If the identity is contained within the objects themselves, they should alter whichever space they occupy. Analysing which parts of these options actually happened in the case of the travelling American icons helps to show the varying stories contained in objects and their environment. Another important aspect of the larger museum story that is illuminated by the American exhibition is that of the unseen chaos and pressures which occur behind the polished exhibition exterior. Temporary exhibitions happen for a variety of reasons, and these are not always as clear and without controversy as it might seem from the surface level. Going behind the scenes to understand the process of building a temporary exhibition of this magnitude helps to illuminate some of the hidden complexities of narrative creation.

Chapter 3 moves on to another temporary exhibition, one that was inspired by the Smithsonian’s effort. In 1989 *The Wealth of a Nation* was produced as an effort by Scottish curatorial staff to look upon Scotland’s national treasures in the same way that the Smithsonian had looked on America’s. This exhibition, too, was an International Festival blockbuster. However, it also had other motives, ones which would lead directly to the creation of the Museum of Scotland. *The Wealth of a Nation* was a demonstration of the power of the museum and its exhibition medium as a political force. The show was meant to showcase the wonderful objects in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland, just as *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* had done, but it was also meant as incontrovertible proof that Scotland needed a new museum in order to do justice to its national icons. The exhibition successfully conflated ‘nation’ and ‘object’ – an intellectual exercise that is often performed in museums, but one that is usually much less overt in its execution and outcome.

Various objects took centre stage in the exhibition and ‘the nation’. A silver picnic set belonging to Prince Charles Edward Stuart was presented not only for its historical associations, but also because the Scottishness of its design and form had been contested over time, and had been finally authenticated by museum professionals just before the exhibition launched. Therefore, the canteen truly was both valuable and ‘of the nation’, historically and in its very form. The Monymusk Reliquary, the other object at the heart of chapter 3, also has a contested history and has been claimed as a treasure for the nation, though the resolution has not been as scientific or clear as for the canteen set. However, in the context of the exhibition, the Monymusk Reliquary became a symbol of all that Scotland and its treasures have been and could be. The ways in which the stories of objects were manipulated through the use of space and display context in the exhibition serve as a strong reminder that what we see in the museum has been carefully produced as part of a larger narrative. *The Wealth of a Nation* set the stage for a new way of looking at Scottish identity through material culture, something that came into fruition with the opening of the Museum of Scotland.

Having looked at the new museum and two temporary exhibitions that inspired its form and modes of display, the thesis moves forward to a more recent series of temporary exhibitions that followed the creation of the National Museum of Scotland. Chapter 4 covers two Russian-themed shows, *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* and *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum*. By 2005 and 2006 Scotland was in a very different place both culturally and politically than it was in the 1980s. The national museums, too, had changed. When a major collaboration with the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg was proposed, with a set of two exhibitions to be mounted, the process of building the exhibitions differed mightily from the earlier international connections with the Smithsonian. In this case the Scottish museum suggested the partnership, had large degrees of control over the narratives that were presented, and supplemented them with objects from its own collections and text from its own experts. Artefacts such as a religious icon painting of Nicholas II belonging to the Royal Scots Greys were taken from groups and people in Scotland to further emphasise and make tangible the relationship between the two nations. These overt

links heightened interest in the exhibition, as did traditionally intriguing items such as Faberge regalia and a bloodstained shirt worn by Nicholas during an early attempt on his life. Building this type of exhibition narrative showed the changing place of Scotland and its cultural institutions on the global stage, as well as the changes that had taken place in post-Soviet Russia. With the advent of devolution in 1997 the Scottish nation gained more recognition and independence in both cultural and political spheres. The museum benefited from this, as they moved from being supported exclusively by the British state and acting as regional collections to being supported – culturally if not entirely financially - by the near-by Holyrood Parliament, and being among the flagship cultural institutions of the nation. Scotland was a nation before devolution, of course, but in Gellner-ian views the increasing congruence of state and nation that devolution wrought made the nation a much more powerful entity. Whereas it had been much the weaker partner in the Smithsonian venture, as perhaps befitted a collection which was uncertain in identity and naming, Scotland was the equal or ruling side in a collaboration between the Royal Museum of Scotland (a part of the National Museums of Scotland) and the State Hermitage. In many ways, the collaboration was both proof of, and further impetus for, an increased international presence for the museum and the defined global identity that would bring.

The two exhibitions that resulted from this partnership were very different in scope, style, and outcome. One, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, was a traditional blockbuster, with all the elements that tend to guarantee successful publicity and many visitors. It also covered a subject that has been treated in many other exhibitions, while also managing to infuse in with a new Scottish element. The other, *Beyond the Palace Walls*, was a much more scholarly presentation that favoured information on the particular object in question over one cohesive exhibition narrative. It too had a strong Scottish component, but this came from the melding of collections rather than any new storylines being brought out. Objects from the Islamic Art collections of the National Museum of Scotland were combined with those on loan for an entirely collaborative exhibition. The way in which the new objects on display in Scotland were able to change the narratives that had traditionally been woven around the objects in both exhibitions, though, provides an

interesting further element for the study of space, identity, and objects. Also of interest is how the direct comparison of two exhibitions with the same pairings of loan and host institutions can illuminate the ways in which presentations of exhibitions in media and catalogues can differ to support different agendas and narratives. With the rise of a temporary exhibition culture within the museum world, the objects that come out of an exhibition - most particularly the exhibition catalogue – have become icons in their own right.

Chapter 5 takes a different view of temporary exhibitions. Instead of the usual loan/host pairing and the display of the show in one clearly delineated museum space, it concentrates on a unique travelling exhibition organised in a joint effort by the three major cultural institutions in Scotland: the National Library, the National Galleries, and the National Museums, with additional contributions from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The resulting show travelled to a variety of museums and galleries across Scotland, and acted as showpiece for the Year of Highland Culture 2007, a political project developed to help the government fulfil some very particular goals. This chapter returns, therefore, to a strand of politics in the museum not strongly present since chapters 1 and 3. The Highland 2007 exhibition took place during yet another moment where Scotland-the-nation was re-evaluating its identity, and it again used the museum as a forum for discussion. Objects such as the Cadboll Cup which, seen in the context of the normal permanent displays said something about French influence in Renaissance Scotland, or like the Union Brooch, which spoke about building Scottish support for Union, came to say something very different when seen as part of Highland 2007. The multivocality of objects, which has been emphasised throughout the text, becomes more overt here, as does the extent to which political visions of the museum and its possibilities can differ from curatorial ones.

In the last of the substantive chapters, 6, we step away from the device of temporary exhibitions to return to the permanent displays of the Museum of Scotland, nearly a decade on from its original opening. In yet another of the moments in which identity is redefined, the museum was ‘re-branded’ in late 2006. What had been two separate, if linked, institutions – the Royal Museum and the Museum of Scotland – were amalgamated so that they each formed half of a new

institution, the National Museum of Scotland. The reasons for this change, and the way in which it was implemented, shed interesting light onto the way in which identities are marketed and made tangible. The rebranding also expanded the definition of a national museum. When the Museum of Scotland was opened, the focus was on the treasures of the Scottish nation and the objects that told the story of the nation's history. However, with the expansion of the 'national' label to the contents of the Royal Museum, very different sorts of objects became involved in national narratives. Egyptian mummies and jewellery associated with Mary, Queen of Scots were now embedded in the same narrative, where before they had existed in parallel but separate storylines. The way in which this narrative alteration was carried out, and the results that it has had for the conceptions of the nation contained within the museum, serve as a good vantage point from which to look at the way museum narratives, identities, and icons are subject to continuous transformation. The change in the museum reflected other modifications that have taken place in the public incarnation of the nation after ten years of devolution.

In the conclusion to the work, many of the larger ideas and trends to be uncovered in the course of the study will be revisited, allowing for an overall view of the subject, and where this work fits into the ever-changing landscape of museum and heritage studies. We will also return briefly to the National Museum of Scotland to look at where it might be heading, and developments too recent to permit in-depth study. These, such as the opening of a new permanent gallery devoted to Scotland from World War One to the present, indicate that a work such as this, concerned with modern incarnations of identity and history, is never entirely completed. The conclusion serves merely as a place to stop and take stock of what has been done while also investigating future research directions and possibilities that got lost in the process of creation.

It is my hope that this thesis serves as an interesting and productive synthesis of detailed historical and cultural study, within a bigger influential but largely tacit web of theoretical discourse. The iconic objects themselves serve as they have throughout the project's development – as signposts that illuminate particular issues with their individual stories. Many of them could have equally well have been placed at several points in the narrative, and the ones that are featured here are only a few of

the masses of interesting and engaging objects that were seen at every moment of the museum's life. They are not the only 'objects' under study either. The catalogues that profile them, the exhibitions that feature them, and the museum spaces that house them are all iconic objects themselves. Being aware at all times of this multivocality and the multilayered aspects of museum, nation, and narrative, will permit a fuller understanding of the issues that are to be encountered as the work progresses.

1

1780 - 1998

Building a Nation:
Creating the Museum of Scotland

Why do nations have national museums? The introduction explored some ideas about what, and when, a nation is. The definition of ‘museum’ is much simpler, being widely understood as a building in which objects of historic, artistic, or cultural value are displayed for the public.⁷³ A national museum, then, would logically house the objects of value to the nation, and display them for the members of the nation. However, as nations have become increasingly the geo-political form into which the world is divided, national museums have become more than just a repository of objects. They have taken on weight as one of the official apparatuses of the nation and an essential means by which to disseminate the ideas of a glorious and eternal history that support the modern claims of nationhood. Having a national museum in the age of nations was, and continues to be, a symbol of the permanence of a particular identity, and a way to embed the narratives of the nation into the larger mass consciousness.

With the weight of this symbolic role behind it, it is clear that the creation of a national museum is not an easy or straightforward task. The process becomes even more fraught when taken out of the nineteenth century milieu where it was most prominent and attempted instead in the late twentieth century context of media,

⁷³ More precise definitions include the one developed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) – ‘A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.’ From the ICOM Statutes, 24 August 2007. <<http://icom.museum/statutes.html>>

politics, and mass opinion. Nation-building, and museum-building, are still projects of the elite, but the barrier between them and the voices of the rest is much thinner. The change in timing also means that the voice of history is added to the other expectations heaped upon the national museum, as the archetype for a ‘national museum’ is already established and rooted in culture. Notwithstanding these potential problems, however, a new national museum was envisioned, altered, contested, and ultimately created in Scotland in the 1990s. Looking at how this was accomplished, what narratives were considered and selected, and how national identity was embedded in exhibits and objects there will serve as a starting point for this work, allowing later chapters to investigate some of these issues in more depth.

Scotland did not follow the typical path of nationness, having given up its apparatus of state in the 1707 Union of the Parliaments and chosen to join the United Kingdom. However, although it was from that moment no longer a state, its sense of national identity – or ‘nationness’ - remained and had long been recognised as distinct from that of its southern neighbour. Throughout the eighteenth century, and especially during the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, Scottish nationalism was considered dangerous, both by the English and by the Lowland Scots who largely supported the Hanoverian monarchy. This split between Lowland and Highland, which also mirrored religious divides between Presbyterian and Catholic, had meant that for much of its history there was not one unified Scottish nation but rather two - one primarily Gaelic-speaking and Stewart sympathising, and the other representing the largely English- and Scots-speaking Lowlanders.⁷⁴ However, by the later eighteenth century the Jacobites had been successfully routed, and what had previously been deemed barbaric and wild transformed into ideas of the historic and picturesque, with its most formerly savage elements becoming incorporated into the martial tools of a newly British empire.⁷⁵ Only then, once the threat of violence had been removed, could the project of museumising the past of Scotland start, just as was increasingly being done elsewhere in the world. It began slowly, led by elites who collected historical objects and gradually shaped their collections into what could be considered precursors to a national museum.

⁷⁴ Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*. 147.

⁷⁵ Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. 119-120.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century characters and struggles involved in creating various incarnations of a national museum in Scotland are critical to the story, and will be covered in depth here. However, the main aim of this chapter is to explore the fraught discussions in the 1980s and 1990s that ultimately led to the opening of the Museum of Scotland.⁷⁶ The creation of a new national museum in Europe in the twentieth century was a rare occurrence, and the process by which this was done suggests much about the role of objects in museums, and of museums in nations. It is important to remember, too, that museums are not the static and unchanging spaces they are often assumed to be. Each object and exhibit in a museum is seen in a space of mediation, and one that is continuously open to change. Investigating how the spaces and stories of the Museum of Scotland were negotiated and changed over the process of its creation can help to unravel how the narratives within it were constructed, and to what extent they are truly historic, national, or ‘authentic’.

The first and perhaps most significant pressure on the new museum was the weight of history. Although there had not been one singular national history museum in Scotland at the same time that those institutions were springing up across Europe, there was a long history of antiquarianism. That past had to be acknowledged, consciously or unconsciously, because of its pervasive influence on the new national museum project – both in terms of the collections to be displayed and the intellectual framework behind the presentation of the past in Scotland. Looking at those who started this in the eighteenth century, and how their missions progressed over the years, will help contextualise and frame an understanding of events in the twentieth century.

Precursors to the Museum of Scotland

In Scotland, as across Europe, there had been private collectors who used their wealth and connections to amass collections of historically and aesthetically

⁷⁶ By using this name, I am referring to the modern half of the museum complex on Chambers Street in Edinburgh. This was its name at opening, and though it is now half of the National Museum of Scotland I will continue to refer to it here by the original name. Issues of naming are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

interesting objects. Some of these, such as the objects belonging to Sir John Clerk of Penicuik and Sir Robert Sibbald, have remained as part of newer collections,⁷⁷ and some, such as the museum opened by Alexander Weir in the late 1780s, disappeared quite rapidly.⁷⁸ None of these antiquarian endeavours were overtly focussed on collecting the history of Scotland. However, on 14 November 1780 David Stewart Erskine, the eleventh Earl of Buchan, called together a select group of Edinburgh elites for an extraordinary meeting at his house that was destined to change this.⁷⁹ Once the crowd was assembled the Earl read to them his meticulously prepared *Discourse delivered at a meeting for the purpose of promoting the institution of a Society for the investigation of the History of Scotland and its Antiquities*. In this he lamented the lack of a ‘regular society for promoting antiquarian researches...in this part of Great Britain’⁸⁰ He wished to start one, spurred on by what he saw as an unacceptable lack of attention to Scottish ‘relics’ which were leaving the country and being sold to foreigners both English and other. He had much to say about the presence of a similar society in London from 1707,⁸¹ and was anxious that Scotland not fall behind or cause all of its antiquaries and collectors to engage solely with the

⁷⁷ Many objects from the collections of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik are currently in the Museum, having been donated to the Society of Antiquaries in 1859 by his descendent Sir George Clerk. For more on him and other early antiquarians, see Iain G. Brown, "Critick in Antiquity: Sir John Clerk of Penicuik," *Antiquity* LI (1977). 201-210.

⁷⁸ For more on the Weir Museum, see Michael A. Taylor, "An Entertainment for the Enlightened; Alexander Weir's Edinburgh Museum of Natural Curiosities 1782-1802," *Archives of Natural History* 19(2) (1992).

⁷⁹ The Earl was very interested in antiquarianism and Scottish politics for much of his life even before founding the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and had been a member of the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society in London since 1764. See Emma Vincent Macleod, "Erskine, David Steuart, eleventh earl of Buchan (1742–1829)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004)

⁸⁰ Ronald J. Cant, "David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: Founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland," in *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to Mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and its Museum*, ed. Alan S. Bell (Edinburgh, 1981). 14.

⁸¹ The Society of Antiquaries (England) was started on the 5th of December 1707, though was only in operation continuously from 1717, and received its royal charter in 1751.

Southern society.⁸² He also mentioned that there had been several attempts to create a society in Scotland, some as early as 1572, but that each had dissolved prior to gaining a Royal Charter. He suspected that these early societies ‘failed on account of their having no house in property, nor any private interests to care for their books, museum, and other necessary appurtenances; and that having met in taverns, their meetings degenerated into convivial and anomalous conversations.’⁸³ It was clear that the Earl had in mind for this to be a much more serious affair than those that came before.

In his *Discourse*, he spoke of several motivations for forming the society at this particular time. First, he talked of the interest in Scottish antiquity across Europe due to the current popularity of the poems of Ossian. These fragments of supposedly ancient epic ballads of the Highland chief Ossian and his son Fingal were great favourites with the leaders of Europe in the 1760s, and Buchan refers to them admiringly as artefacts of Scottish history and tradition.⁸⁴ The Ossianic fashion served to highlight the wealth of interest that could be evoked by the Scottish past. William Smellie, one of the first members of the new Society and the first curator of its collections, gives a few other reasons for the timing of the foundation in his edited version of Buchan’s remarks. He says that

Till we were happily united with England, not in government only, but in loyalty and affection to a common sovereign, it was not, perhaps, altogether consistent with political wisdom, to call attention of the Scots to the ancient honours and constitution of their independent monarchy. Not many years have elapsed since the jealousies of the two nations were succeeded by a warm and mutual attachment to the same family and constitution.⁸⁵

⁸² David Stewart Erskine, Earl of Buchan, 1778. Quoted in R.B.K. Stevenson, "The Museum: Its Beginnings and its Development: part I, to 1858," in *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to Mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries, 1780-1980*, ed. Alan S. Bell (Edinburgh, 1981). 9.

⁸³ David Stewart Erskine 11th Earl of Buchan, *Discourse delivered at a meeting for the purpose of promoting the institution of a Society for the investigation of the History of Scotland and its Antiquities* (1780).

⁸⁴ Stevenson, "The Museum: Its Beginnings and its Development: part I, to 1858." 33.

⁸⁵ William Smellie, *Account of the Institution and Progress of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1782). 1-2.

Scottish history, having been leveraged powerfully by Jacobites earlier, had been a fraught field of study. However, Smellie and others believed that by the 1780s the divisions of the recent past were healed enough to allow academic, rather than pointedly political, interest in the past. The Earl wished that his incarnation of the Antiquarian Society would concern itself with the whole body of antiquarian studies. ‘He wished to provide Scotland with the most effective means of safeguarding its national heritage’.⁸⁶ Buchan saw the Society and its museum as a way to put himself and other prominent Scots ‘in a position to embark on a wide range of activities to conserve and record everything that contributed to the distinctive identity of Scotland.’⁸⁷ The distinctive identity of Scotland, however, was only able to be accepted widely after the Union with England was solidified. Now that the present situation of Scotland was settled, and the Jacobite risings had been definitively crushed, men like Buchan could celebrate the past.

After hearing the Earl’s *Discourse*, the crowd agreed that there should be a further meeting on 28 November 1780, and at a third meeting on 18 December the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland was formally constituted. Almost immediately the members of the Society began collecting whatever objects people were willing to give them, and the Earl went on a hunt for a space in which to display the fledgling collection.⁸⁸ Some sort of Scottish museum of history was born.

Towards a Public Institution

For years the Society and its museum stumbled from house to house in Edinburgh, trying to find a lifelong home.⁸⁹ The collections expanded, but display

⁸⁶ Cant, "David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: Founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland." 14.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ David Erskine, Earl of Buchan, quoted in Smellie, *Account of the Institution and Progress of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. 16.

⁸⁹ The first home of the Society’s museum was in a tenement house in the Cowgate [see image 1.1]. It then moved to several other houses around that area, including locations on Castle Terrace and the Lawnmarket, before moving in 1813 to 42 George Street, where they shared accommodation with the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In 1826 the two moved together to new housing in the Mound [see image

space and public access was severely limited and little work was put into cataloguing or examining the contents of the collections. Curators were by and large amateur enthusiasts with other primary employment, and their pay and length of tenure reflected this. However, in the middle of the nineteenth century – the heyday for museums of national history across the world – the museum in Scotland changed as well. The Society had started as a private association, but by the early 1840s it had begun petitioning the British government for grants and public recognition, continuing to do so at regular intervals despite continually being turned down. It was thought that governmental support would shore up the shaky finances of the Society, while also letting them take a stronger public role. The museum was becoming increasingly popular with the public, being seen by 4000 people in 1841, and by more in the following year, including Prince Albert himself.⁹⁰ Gradually, however, the feeling grew in the Society that it was not just government funding they should be seeking, but a wholesale removal of the collections to public and state control. By 1848 the society was campaigning hard for a place in the building that was at that time being planned for the foot of the Mound in the centre of Edinburgh.⁹¹ It wished to move to this overtly public and established building not only for reasons of rent and space, but also because their presence there would signify that the museum enterprise had moved beyond a private endeavour of one particular Society into something that had benefits for the whole of a much larger society. As the building on the Mound was also to host the National Gallery, the ties of shared space would raise the museum of the Society of Antiquaries in status, above some of the competing museum projects in Edinburgh at that time. Institutions such as the museum of the Royal Society and the collections of the University were long adversaries of the Society of Antiquaries, and being able to claim space next to the

1.2]. In 1844 the Society of Antiquaries returned to George Street, this time to number 42, sharing with the Edinburgh Life Association. After being evicted for non-payment of rent, in 1851 they were offered free space in the Royal Institution, and from there moved on to the Findlay building in 1883 [see image 1.3].

⁹⁰ Marinell Ash, "David Laing, Daniel Wilson, and Scottish Archaeology," in *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to Mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1780-1980*, ed. Alan S. Bell (Edinburgh, 1981). 96.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 102.

National Gallery would have strengthened the Antiquarians' claim to have the pre-eminent museum in the city and the nation.⁹²

To further bolster their case for national status, the Society of Antiquaries turned to Daniel Wilson, an artist and archaeologist who had been recently elected to the Society. He took charge of the collections, attempting the first comprehensive and scientific cataloguing of the contents. In doing this, Wilson began with the tripartite form of cataloguing which was in vogue among Scandinavian archaeologists at the time. There had long been links between the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and similar groups in the Scandinavian countries. Grimur Thorkelin, an important Icelandic scholar, had been a correspondent and friend of the Earl of Buchan starting in 1783, a relationship which led to ongoing dialogue between the two and multiple trips to visit and compare artefacts and museums. This pattern of scholarly antiquarian connection outlived the Earl and continued to develop into the late nineteenth century. Members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland were especially interested in the building of the Danish National Museum of Antiquity which opened in 1819. Scandinavian archaeologists Christian Thomsen and Jens Worsaae developed a theory of 'seriation' to categorise the artefacts to be displayed in their museum.⁹³ Their tripartite division of artefacts into categories of Iron Age, Stone Age, and Bronze Age, allowed what they believed to be the natural evolution of human society to be most clearly seen.

Wilson admired the Scandinavian system and agreed with their theories of evolution. However, the system was purely meant for prehistoric artefacts and obviously did not have space for many of the objects in the holdings of the museum, such as the 'Maiden' beheading machine given to the Society in 1797. Thus the schema had to expand somewhat, and Wilson became increasingly interested in the social basis of objects - and especially in the importance of comparison between cultures and times. He catalogued every object by its intended use and its home location, as well as the underlying tripartite division. The final outcome of this work,

⁹² These two institutions and the boundaries and intersections between them and the Society of Antiquaries will be covered in more detail in Chapter 6 of this work.

⁹³ Bruce G. Trigger, "Daniel Wilson and the Scottish Enlightenment," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. 122 (1992). 61.

the *Synopsis of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* was completed in 1849 and distributed to all members of the Society as well as being sold in the Museum. Two special copies were sent to Balmoral for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.⁹⁴ The catalogue was also printed in the first volume of the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in 1852. There it was joined by a list of what was known to be coming into the collections in the near future, and several articles on the state of archaeological research in Scotland.⁹⁵ The creation of the catalogue and the *Proceedings* served to emphasise the national scope of the collections and its importance to the people of Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole.

A National Museum?

In part, this mission to procure new housing an increased public support was successful and in 1851 the Society of Antiquaries was offered the rent-free accommodation in the Royal Institution building (now the Royal Scottish Academy) at the foot of the Mound on Princes Street [image 1.2]. A year later, in 1852, they also finally received state recognition. With that, the collections moved to the jurisdiction of the government and Scotland had, for the first time, a national museum. When the museum opened in its new quarters in 1859 it was under a new name or names – technically it was the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, though it was also known as the Museum of Antiquities, and was most commonly referred to as the Antiquarian Museum.⁹⁶

The naming of museums and collections is an important issue that will be revisited throughout this study. Names tell the observer much about how an institution is being framed for the public, and through that, something about which narratives are going to be given priority within the exhibition space. Because of this,

⁹⁴ Stevenson, "The Museum: Its Beginnings and its Development: part I, to 1858." 80.

⁹⁵ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 1 (1852).

⁹⁶ R.B.K. Stevenson, "The Museum, its Beginnings and its Development: Part II: The National Museum to 1954," in *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to Mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1780-1980*, ed. Alan S. Bell (Edinburgh, 1981). 143.

changes in naming often reflect changes in status and role for the museum within the national context. Looking at how the museum is titled at any moment in time can show which aspects of itself the nation is choosing to make most public. This first attempt at naming the collection of Scottish historical artefacts was especially critical, however, merely because it *was* the first. Previously the museum had been without an official title. It had been commonly known as the museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, largely in order to separate it from the other major Edinburgh institution, the museum of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. This name, unofficial as it was, reveals how the museum was seen at the time – as the auxiliary activity of a scholarly association. It could remain under that name regardless of which location it moved to, as it was the Society that was important, rather than the museum or its contents. However, with the start of national control and a recognised and iconic new home the Museum began to exist as an institution, one that was connected to, and yet separate from, the Society that had inspired it. The new name helped to cement the idea of the museum as national institution and to give it an identity that was more public and widely accessible, as well as allowing it to emulate other European museums of the time in London, Paris, and others.⁹⁷

However, the question is worth asking: Was this a national museum, just because it was controlled by the government and accessible to the public? As the years went on and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland moved to and settled into its most permanent home, the neo-gothic Findlay Building on Queen Street [image 1.3], observers were increasingly unsure. In the Findlay Building the Museum of Antiquities shared space with the National Portrait Gallery, which was a conjunction that the earliest members of the Society of Antiquaries would have liked. The Earl of Buchan and William Smellie had felt strongly that the Society should collect portraits as well as objects, as pictures of the people who helped form the nation was a much more effective way of telling a story than the objects they left behind. The Earl proposed that

...with a view to inspire our fellow citizens with the love of fame which produced the triumphs of antiquity, the Society do resolve to collect the best original portraits or,

⁹⁷ See Prior, *Museums and Modernity*. Chapter 2.

where such cannot be procured, the best copies of portraits of illustrious and learned Scots; and from time to time do, after mature consideration, place and affix them in a room or gallery, to be denominated the *Temple of Caledonian Fame*.⁹⁸

Thus it was that portraits began to be collected, and though this ‘*Temple of Fame*’ remained unhoused for decades, the newspaper baron John Richie Findlay paid for its endowment and housing in the larger part of the Findlay Building, while its predecessor institution, the museum of the Society of Antiquaries, was given the smaller back rooms. By 1891 when both institutions were housed there and open to the public, the Earl of Buchan’s vision of a national collection of both objects and portraits was finally completed, albeit in a different form than he would have expected, as separate entities.⁹⁹

There was never a sense of the Antiquarian’s museum using its collections to say anything about the particular history of Scotland, even when it received its new home and new, national, naming. Instead, it clung to the tripartite divisions and anthropological comparison of Daniel Wilson, even into the twentieth century. The museum also kept to the long-standing policy of collecting everything and anything it could [images 1.4-1.6]. The naming of the place echoed these ideas. The National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland was a solid official title, but also hid many ambiguities. While it was a *national* museum, it was the museum of *antiquities*, not the museum of the nation. It was being presented as the museum of a collection, rather than that of an idea or a community.

This was worrying to the increasingly vocal campaigners for a more recognised Scottish nation. Though the British Museum is not a museum of Britain so much as a museum of the glories of British enterprise, other sub-state nationalisms within and without Britain had long presented their history in material form to reinforce their claims of existence. The Earl of Buchan had worried about

⁹⁸ David Stewart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan, quoted in Smellie, *Account of the Institution and Progress of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. 24.

⁹⁹ The history of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery credits the 11th Earl of Buchan as the first person to systematically collect portraits of Scottish personages, but makes no mention of the Society of Antiquaries and their museum. See the History of the Gallery, <<http://www.nationalgalleries.org/visit/page/2:302:3/>>

the loss of Scottish artefacts themselves. Twentieth century campaigners worried more about the loss of the identity that was tied to those objects if they could not be displayed in an appropriately fitted and recognisable national museum space. Formal complaints by curatorial staff and institutional supporters had been presented to the government in 1929, 1951, 1981, and 1985 about a lack of space for the proper display of objects in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and informal murmurings had been a constant presence ever since the 1891 opening of the museum in Queen Street.¹⁰⁰ The discontent at these times echoed the Society of Antiquaries' displeasure at being unable to secure government funding in the nineteenth century, when they wrote that they considered

...the refusal of their application...as a slight offered to Scotland and they cannot help comparing the support which scientific institutions in Scotland receive from the government with the munificent grants made to those in England, and still more so to those in Ireland...¹⁰¹

There was an idea that a nation had to have a national museum in order to exist in the modern world, and that the lack became more and more inexcusable as time went on. Plans were made in the 1970s to provide a new museum, but at the last minute the government funding was withdrawn and the project collapsed. However, as a small gesture of reconciliation a committee was set up by the British Government and the Scottish Office. Called the Committee for the National Museums and Galleries of Scotland, it ran from 1979 until 1981, under the chairmanship of Sir Alwyn Williams, a geologist who at the time of his appointment was Principal of Glasgow University and Chairman of Trustees of the Natural History Museum in London, among other prestigious positions.¹⁰² The new committee was meant to examine the current provisions and status of museums and galleries in Scotland and report back to the government about what needed doing. The ensuing Williams Committee report, titled *A National Heritage for Scotland*, was clear about its belief that the state of

¹⁰⁰ Michael Lynch, "The Making of the Museum of Scotland: A Museum of National Memories or Nationalism?" (Ottawa, September 2003). 1. Also see Charles McKean, *The Making of the Museum of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000). 8-24.

¹⁰¹ Society of Antiquaries of Scotland minute book, 1844.

¹⁰² G.Y. Craig, "Obituary: Sir Alwyn Williams," *The Independent* 12 April 2004.

heritage preservation and presentation in Scotland was in need of much help.¹⁰³ It recommended the reorganisation of heritage institutions in Scotland to eliminate confusion about the varying remits of galleries, libraries, and museums, and it also formally recommended the creation of a new museum, which they wished to call the Museum of Scotland, that would finally address the national history of the country.

The report was scathing in its critique of the care that was being taken of the objects of material history that had first inspired the formation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland two centuries before. It said

The greatest deficiencies we found were, paradoxically, in the exhibition, storage, and conservation of the very objects which reflect the uniqueness and genius of Scotland and confirm the importance of her contributions to western civilisation.¹⁰⁴

Given that, it was perhaps obvious that for the committee, the

...most fundamental recommendation therefore is that the artefacts of Scottish Culture should be the concern of a new institution, the Museum of Scotland, at least comparable in space, staffing, and resources with the Royal Scottish Museum and wider in scope than the present National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, which it is intended to replace.¹⁰⁵

Now, finally, there was to be what Daniel Wilson and the Society of Antiquaries had wanted at least since the 1840s – one complete museum for all the national history and material culture of Scotland. The National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland had served its purpose for a time at which the study of antiquities was judged to be one of the worthwhile sciences, but antiquarianism was no longer the predominant way of understanding objects, and in the new heritage-focussed culture of the 1970s and 1980s there were new visions of how to present objects and narratives in order to portray an increasingly confident and vibrant Scotland.

¹⁰³ Dr. Alwyn Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland: Scotland's National Museums and Galleries, the Next 25 Years - Report of a Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for Scotland under the Chairmanship of Dr. Alwyn Williams," (1981).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* xi.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* xi.

Not only the content but also the timing of this committee's statement was important, because of the extent to which a new idea of national distinctiveness was forming in Scotland. With the rise of Thatcherite politics in the later 1970s and 1980s, and the earlier crucial discovery of oil reserves in the North Sea, came a backlash against British rule, and a consequent surge in Scottish national identity.¹⁰⁶ Since 1945 a greater proportion of Scottish voters have supported the Labour party and other left-of-centre parties than the Conservative Party of Thatcher. This tendency to be out-of-sync with the voting patterns of the rest of Britain is long-standing, with 14 of the 32 elections since 1885 having shown the same pattern.¹⁰⁷ The electoral gap was largest in 1970s, with some of the Conservative government policies being seen to be explicitly anti-Scottish.¹⁰⁸ Thatcherism came to epitomise the frustration of years of minority rule and the ignorance in Westminster of particularly Scottish needs. This helped to crystallise national feeling that had been only vaguely elucidated in the previous years. Clamouring for a long-deferred national museum was a symbolic gesture that helped fight for the existence of a much larger Scottish culture.

Little regard was given to the Williams report outside of Scottish cultural circles until April 1984, when a new committee, helmed by the Marquess of Bute,¹⁰⁹ a long-time benefactor of the arts and culture in Scotland, was appointed to

advise the Secretary of State for Scotland ... having regard particularly to the planning and future development of a Museum of Scotland within the new structure, including its accommodation needs and its links with existing collections, both national and local.¹¹⁰

This report was strongly in favour of the earlier Williams Committee

¹⁰⁶ See Jonathan Hearn, *Claiming Scotland: National Identity and Liberal Culture* (Edinburgh, 2000).

¹⁰⁷ Ailsa Henderson, *Hierarchies of Belonging: National Identity and Political Culture in Scotland and Quebec* (London, 2007). 41.

¹⁰⁸ McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*. 169-173.

¹⁰⁹ For more on the Marquess of Bute and his various contributions to Scottish cultural life, see Gavin Stamp, "Stuart, John Crichton-, Sixth Marquess of Bute (1933-1993)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

¹¹⁰ Museums Advisory Board, "Report to the Secretary of State for Scotland by the Museums Advisory Board under the Chairmanship of the Marquess of Bute," (Edinburgh, 1985). 1.

recommendations, but unlike this first report – which pointedly recommended that the new museum not be situated next to the Royal Museum on Chambers Street, to allow the new institution more space and independence¹¹¹ - the Bute Committee believed that the two should be located side by side [image 1.7]. More than that, they also

...recommend that the new Trustees should pursue the greatest possible degree of integration of the two museums and that the aim should be to achieve this as swiftly as circumstances permit. This is, we believe, the best and most realistic way of developing the Williams Committee's concept of a Museum of Scotland.¹¹²

This was a change to the original plans, and directly contradicted some of the Williams Committee's philosophy about the role of the new museum in the heritage of Scotland, and the prominence it should be awarded. However, making any progress on the long-deferred museum was good, and the Marquess of Bute, head of the Museums Advisory Board, was a long time advocate of the creation of a new museum, so his involvement lent weight to the enterprise.

The heritage culture in Britain was at a time of change in the 1970s and 1980s, with many new museums and heritage sites opening as well as the government establishing both a Department of Heritage (now the Department of Culture, Media and Sport) and the National Heritage Memorial Fund. Heritage became big business, and also a very political issue for the nation – the past became an object to be saved and treasured as a way of promoting the present.¹¹³ The Museums Advisory Board report, being read in the heritage-saturated context of its time, led to the 1985 passage in Westminster Parliament of the National Heritage (Scotland) Act. This covered everything from the National Galleries of Scotland to the Royal Botanic Gardens, the National Library, Public Records, and, most crucially for this work, the National Museums. It mandated a change to the structure of

¹¹¹ Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland." 42.

¹¹² "Report to the Secretary of State for Scotland by the Museums Advisory Board under the Chairmanship of the Marquess of Bute." 3.

¹¹³ For more on this time period and the changes to heritage, see Hewison, *The Heritage Industry*. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994). And Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*.

national institutions in Scotland, so that there was one board overseeing all the national museums, to be called the National Museums Scotland. In practice this meant a combining of staff from formerly separate institutions like the Royal Scottish Museum and the Museum of Antiquities, as well as more cosmetic changes such as altering the name of the RSM to be just the Royal Museum. Bigger changes were also manifest, though, with a whole section of the Bill being devoted to the Williams Committee's suggestion of the Museum of Scotland. Section 4 says that

The Board may form a 'Museum of Scotland' and may include in that museum any or all of the objects which -
 (a) are presently in the collections of the Royal Scottish Museum or the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland;
 or (b) may become vested in the Board in the future.¹¹⁴

Thus it was that the first museum of Scottish National History was written into law by a government that did not seem to truly believe in Scottish national distinctiveness. It could have been that the granting of the museum was in fact an inducement dangled by the Conservative government in order to stave off further calls for political devolution. There was an idea in Scottish cultural circles, including those of the museum's curatorial staff, and perhaps also in the Scottish Office and the Westminster government, that granting some degree of acknowledgement of past national identity and autonomy would forestall the call for political autonomy in the present and future.

Imagining the Museum of Scotland

However, just because the idea of a new museum for Scotland had moved from plan to parliamentary act did not mean that it then quickly progressed from act to deed. In fact, by 1989, four years after the jubilation of the National Heritage (Scotland) Act, there had been so little movement that a special summer exhibition was put on in order to place pressure on the government to follow through with the promised funding and get the project moving.¹¹⁵ That exhibition, titled *The Wealth of*

¹¹⁴ National Heritage (Scotland) Act, 1985. Section 4.1

¹¹⁵ There were other motivations for the exhibition as well, but the political tone of it was made clear in promotional materials and media coverage, all of which will be covered in more depth in Chapter 3.

a Nation, will be covered in depth in Chapter 3 of this work, so all that need concern us now is the outcome – and that was a successful one, with funding being committed to the project by the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland, Malcolm Rifkind on the day the *Wealth of a Nation* exhibition opened to the public.¹¹⁶

On 16 October 1990 a Symposium was held in the Royal Museum, next door to the proposed site of the Museum of Scotland, to discuss the ideas for the new museum. It had been convened by the head of the National Museums of Scotland, and it covered everything from the feasibility of putting the museum where it had been planned, the role of the building in the vision of the new museum, how it would compare to other major national museums in the world, and finally, how it would serve the people of Scotland and beyond. This served as an important first step in moving the museum from political and social dream to a recognisable concept. Over the course of this symposium it was decided that, in keeping with the ideas of Daniel Wilson, the Earl of Buchan, and other early supporters of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the new Museum of Scotland should endeavour to focus on the objects and tell the story of Scotland that emerged from them.

The objects should tell the story, not that we should present a story illustrated by objects. This would mean, of course, that we would not be presenting a history, as written in textbooks, with objects as three-dimensional illustrations. The objects should speak for themselves, and should occupy the primary role in all displays.¹¹⁷

With this statement the new Museum of Scotland was envisioned as an unabashedly object-centred project. There have emerged two general categories of history museums. One is narrative-based, where a complete history is told with authentic objects being used primarily to illustrate the story throughout the museum. The other, with which the planners of the Museum of Scotland were aligning themselves, tells only the parts of the historical narrative for which there are surviving authentic

¹¹⁶ David Black, "Exhibition's a Wealth of Attractions," *The Sunday Times* 11 June 1989.

¹¹⁷ R.G.W Anderson, "Meeting Public Needs," in *A New Museum for Scotland: Papers Presented at a Symposium held at the Royal Museum of Scotland on 16 October 1990*, ed. R.G.W Anderson (Edinburgh, 1990). 42.

artefacts. This approach leaves some necessary gaps in the historical narrative, preferring instead to focus on what the objects in their collections can say about the time that they witnessed. In the imagined Museum of Scotland the narrative was to be one of the surviving material culture history of Scotland and what that had to say about the past. The collections were central, and only the stories that they led to would be showcased.

When the Exhibition Review Committee and the Museum of Scotland Project members assembled the Museum of Scotland Exhibition Brief in December of 1991, these ideas about the centrality of the artefact still held pride of place. The introduction to this seminal document – a first envisioning of what the museum would grow to look like, and what ideas it would embody – embraced a narrative primarily based on objects, rather than explanatory text.

It became clear very quickly that it would be neither possible nor desirable to fashion this material into a comprehensive ‘History of Scotland’. The unique nature of the Scottish collections suggested different approaches, based on particular kinds of evidence...which allow many of Scotland’s stories to be told. Assembling this evidence allows us to present aspects of Scotland, her history and her culture...¹¹⁸

Objects and artefacts were going to be crucial because of the long and deep history of the collections as a precursor to the Museum of Scotland. The objects had been collected long before there was a public and national space in which to display them, and so their history was also the history of the nation itself. The Exhibition Brief also acknowledged that any story told this way was not going to be complete.

The collections of Scottish material held by the NMS [National Museums of Scotland] are the result of centuries of discovery and preservation. They are also the result of changing interests and priorities...Changing perceptions of the stories to be told have influenced collection, and serendipity has also played a part.¹¹⁹

This Exhibition Brief had been compiled by the Exhibition Review Committee, which had been convened for the first time earlier in 1991. There were many other

¹¹⁸ "The Museum of Scotland Project Exhibition Brief," (December 1991).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

committees and focus groups around the creation of the museum, all under the wider umbrella of the Museum of Scotland Project, but this one was focused solely on the internal design and messages of the new space. On the committee were the architects who had been chosen to design the museum – Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth - the director of the museum, the curatorial head of the project, and several specialised outside consultants. It had already been decided to structure the museum roughly around a chronological spine.¹²⁰ By the end of 1991, further divisions were proposed. The narrative of the museum was to be divided into three major sections: Beginnings, Early Peoples, and Scotland in History. Beginnings was to be focused mostly on the natural environment and geological makeup of the Scottish landscape. The Early Peoples section would cover prehistory and the archaeological collections, roughly until 1100. Scotland in History was to be the largest and most wide-ranging section, covering from around 1100 until the present day, or as close to the present as is possible in a static building. The analytic focus of this work will largely be with this last, and largest, section of the museum.

These three divisions framed some of the first conceptual stories that would be contained within the building. Each section had their own group of materials and approaches to the story of Scotland, as well as a distinct type and number of artefacts. They were also each assigned their own group of curatorial staff, with Scotland in History being also further sub-divided. All of the curatorial coordinators for the prehistoric and historic sections had been working for museums in Scotland prior to the Museum of Scotland Project. They all moved into their new roles as visionaries of a new museum while still continuing to work at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, the institution to be replaced by the new vision. This meant that the staff members who had been dealing with the objects in their antiquarian context now had to shift perspective and imagine their objects in a very different space and narrative.

Although many of the same objects were going to be on display in the Museum of Scotland that were in the Museum of Antiquities, the guiding thoughts behind the exhibits were arranged, even at a very early stage, to be quite different.

¹²⁰ This largely chronological structure had been laid out at the 1990 Symposium, by RGW Anderson, in his paper Anderson, "Meeting Public Needs." 42-43.

As has been mentioned above, the Museum of Antiquities was the space in which Daniel Wilson worked out his theories of comparative societies, and its style of display was reflective of this, as well as being problematically influenced by the neo-gothic space it occupied. One of the historical consultants involved in the planning of the new exhibits said of the National Museum of Antiquities

I liked bits of it. Other bits reminded me of an elderly aunt's sitting room, with junk, usually dusty junk, all about. It had the mark on it of being a kind of timepiece... what that period [the early twentieth century] thought was important in Scottish history. It had some good objects, but they were not displayed properly because the building made it impossible.¹²¹

The design of museum exhibits and display cases go through fashions, as new ideas of how material knowledge should be displayed come to the cultural forefront. This has been documented in art galleries, with their various types of 'hangs'.¹²² However, the same is true in object- and history-based museums as well. Nineteenth century aesthetics called for the museum to present as much as possible to the eye of the visitor, whether those objects were displayed for beauty or to make anthropological and cultural statements.¹²³ At the time of the building of the new museum in Edinburgh, though, the fashions had turned against that crowded look, preferring instead the modernist 'white cube' vision that made individual objects, rather than their amalgamation, the goal.¹²⁴ This was the aesthetic to which the architects, if not the curators entirely, aspired. It was completely different than the desires and necessities of the earlier space and its time. The new Museum of Scotland represented a chance to remove objects from the constraints that had been placed upon them and let them tell new stories as part of a new narrative of nationhood.

¹²¹ Interview with Professor Michael Lynch, National Museums of Scotland Trustee and Historical Consultant to Museum of Scotland Project, 9 June 2005.

¹²² See Prior, *Museums and Modernity*. Chapter 6. for a discussion of some of these types of hangs.

¹²³ Examples of this can be seen in the NMAS [images 1.4-1.6] or the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford.

¹²⁴ See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (London, 1976). for more on this.

The nation that was being imagined in the space of the yet-to-be physically constructed Museum of Scotland was one that saw the nation through its surviving objects, rather than through repeating the same historical stories that had always been told about the nation. This approach did not always meet with complete approval.

One curator remembers

there was a lot of criticism when we opened that there was an assumption that this was to be a new history of Scotland. And we said ‘oh, hey, hang about, it may be a new history of Scotland but it’s actually the material culture history of Scotland, which we want to present to you. If you like the history books are there...there’s no point in us pasting that up on the wall. But what those books lack are the real objects, and the real essentials of surviving material culture.’¹²⁵

The objects were, in the minds of the curators at least, imbued with a ‘truth’, a story that was somehow more valid than those that have already been written. These real objects link the observer to the past in new and different ways, and were central to the project for all the curators interviewed. They wanted to present the objects like the scene-setting tools of a radio broadcast. ‘A museum display has to be about that imaginary exercise...Your display has to provide people with the props.’¹²⁶ The Museum of Scotland was to be the museum of a long-imagined nation, and each person visiting it was going to imagine their own narrative, with the help of the iconic objects in front of them.

However, this vision of an artefact-centred museum was not the only one that was under consideration as the plans were being made. It could not, after all, be just a collection on display. The Museum also had to be a location, a delineated space, and with that came new ideas of architecture and the national past.

¹²⁵ Interview with Hugh Cheape, Curator of Scottish History, 23 May 2005

¹²⁶ Interview with David Clarke, Keeper of Archaeology and Curatorial Director of Museum of Scotland Project, 24 May 2005.

Building Museum Space

The Williams Committee called for the new museum to be ‘housed in a showplace for Scottish culture’,¹²⁷ asking that this showplace be put somewhere that was big enough and flexible enough to house the collections that were already in the National Museum of Antiquities as well as leaving space to expand. They disliked the idea of placing the new building on the end of Chambers Street with the then Royal Scottish Museum. However, by the time that the follow-up Report by the Museums Advisory Board¹²⁸ that plea had been rejected and plans were afoot to adapt the Chambers Street site [image 1.7] to the needs of the nascent museum. This was a highly symbolic site in the eyes of several observers.¹²⁹ They waxed poetic about its connection to both Old and New Edinburgh, applauded its visibility, and expounded on the history of Chambers Street itself. Proponents thus began seeing the museum as a symbolic place before the first plan was even drawn up.

This site necessitated the construction of a new building. This fitted neatly with the spirit of the Williams Committee, who acknowledged the antecedents to the Museum, but still aimed to

describe the Museum of Scotland as new in order to stress our belief that Scotland’s heritage should be in the custody of a dynamic museum complex which is popular as well as respected.¹³⁰

To this end, the New Building Working Committee chose to hold an international competition to select an architect and design for the project.¹³¹ The curators and committee members put together a substantial brief for the competition, with a list of objects to build around and general ideas about the material to be conveyed in the museum and through the collections. The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland also contributed a statement to the competition brief, saying that they were

¹²⁷ Stevenson, "The Museum, its Beginnings and its Development: Part II: The National Museum to 1954." 156.

¹²⁸ Abbreviation of ‘Report to the Secretary of State for Scotland by the Museum Advisory Board under the chairmanship of the Marquess of Bute’, Scottish Education Department Edinburgh 1985.

¹²⁹ see McKean, *The Making of the Museum of Scotland*. 1-18.

¹³⁰ Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland." 14.

¹³¹ McKean, *The Making of the Museum of Scotland*. 26.

hoping for display of the collections in 'a museum environment which will be enjoyable, readily accessible, and comprehensible to the public.'¹³² The competition was officially launched in January 1991.

Buildings make powerful statements, though we are used to walking by them daily without a second thought. They are subject to the same forces of objectification as the artefacts in the collections. Architecture takes space and makes it tangibly important, just as collection takes things and makes them historically important. Space enclosed in a certain building takes on a set of assumptions tied to the location, so that is it no longer neutral. By being enclosed in this way, the space has been claimed and produced to be of a particular type.¹³³ This was especially true in the space designated for the new Museum of Scotland. At a symposium prior to the opening of the competition Sir Philip Dowson, a prominent architect and head of the competition judging committee, reflected on the task ahead.

Buildings are experienced in memory, so the new extension will have to be strong enough to stand adjacent to that great space. There is narrative quality in moving from one place to another place, providing the story of the whole. Whilst being strong and holding its symbolic place, it should seek to do so with humanity and in a way that is accessible and inviting.¹³⁴

There are many levels of narrative and symbolism that were going to be expected of the new building, as the external counterparts to the relics inside. It was clear that the collection could no longer be housed just in a 'black box' type shell, empty of any story apart from that of its contents. The building of the Museum of Scotland was expected to say things about Scotland and history and nation before it was even designed, partly because of the weight of expectations being placed on the museum as shrine for a nation, and also because of the larger fashion at the turn of the twentieth century for iconic Modernist and Postmodernist architectural statements.

¹³² Trustees to the Design Committee, 1990. Quoted in Gordon Benson, "The Architect's Vision: Designing for Content and Context," in *Heritage and Museums: Shaping National Identity*, ed. J. M. Fladmark (Shaftesbury, 2000). 17.

¹³³ see Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

¹³⁴ Sir Philip Dowson, "The Architect's Role," in *A New Museum for Scotland: Papers presented at a Symposium held at the Royal Museum of Scotland on 16 October 1990*, ed. R. G. W. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1990). 21.

From hundreds of initial entries the competition field was winnowed down again and again. The Edinburgh and London based firm Benson + Forsyth was eventually declared the winner, and their design of ‘a building to encapsulate national identity’ was much praised for its links to the surrounding area and the larger ‘national’ ideas.¹³⁵ It was to be a postmodernist building of Clashach golden sandstone, with a form inspired by the towers of Scottish brochs, the standing stones of Callinish, and Dunstaffnage Castle, among others [image 1.8].¹³⁶ Much has been made of these links to a Scottish history of castles and towers, and also the Scottish materials used. All through the design process Benson + Forsyth proved themselves very adept at creating an idea of the museum building as a type of *ethnoscape*, a specially produced space which, according to Smith, creates certain ideas in the mind of people who experience that space. The ethnoscape is a place that is ‘no longer merely a natural setting. It is felt to influence events and contribute to the experience and the collective memories that moulded the community.’¹³⁷ The museum building was not a natural setting. It was created with certain thoughts and ideas in mind, ostensibly to set the stage for the ‘treasures’ that were contained inside. However, it took on a role even bigger than this, and became an icon representative of larger ideas about Scotland and nationness as well.

It was not to be merely the home for a particular collection of objects. The *ethnoscape* needed a larger idea than this. Some of the competition assessors saw the design as ‘synoptic of Scottish culture and its artefacts’.¹³⁸ This implied that the building was doing exactly what participants at the 1990 symposium had wanted it to do.

Buildings occupy, articulate, and enclose public spaces...
above all, however, buildings are located necessarily in the
dimensions of space and time - that is, context.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ McKean, *The Making of the Museum of Scotland*. 39.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 40.

¹³⁷ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. 150.

¹³⁸ Sir Philip Dowson, quoted in McKean, *The Making of the Museum of Scotland*. 86.

¹³⁹ Peter Jones, "Overseas Experiences," in *A New Museum for Scotland: Papers presented at a Symposium held at the Royal Museum of Scotland on 16 October 1990*, ed. RGW Anderson (Edinburgh, 1990). 23.

With its echoes of crumbling castles, rounded protective brochs, and rich local stone, the building that was to become the Museum of Scotland was articulating an explicitly Scottish public ethnoscape. Context and connection of outside and inside was central to the design philosophy of the architects and they saw their role as more than simply the creators of a stage for the objects. They wanted their design to encourage visitors to wander, ‘composing their own journey not only through the building, but through Scotland’s history, informing their own unique view.’¹⁴⁰ Thus ‘the narrative of the museum would enhance the narrative of the object.’¹⁴¹

Where the Museum used to be based solely on a centuries old collection bereft of a permanent home, it now seemed to be in danger of being overcome by its space. The Museum of Scotland was, with name and building, taking on different stories than those purely based on the collections. It was becoming more of a symbolic place rather than an object-driven historical exercise. This set up a series of largely inevitable tensions between the two approaches.

The architects believed that they had been given a remit to come up with a building which would be a work of art, that would be a striking landmark, and that the objects in it were subsidiary, would support their architectural vision... Whereas we as curators had started from the viewpoint that we wanted an empty space in which we could develop exhibitions about Scotland’s past. And the two sets of aspirations were not a good match with each other, it’s fair to say.¹⁴²

The architects were protective of their vision for the museum, and were sometimes unwilling to let objects or labels intrude onto the surface of their design plan. This meant that ‘there definitely was a tension between the building as a building, a work of art, and the building as a functional museum’ developing in the minds of the curators.¹⁴³ This was dealt with in a variety of ways, from the archaeology section that effectively withdrew from the overarching design plan, to the historical galleries

¹⁴⁰ Benson, "The Architect's Vision: Designing for Content and Context." 20.

¹⁴¹ Charles McKean, "A House for Identity: National Shrine or Distorting Mirror?" in *Heritage and Museums: Shaping National Identity*, ed. J.M. Fladmark (Shaftesbury, 2000). 140.

¹⁴² Interview with Dr. David Caldwell, Keeper of Scotland and Europe, 23 May 2005.

¹⁴³ Interview with George Dalgleish, Curator of Scottish Decorative Arts, 10 June 2005.

that submerged curatorial ambitions to design imperatives. In general it appears that the architectural vision often won over the curatorial one, as the museum was progressively being seen more from the outside, as a whole rather than as a collection of objects.

Since the building has been completed this architectural agenda has been constantly reiterated both inside the building in tour group monologues and expository labels, and outside the space in press coverage and public opinion polls. The building, and the symbolism of the architecture, is routinely mentioned well before the exhibits are discussed.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, it can be argued that the objects have become secondary to people's impressions of the space. One of the earliest reviews of the new museum recognised this:

The essence of the city and of Scottish history has been distilled into one supremely symbolic, semi-abstract object. The collection it houses seems a bit thin, but that hardly matters anymore; new museums attract people through their architecture, not their contents.¹⁴⁵

Because of its impressive new home, the museum was saying something that it had not before. Purely through architectural mass and gravitas, the objects within were imbued with a new sort of public legitimacy. One of its curators said that the architectural form meant that the museum became well known, through being housed in 'a building that says this is an important place.'¹⁴⁶ The shape of the building also echoed other, older, visions of the role of museums, namely as a storehouse where treasures are kept locked away.¹⁴⁷ The architectural images embedded in the building, like the aforementioned ones of castles and protective brochs, give the objects inside more importance by sequestering them away from the gaze of the casual passer-by. A visitor to the museum must pass through a large amount of purely architectural space before encountering any objects, and often the objects they

¹⁴⁴ Personal experience of ten 'Introduction to the Museum of Scotland' tours taken between January and March 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Hugh Pearman, "Tower of Scotland," *The Sunday Times* 15 November 1998.

¹⁴⁶ Dalglish interview.

¹⁴⁷ For more on this role of the museum, see David Clarke, "New Things Set in Many Landscapes: Aspects of the Museum of Scotland," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 128 (1998). 2.

do find are embedded directly into the fabric of the building. The reasons for this, and their impacts, are worth further consideration.

Eliding Object and Space

So far, this chapter has argued that in the process of envisioning a new museum to tell the history of Scotland there emerged several competing ideas of what it should be. It could be a repository for an iconic collection, whose objects then speak for themselves without the need for interpretive narrative history, or it could be an iconic architectural space, which told of the importance and weight of the Scottish past through its strikingly modern presence. These were overlapping, but also conflicting, visions. If the building made too large a statement, the objects would be lost within it. If the objects were foregrounded there would be the danger of creating a nondescript box of a building to house them. The battle lines were drawn in the 1990s. In the physical reality of the Museum of Scotland building as it was eventually realised, however, the division between the two sides is less obvious. The places where building and object intersect have only increased the iconic value of both. By their placement in the space the stories of the objects are strengthened, and the building takes on the nature of the stories that are being told within it. This point is best illustrated by the positioning of one of the most striking objects in the museum.

The Newcomen Engine

As the visitor enters the ‘Scotland Transformed’ exhibits on the second floor, their attention will doubtless be drawn to the soaring bulk of the metal and stone Newcomen engine [image 1.9]. It reaches more than three stories up and is in operation at least two times a day. It would be grand and awe-inspiring no matter where it was displayed, but in the context of the Museum of Scotland building, it has extra resonance. Like all of the objects which will be profiled in this work, the Newcomen engine is iconic – it is used in the museum to tell stories which are larger than just its own. Each object that will be investigated is individual and iconic for its own particular reasons, but together all the iconic objects help the museum to showcase many different and overlapping narratives within its space. The many

stories of the Newcomen engine reflect the narratives of tension between collection and building, thus saying much more than it would were it displayed anywhere else. At the same time a visitor does not need to consciously know the story of the building of the Museum of Scotland to understand the engine. This is the beauty of the iconic object – it can be at once particular and universal. Uncovering the singular story of the artefact can bring to light much larger ideas.

The particular engine that is displayed in the museum is not especially unique of itself. It was made at the Carron Ironworks in Falkirk around 1780, following a type invented by Thomas Newcomen in 1712. It was installed at the Caprington Colliery near Kilmarnock in 1806, and it worked pumping water out of the mines there until 1901 [image 1.10].¹⁴⁸ There were hundreds of these engines produced and put to work in Scotland in a similar time, and they graced the vistas of the industrial central belt, coming to seem in their ubiquity like any other natural feature. Indeed, both the ironworks where it was made and the later industrial home of the engine became tourist sites in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, attracting the hardy traveller looking for scenes of the ‘awesome’ and the ‘sublime’. Thomas Pennant, one of the first travellers to note down his experiences travelling in Scotland, wrote approvingly of his time observing the ironworks and the great modernity of its products which were going to work improving Scotland.¹⁴⁹ It was considered as impressive and attractive a sight as the Highland waterfalls and craggy forbidding mountains also on the early tourist itinerary.

However, the engine was not just a static object of observation. This type of atmospheric engine, and its descendant, James Watt’s steam engine, were the first large scale mechanisms for moving power and energy from one place to another. Without this capability, mines would have been abandoned to water before their stores were exhausted, and the industrial revolution would have faltered. The Carron Ironworks and engines like the Caprington Newcomen fulfilled a particular and urgent need that shaped modern Scotland in innumerable ways. Unlike some museum pieces, this engine was a vitally important working object, not a beautiful or special object created primarily for display. It did act as a type of muse for the

¹⁴⁸ Museum of Scotland accession records, object no. T.1958.117

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland 1769* (Edinburgh, 2000). 163-164.

tourists, allowing them to envision the new type of prosperity that industrialisation would bring to Scotland, but the workers in the foundry where the engine first came to life would doubtless have scoffed at the idea of preserving the engine inside, away from any useful work just to be seen by tourists.

The transition from machine to artefact began when technological advances made its original purpose redundant. Though there were many Newcomen Engines made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not many of them managed to survive until the twentieth and twenty first. Most would have been removed from service and disposed of, either allowed to rust away, or melted down to serve other purposes. The example at the Museum of Scotland is now one of very few authentic engines on display. It was gifted to the Corporation of Kilmarnock, for the Dick Institute Museum, when the mine closed in 1903.¹⁵⁰ However, it was presented in a series of boxes, rather than as a complete engine. The Dick Institute later gave it to the Royal Scottish Museum in hopes they had space to display it. In 1958 the RSM was congratulated by the Newcomen Society in London for ‘preserving the last of the race in Scotland’, even though there was no plan to display it at that point.¹⁵¹

It did not go on display until the Museum of Scotland opened in 1998. Its large size, which had prevented it from being displayed before, actually strengthened its case for display in the new space. People have always been drawn to extremes and juxtapositions. The precursor to the modern museum is usually considered to be the ‘wonder cabinets’ of the Renaissance and later, which were often organised around principles of contrast. The smallest exemplar of something would be placed next to an abnormally large example of the same thing, in order to create a sense of awe in the viewer.¹⁵² Though museum organisation practices have moved beyond this in the modern era, visitors still expect a certain amount of awe in their museum experience. The sheer size of the large and overwhelming Newcomen Engine, as

¹⁵⁰ Description of donation, Newcomen Engine, written by Mr. H.S. Dunn, J.P., of Earlston, 1903. Found in the Accession files of NMS, April 2006.

¹⁵¹ Letter of 31 December 1958 from A. Stowers, of the Newcomen Society for the Study of the History of Engineering and Technology, to R. W. Plenderleith, Esq. FRSE, The Royal Scottish Museum. In NMS accession records, April 2006.

¹⁵² See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (London, 1993).

well as the added bonus of being able to watch it function, provides that sense of wonder, and perhaps persuades visitors to stay longer than they otherwise might. As the centrepiece in a large exhibition space, the Engine tells its own story, but also has a role to play in attracting visitors and pulling them through the gallery.

Appropriately, the Newcomen engine is the centre of the ‘Power’ subsection, surrounded by weaving machines, and other detritus of mechanical Scotland.

Whereas some iconic objects gain more power from being solitary, the great bulk of machines around the engine serve to reinforce its formidable presence [image 1.11].

The display is tangible proof that industry in Scotland has been given a significant role in the museum, and by soaring above the masses, the Newcomen is signalled as the star. The same stories about industrial Scotland, the coal economy, and its ultimate downfall could have been articulated around other, smaller, objects in the collections. Other objects may also have had a more explicitly Scottish story, as Thomas Newcomen was from Devon and lived there his whole life.¹⁵³ However, the Newcomen Engine is big, and it is unusual. Both of these factors helped it become a central part of the narrative in this part of the museum and led to its connection to Caprington and the ‘Scottishness’ of the individual engine being given precedence over any larger story about the engine’s inventor and use across Britain.

The engine was given its starring role in the exhibit space since before there was even a museum built. Competitors in the architectural competition to design the new museum were given a list of iconic objects to focus their design plans around. The engine was the largest of these, and all conceptual drawings from the very beginning of the project include this object [image 1.12]. The line between artefact and architecture was blurred throughout the museum, but here the one was literally built around the other. The engine, still in pieces, was lowered into position by a huge crane almost as soon as the foundations of the museum were dry. The walls and floors of the emerging structure were built around its imposing bulk. This resulted in some very ‘iconic’ publicity images for the Museum of Scotland, as the sight of the huge engine dangling off a crane on its way to be installed in the scaffolding-

¹⁵³ John S. Allen, “Newcomen, Thomas (*bap.* 1664, *d.* 1729),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004)

shrouded building site illustrated many a news story about the construction process [images 1.13-1.14]. Through the new-museum undertaking of the 1990s it became a symbol of how Scottish history was going to be portrayed in new and exciting ways in the new museum.

As part of the original brief, the Newcomen engine was also built into the ‘use-theory’ of the building as a whole. The architects Benson + Forsyth developed an idea of ‘serendipitous discovery’ where there would be no fixed route through the exhibits, but rather the visitor would be free to choose their own path, catching glimpses of what was ahead or behind from everywhere they chose to go.¹⁵⁴ This post-modern narrative structure allowed flexibility of interpretation within a broader chronological structure, and gave the artefacts the ability to direct storylines, depending on how they were viewed. Thus, peering through an architectural and a-historical ‘arrow slit’ in the walls of the Victorian section, one is confronted with the behemoth of industrialisation which the chronological structure should have left behind [image 1.15]. This interconnectivity helped reinforce the point made by the engine in the first place – that the coal industry and the revolution that it helped to fuel, as well as its tragic downfall, both mirror and foretell many later episodes of Scottish history. The positioning of the object within the built space of the museum help both object and space tell new stories. Neither would be the same without the other.

The eighteenth-century tourists who saw the ironworks and their impressive engines were interested in the overwhelming technology and modernity of a new industrial process, and the implications for how Scotland would change, as well as in the awesome spectacle of industrialisation. Now, though, it says something quite different. As a museum artefact, the engine became a metonym, as do many iconic objects. It was impossible for the entirety of the Ironworks and the colliery could be placed in a exhibit, so the engine was, and is, expected to stand in, with its imposing presence, for a much larger set of places and ideas. The Scotland Transformed galleries at the Museum of Scotland were designed to cover everything from the Act of Union through the Jacobite rebellions to the burgeoning textile industry and the

¹⁵⁴ The architect’s statement is elucidated in Benson, "The Architect's Vision: Designing for Content and Context."

end ofcrofting. They chart a path from growing victory to utter defeat with the Jacobites, and then back through the cycle a century later – from expanding and thriving industrialisation to the failure of the coal industry and the loss of economic and social power that brought with it. The Newcomen engine stands today, as it did at the opening of the Museum, as the large visible statement to pull the attention of visitors to all these narratives.

A visitor standing in front of the Newcomen Engine will know nothing of the years of debate between curators and architects about whose idea of the museum would triumph. There are some who feel that large objects should not have been given such precedence, and that the needs of the collections should have come before the creation of an artistically envisioned space. The very situating of the engine has made the flexibility that the curators were hoping for largely impossible. Now, though, everything looks so permanent that the casual visitor will accept things as they are, free of debate.

This too is the particular power of artefacts and objects in the museum setting. The draw of the historical museum is the presence of the ‘real thing’. In glass cases and behind explanatory labels is the authentic, the relic of history. There is a legitimacy to the space of the museum, where people are willing to suspend normal processes of doubt and believe they are seeing truth. Merely by being removed from the normal contexts of commerce and function, the object in the museum becomes an ‘artefact’ or an ‘exhibit’. Once placed in the museum and in the context of the narratives of Scottish history told there, objects such as the Newcomen engine take on richer layers of significance. People see them as things worthy of veneration, and ascribe near mystical qualities to them, expecting to be told something about who they are and where they came from. Even ordinarily powerful objects become something more in the museum. The interaction of interesting object and powerful space comes together to create a multifaceted experience which itself also reflects the iconic nature of the nation in which it is located, and of which it is representative.

Nation and Museum

From its very inception the Museum of Scotland was an iconic place, distinct from the objects it held. The years of campaigning for a museum and then the years

that followed, filled with committee meetings and gargantuan piles of exhibition briefs, allowed many opportunities of the retelling of the story of the Society of Antiquaries and their quest for a museum. Successive speeches and fundraising campaigns recounted how ‘Almost alone Scotland...had failed to provide an adequate home for the collections’.¹⁵⁵ This became an almost ritual invocation of a right to possess high culture and history. By telling the story over and over the museum took on the force of a natural and inevitable *telos* to three centuries of almost mythical questing by the ‘Scottish people’. It was complete with requisite amounts of adversity, colourful characters, attractive props, and now a satisfyingly substantial conclusion in stone and concrete. The story became a part of public culture – it formed part of ‘a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating’¹⁵⁶ - where those included in the group could root themselves. The finished museum was the public and legitimate representation of this culture.

Benedict Anderson has written that ‘museums and the museumizing imagination are profoundly political’,¹⁵⁷ and sees them as a variant on the newspapers and novels that he celebrates with his theories of ‘print-capitalism’. For Anderson, all of these cultural products are important for elucidating the story of the nation, and spreading that story to the masses. Only when the story of the nation has been put into a form where the average people who make up the nation can see it, and see themselves in it, can the nation truly exist. Thus, the act of negotiating which particular narratives will be in a museum is an act of nation-creation, and the school trips and Sunday jaunts around the galleries are ways in which identity is solidified.¹⁵⁸ Because the time of nation-building overlapped so closely with the zenith of the formation of national museums, we have come to believe that a national history museum is, in the words of one curator, ‘something that should be part of any

¹⁵⁵ Clarke, "New Things Set in Many Landscapes: Aspects of the Museum of Scotland." 1.

¹⁵⁶ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. 7.

¹⁵⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 183.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Billig also discusses the ways in which national identity is reinforced by small acts like this. See Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995).

civilised nation's approach to its history and their culture.'¹⁵⁹ In this world where national identity and national states is so normal as to be nearly unnoticeable, there are a series of symbols of the nation that are all necessary. The museum, like the national assembly and the flag, is one of these.¹⁶⁰

These wider ideas of the importance and weight of a national museum were intensified when in May 1997 a Labour government took power in Westminster, and immediately began implementing plans for a promised devolution referendum in Scotland. Perhaps contrary to popular expectation the referendum, held 11 September 1997, passed with a 74% majority, which meant that a Scottish Parliament would be convened again for the first time since 1707. This effectively focused a new level of scrutiny on the Museum of Scotland Project, now less than a year from opening. Suddenly the museum was to be 'the first public building in both the "new Scotland" and in Scotland's renewed capital city.'¹⁶¹ It was inevitable that new expectations would be imposed on this building, given the weight that history, and the public articulation of it, has always had in national rhetoric. According to one professional observer, this museum

legitimises things like the Parliament. There's no question that the national history in that sense has a role in legitimating the present political structures. It says its okay for Scotland to have a parliament because, you know, Scotland is really a nation...I think the Museum of Scotland is more important as a symbol of nationhood than as an informer of the nation's past...All nations somehow have their national museums.¹⁶²

The very process of creating a national museum is a political act. Public display of collections, of objects from history, necessarily makes some assumptions that then support a sense of nation-ness. The presence of historical artefacts imbues the nation with an authentic past, which then helps to strengthen the case for an independent future. A national museum therefore assumes the presence of a recognisable nation.

¹⁵⁹ Dalgleish interview.

¹⁶⁰ For more on this see Anthony Smith, "Nations and History," in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. Monserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge, 2001). 8.

¹⁶¹ Lynch, "The Making of the Museum of Scotland: A Museum of National Memories or Nationalism?" 3.

¹⁶² Clarke interview.

In the 1990s, an era when Scotland was deciding what form its national identity would take, the symbolic and performative role of the national museum became especially important.

So it was that a museum firstly and explicitly designed to give primacy to surviving pieces of material culture became something more. It became an entity on its own, part of the greater context of its location and timing. In this role of ‘museum as location of identity’ it made perfect sense for one of the curators to comment that

I don’t know whether it worked out this way, but I certainly always thought that I would have liked to have seen the museum as one of the legs upon which the new Scotland stood on; the museum - the national museum - the Parliament, and all the other great pillars of Scottish society.¹⁶³

Such sentiments would have resonated strongly with David Stewart Erskine and his compatriots at the founding of the Society of Antiquaries in the 1780s, as well as with the later generations of Walter Scott, Daniel Wilson, or Joseph Anderson. For all of these men merely having the objects and artefacts of Scottish history was not really enough. Even at the very beginning of the Society’s long history, when the collections were largely undocumented and haphazard, there were efforts made to display them to as many members of the public as possible in order to tell the story of Scotland. It seems that there were multiple layers of importance here. Possessing the collections was significant, but there was always a belief that the objects deserved a building, and that being able to produce a recognised public display space was crucial to the whole undertaking.

A museum is a public space - one that has specific connotations of history and group identity enclosed within it. In a time when culture, and particularly high culture, has become woven throughout life to an extent that has never been seen before, the museum has ‘become a place where people feel they ought to come to, and certainly ought to bring their children to...even though most of them couldn’t actually define why.’¹⁶⁴ Ernest Gellner thought that in the modern era this pervasive national culture took the place of earlier forms of authority. For him ‘the cultures

¹⁶³ Dalglish interview.

¹⁶⁴ Clarke interview.

now seem to be the natural repositories of political legitimacy'.¹⁶⁵ The museum has become the natural repository of much of that culture in its material form. However, because of the prevalence of culture and cultural rhetoric in our society today, museums are no longer just houses for historical objects. They are expected to say something on their own, even at the risk of overpowering the stories of the collections contained within them.

This can be seen quite clearly in the process of creation that resulted in the Museum of Scotland. The name itself signalled a departure from a merely object-based philosophy, and the aspirations to something larger. Throughout the project the public view focused increasingly on the project as more of a political and public statement than it was thought to be originally. Changing context and differing design philosophies made the Museum of Scotland into more than just a home for the collection of Scottish material culture stored in the vaults of the National Museums of Scotland. It became seen as a stage, or a location, for the performance of a particular view of national identity. It became an icon itself, more voluble than those objects for which it ostensibly existed. It spoke of a nation on the brink of large-scale change, of the history and environment that had made it so, and the grand hopes for the future of a culture that was increasingly public and politicised.

When the Earl of Buchan first began the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland his vision was possible because enough time had passed to transform the Scottish past from threatening political reality to nostalgic tourist attraction. By the time that the Museum of Scotland opened more than two centuries later the past was again powerful political currency. The form of history that was to be presented in the new highly symbolic Museum of Scotland was, by opening day, seen as reflecting the vision of a modern Scottish nation with a newly independent future. The museum became the iconic heart of a new ethnoscape that was being created for and by Scotland. The planning for the museum had started with a vision of creating a home for the iconic objects of Scotland's material past. The artefacts were going to tell the stories that they could, and a larger connective narrative not supported by objects was going to be largely left to the imagination. However, the changes in context and

¹⁶⁵ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. 55.

rhetoric over the course of the eight-year Museum of Scotland Project meant that the place of the museum in Scottish life had to alter as well. What emerged at the gala opening on Saint Andrew's Day – 30 November – 1998 was not just a new home for the contents of the National Museum of Antiquities. It was neither a blank home for a collection of strongly iconic objects nor merely an architecturally beautiful symbolic space. The reality of the institution took aspects from all these approaches in order to become something new, where both the contents and the space became icons for a nation in flux. But if the building itself is an 'iconic object', what does that mean for the actual artefacts within it?

Objects gain aura and value by being removed from their normal contexts and placed in a museum. They acquire their own history and become the tangible way through which history is passed on.¹⁶⁶ If they were encountered outside the museum space they would not be expected to do this. Since the very first public museums in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the institutions have held iconic value. By not having a national museum Scotland the nation was seen as lacking that institutional support for its stories. This could have been seen as weakening its claim to national status, a contentious issue especially as Scotland moved towards devolution and the closer alignment that would bring between nation and state. Because of this powerful social and political context the Museum of Scotland had to become more iconic, more symbolic, than it otherwise might have been.

The intertwining currents of political events, the nature of the collections, the architectural fashions of the time, and the deep and contested history of the nation concerned came together to create a museum that is full of iconic objects, and is an iconic space as well. Artefact and architecture did come together, but in a more complex way than the architects envisioned. In the next chapters this intersection between space, context, and object will be revisited, to show the ways in which museum stories are produced and consumed within these fields, as well as how, and

¹⁶⁶ Ackbar Abbas, "Walter Benjamin's Collector: The Fate of Modern Experience," *New Literary History* 20 (1988). 18. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1992).

if, they say something larger about identity, society, and the modern construction of the past.

2

1984

Iconic Connections:
Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution

The permanent form of the Museum of Scotland is a reflection of the political and social time at which it was made, as well as of the history of the institutions that predated it. However, these were not the only influences. Before there was a national museum of history in Scotland, there were several temporary exhibitions held in the space of the Royal Museum of Scotland that had repercussions for the narratives which were eventually enshrined in the new attached space. Temporary exhibitions are windows into larger ideas of material culture history and the time in which they were constructed, and the two blockbusters profiled in the following chapters provided Scottish curators with inspiration and ideas to which they returned when they constructed their own material-centred narratives.

The first of these was from the Smithsonian Institution, a series of museums that make up the national museum service of the United States. This show, titled *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Scottish Museum*, was a major ‘blockbuster’ – the name that has come to be given to temporary or travelling museum exhibitions which are widely advertised, and which bring in large numbers of new visitors into the space of the host museum.¹⁶⁷ The first blockbuster exhibition is widely considered to be that of the artefacts of King Tutankhamen in the late 1970s at the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other notable

¹⁶⁷ For more on the phenomenon of the ‘blockbuster exhibition’ see Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: The Blockbuster Show."

institutions.¹⁶⁸ By the 1984 opening of *Treasures from the Smithsonian*, the blockbuster was seen to be a profitable exercise for both loan and host, and the number of temporary and touring exhibitions in the museum world was increasing. They allowed, and continue to allow, a duality of display where the loaned objects exist both with the permanent displays of the host space but also apart from them. They are within the physical space of a national museum, but, as in the 1984 case, are from outside of its cultural and narrative space. Because of this duality the temporary exhibition is a location in which much can be analysed about the meanings embedded within artefacts and those put onto them, as the loan objects change narratives when displayed elsewhere and the host's objects are changed by their spatial proximity and narrational distance from the established norm. These issues, which are common to the vast majority of temporary exhibitions, were seen clearly in *Treasures from the Smithsonian*, as the implicitly American-ness of the objects travelled with them but was also altered by their presentation to, and in, a different nation. How these objects had become American icons in the first place, and how they were treated both home and abroad, became salient issues for the Scottish curatorial staff in the time the show was on display and throughout the important decade that was to follow, when their own visions of museological identity were clarified.

Scotland and America in Museum Space

Scotland and America have a rich history of cultural interchange and linkages that long preceded the 1984 show.¹⁶⁹ Many American cultural institutions were founded or heavily supported by Scottish immigrants who had made their fortunes in the New World. Andrew Carnegie is the most well known of these, but was far from the only one.¹⁷⁰ This pattern of Scots creating American institutions shifted in the

¹⁶⁸ Stefan Toepler and Volker Kirshberg, "Museums and Merchandising," in *Museum Marketing: Competing in the Global Marketplace*, ed. Ruth Rentschler and Anne-Marie Hede (Oxford, 2007). 163.

¹⁶⁹ See work such as Rick Wilson, *The Scots Who Made America* (Edinburgh, 2006). or James Hunter, *A Dance Called America: The Scottish Highlands, the United States, and Canada* (Edinburgh, 1994).

¹⁷⁰ The Carnegie Corporation. <<http://www.carnegie.org/>>

modern era, as the exchange of idea, and objects, came both ways across the Atlantic.

The first recorded exhibition to go from America to Scotland had a more political than cultural remit, but it established many of the issues about national identity, objects and narrative that continued to be important in 1984. Called *America Marches with the United Nations*, this travelling exhibition was developed by the US Office of War Information to boost morale in Europe as America entered World War II. The exhibition was a collection of primarily black and white photographs, most taken by the exhibition's curator Edward J. Steichen.¹⁷¹ Steichen was a noted photographer in the modernist tradition, and had been drafted into the army and rose up to the level of Colonel by the end of World War I. However, having been born in 1879, by the time World War II entered American consciousness, Steichen was over the acceptable age for re-enlistment. In autumn 1941 he attempted to re-enlist, but was denied on age grounds. This all changed on 28 January 1942, when he was granted a waiver and drafted into the Navy. 'His initial orders were to finish an exhibit related to the war effort that he had already begun in New York' and afterwards to report for duty in Washington DC.¹⁷²

This embryo exhibition was that which would become *America Marches with the United Nations*. It had started before the attacks on Pearl Harbour when David McAlpin, chairman of the photographic committee and a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) had invited Steichen to create an exhibition for the MOMA, which would be co-funded by the Office of Emergency Management. Steichen was given \$25000 and told to depict American life during both peace and wartime.¹⁷³ The final exhibition, which opened at MOMA on 20 May 1942, was comprised of photographs from civilian and military sources, often blown up to mural size.¹⁷⁴ At

¹⁷¹ Lieutenant Commander Edward Steichen and Carl Sandburg. *America Marches With the United Nations: A Procession of photographs of a nation at war assembled by the Museum of Modern Art, New York: Presented by the Ministry of Information in Collaboration with the United States Department of War Information*. London: L.T.A. Robinson Ltd., 1943.

¹⁷² Mame Warren, "Focal Point of the Fleet: US Navy Photographic Activities in WWII," *Journal of Military History* 69(4) (2005). 1061.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

its first opening in the US, the exhibition was called *Road to Victory*, though Steichen said later that it went through the preliminary titles *Panorama of Defence* and *The Arsenal of Democracy* before it was finished. Carl Sandburg, a famous American poet who was also Edward Steichen's brother-in-law and biographer, wrote all exhibition label text and captions.¹⁷⁵

After opening in New York the exhibition was repackaged as *America Marches with the United Nations* and sent to the UK. The first stop seems to have been Dorland House in London, which had been used for a series of exhibitions by the Royal Air Force¹⁷⁶ as well as a series of British design exhibitions between the wars.¹⁷⁷ After its stop in London the exhibition was slightly altered and came to the Royal Museum of Scotland and then Lewis' Polytechnic in Glasgow.¹⁷⁸ The head of the British Division of the US Office of War Information, Thomas H. Eliot, oversaw the show in Britain. Eliot's 'job was to give Great Britain a clearer picture of America, its people, and its war effort'.¹⁷⁹ Given this remit, the exhibition was a perfect manifestation of the work done by the Office of War Information, and it was somewhat more tangible than Eliot's other work – a series of public lectures on 'subjects as varied as the juvenile activities and adult cultural interests of America, [and] the nation's farm and industrial conversion to war production'.¹⁸⁰

America Marches with the United Nations is of course much different from other, later, temporary exhibitions in the Royal Scottish Museum. It was a product of its time and was produced and displayed completely separate from the RSM's normal collections and objects. Also, all the other temporary exhibitions have had a

¹⁷⁵ Edward Steichen and Carl Sandburg, *Steichen: The Photographer. Text by Carl Sandburg* (New York, 1929).

¹⁷⁶ Such as the one co-sponsored by the Daily Herald from April of 1945 found in the Mass-Observation Archive, box TC 29/1/I.

¹⁷⁷ Mentioned in sources such as Barbara Tilson, "Plan Furniture 1932-1938: The German Connection," *Journal of Design History* 3(2/3) (1990). 145-146.

¹⁷⁸ I say 'seemed' here because my only basis for its touring stops are mentions in two Scotsman articles - "America's Effort: Exhibition in Edinburgh Impressive Display," *The Scotsman* 30 August 1943., and "America Marches," *The Scotsman* 23 September 1943. Between the London and Edinburgh engagements alterations were made to better include the role of women in American life.

¹⁷⁹ "Men and Affairs: A Scotsman's Log - Office of War Information Director," *The Scotsman* 28 August 1943. 4.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

much more explicitly 'material' focus. In contrast to the object focus of the other exhibitions, *America Marches with the United Nations* was comprised of 140 photographs and few other objects.¹⁸¹ The photographs were meant to be 'expressive of the size of America, the richness of her agricultural production and the strength of her war production'.¹⁸² However, as much as the 1943 exhibition was unique and outside the normal parameters of temporary exhibitions held in the RSM, it also set the stage for later considerations of American nationness to be held in that same space.

Creating a Blockbuster

The Smithsonian Institution is 19 distinct museums and galleries, and one zoological park, which together make up America's national museum service.¹⁸³ The majority of the Smithsonian museums are arranged around the strip of land between the Washington Monument and the Capitol Building, known as the National Mall. They are colloquially known as 'America's Attic' or 'America's Treasure Chest', sobriquets that the institution itself embraces.¹⁸⁴ The objects, now numbering in the many millions, held by the various corners of the Smithsonian, vary from famous works of art to natural history specimens, relics of exploration, to frontiers of the land and space, and items of national and global historical import. Items from all these categories came to Scotland between August and November 1984 under the auspices of *Treasures from the Smithsonian*. During its run it had about 100,000 visitors, and it was considered one of the centrepieces of the Edinburgh International Festival that year.¹⁸⁵ Tracing how, and why, a collection of 260 objects were chosen, transported, and displayed in the rapid space of seven months - from an initial call in January of 1984 until opening on 11 August - at the Royal Scottish Museum shows

¹⁸¹ "America Marches." 3.

¹⁸² "America's Effort." 3.

¹⁸³ The official count as of February 2009. From Smithsonian website, 'About the Smithsonian', <<http://www.si.edu/about/>>

¹⁸⁴ As seen in a series of banners throughout the Smithsonian Castle building in Spring 2008.

¹⁸⁵ Sheila Brock and Alison Harvey, ed., *Royal Scottish Museum Final Report 1983-84-85* (Edinburgh, 1986). 64. The report says 98,000 visitors – press releases at closing report 100,000.

that political pressures were just as present in 1984 as they had been the previous time American objects had come to Scotland in 1943.

Official reports of the Royal Museum of Scotland tell us that there was a ‘delegation from Washington who proposed to bring a major exhibition from the Smithsonian to Scotland’ in January of 1984.¹⁸⁶ At the same time there was a change in direction at the Edinburgh International Festival, with a new director, Frank Dunlop, being appointed and promising to shed the stuffy elitist air of the International Festival and attract shows which were more geared to a populist audience. Perhaps this explains why the exhibition catalogue says that the exhibition came about after a call from Dunlop to the Smithsonian, only after which was the museum involved. The catalogue says that

When the Smithsonian Institution was asked to participate in the 1984 Edinburgh International Festival we were delighted and accepted immediately...the question then arose as to where to send our treasures, and a happy answer was found in a second invitation, this one from the Royal Scottish Museum.¹⁸⁷

This story is true, but in eliminating some of the details it obscures the complicated dialogue that led to the connections between America and Scotland.

Some of these connections are embedded in the fabric of the Smithsonian, and were used as justification for the exhibition. The official institutional review of the exhibition says that

In 1784, James Smithson, benefactor of the institution which bears his name, travelled to Scotland at the suggestion of Benjamin Franklin. The decision to bring ‘Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution’ to Edinburgh *could be* seen as a bicentennial celebration of this event.¹⁸⁸ (emphasis added)

There is a nice symmetry in this logic, and it seems worth celebrating with an event

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 63.

¹⁸⁷ John E. Reinhart and Ralph C. Rinzler, "Foreword," in *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Museum of Scotland*, ed. Edwards Park (Edinburgh, 1984). 5.

¹⁸⁸ Sheila Brock, "'Treasures From the Smithsonian' Review," in *Royal Scottish Museum Final Report 1983-84-85*, ed. Sheila Brock and Alison Harvey (Edinburgh, 1986). 64.

to further connect two nations. However, it is use of ‘could be’ that is slightly mystifying. Another official review, for the wider public’s eyes, put forth this bicentenary idea more strongly, as did many media reports. One in particular even expanded the story, and with it the sense of connection and indebtedness between the Smithsonian and Edinburgh. They said

It’s 200 years since the British scientist James Smithson visited Edinburgh and then followed Boswell’s walk through the Highlands, William Thornton, future architect of Washington’s Capitol by his side. Smithson never visited America, but it’s felt that Thornton was among those who influenced him to bequeath his fortune to founding the Smithsonian.¹⁸⁹

Interestingly, however, there is no mention of this supposedly critical bicentenary in the exhibition catalogue or any other official publications, other than media reports. In fact, though many newspaper articles do mention the Smithson visit to Scotland, some observers were less than happy about the neat justification.¹⁹⁰ The *Times* ran a very positive review of the exhibition several days after it opened, but began the article by sliding in some sly comments, saying that ‘...the excuse for it [the exhibition] is, *rather flimsily*, the Bicentenary of James Smithson’s visit to Edinburgh.’ (emphasis mine)¹⁹¹

The Smithsonian’s own publications presented the Smithson story as more of an interesting aside to an exhibition already fated to happen anyway, saying for example that ‘a Smithsonian Institution link *was found* in an expedition to Edinburgh and the Highlands made 200 years ago by a group of scientists, including young James Smithson, the English chemist whose bequest served to create the Institution.’ (emphasis mine)¹⁹² Even the press release issued by the Smithsonian to announce the exhibition made a more casual link between the bicentennial and exhibition, quoting the Institution Director as saying that

It seems especially appropriate that this year, on the two-hundredth anniversary of our founder James Smithson’s visit to Edinburgh, that the Smithsonian, the national

¹⁸⁹ "Memorable Outing," *Sunday Express Magazine* 12 August 1984.

¹⁹⁰ 8 of 19 articles have a variation of the Smithson-to-Scotland story.

¹⁹¹ "Visual Wonders Proudly Unveiled," *The Times* 14 August 1984.

¹⁹² Abby Wasserman, "Smithsonian Featured at Edinburgh Festival," *The Torch: A Monthly Magazine for the Smithsonian Institution* August 1984.

museum of the United States, participate in this international arts festival.¹⁹³

This makes it sound as if it was just fortuitous timing – and indeed, that was probably the case. However, museum officials are increasingly responsible for marketing their museums and exhibitions, and the Smithsonian story was marketing gold. It strengthened the connections between loan and host exhibition and set up a history of shared culture that increased the value of sending American objects to Scotland. Even the Queen received a version of the story when the director of the Smithsonian wrote to ask for the pleasure of her company at various events involving high-level Smithsonian donors and trustees. For Her Majesty, Ripley expanded the story, saying that James Smithson had travelled in Scotland with William Thornton, later to be the designer of the United States Capitol Building, and a French Abbe as tutor. The men were recommended the Abbe by Benjamin Franklin, when they met him in Paris.¹⁹⁴ The Royal Scottish Museum press release took it a bit further, saying that the men were ‘encouraged by Benjamin Franklin to have some first hand experience of the country whose name was associated with enlightenment’.¹⁹⁵ These stories seem to be factually true, but the way in which they are being used is more intellectually interesting than their objective truth. The way in which different versions of this story were used to frame the exhibition can show the complex interlinks between luck and reason that combine in creating a temporary exhibition.

While the chronological coincidence of James Smithson’s trip to Scotland provided some impetus to the exhibition, it also came out of a complex interplay of political forces within not the host nor loan institution, but rather the largely silent third partner in the enterprise, the Edinburgh International Festival. The Festival was started in 1947 to enrich cultural life in Britain and has been, and remains, a major

¹⁹³ S. Dillon Ripley, quoted in Smithsonian Institution Press Release, ‘*Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution Travels to Scotland’s 1984 Edinburgh Festival*’, 30 March 1984. SI Archives 00-069, box 25/28.

¹⁹⁴ Letter from S. Dillon Ripley to H.R.H. Queen Elizabeth II, 28 October 1983. SI Archives 00-069, box 25/28.

¹⁹⁵ Royal Scottish Museum Press Release, 12 March 1984. SI Archives 00-069, box 25/28.

source of tourism income for the city and Scotland in general.¹⁹⁶ However, by the early 1980s there were increasing numbers of complaints that the festival had become too elitist and had betrayed its root mission to expose the whole of the population to culture. Frank Dunlop was appointed the head of the Edinburgh International Festival in the summer of 1983. He was meant to take the Festival in some new directions and reinvigorate its programmes, and hopefully eliminate concerns about elitism. Shortly after his appointment, Dunlop sent a letter to S. Dillon Ripley, who was then the Director of the Smithsonian Institution. In this, Dunlop introduced himself as the new Festival Director and then moved on to the main point:

I have heard that you are planning a Smithsonian exhibition in Great Britain to honor James Smithson...I have also heard that you had expressed an interest that such an exhibition should touch all levels of British society and if possible, reach beyond Great Britain, celebrating Smithson as an exemplar of Anglo-American amity not only to our people but the people of Europe as well.¹⁹⁷

After setting up the framework of what he knew the Smithsonian wanted to do, Dunlop detailed his own many connections to the US, and his interest in bringing an American flavour to the 1984 Festival. He outlined the ways in which the Edinburgh International Festival would provide everything that the Smithsonian desired in a exhibition venue, and how their presence there would be of mutual benefit.

With the basic coverage in newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio which the Edinburgh Festival receives, such an exhibition would be assured of an attendance which would be appropriate to the significance of the Smithsonian and the Anglo-American relationship.¹⁹⁸

This was an important voicing of the power differential between Edinburgh and the Smithsonian. As the much larger partner in any potential joint venture, the

¹⁹⁶ For more on the International Festival and its history see George Bruce, *Festival in the North: The Story of the Edinburgh Festival* (London, 1975), Eileen Miller, *The Edinburgh International Festival, 1947-1996* (Aldershot, 1996).

¹⁹⁷ Frank Dunlop to S. Dillon Ripley, 17 August 1983. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Smithsonian had to be reassured that they would not be lowering their status by participating. This is a theme that will reappear repeatedly over the course of planning, mounting, and analysing the exhibition.

Of course, the political and cultural context of America was important in the decision to produce the exhibition as well. Still embedded in the Cold War, the US was engaging increasingly in Western Europe under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, which began in 1981. Reagan espoused a doctrine of ‘containment’, which was later enshrined as the ‘Reagan Doctrine’.¹⁹⁹ To go along with this aggressively military strategy, the country also reached out culturally to non-Soviet countries, to increase understanding of America and to bolster international support. Under Reagan links between the US and Britain were also strengthened because of the personal friendship and ideological agreement between him and Margaret Thatcher. Given all this, the Smithsonian’s venture to Edinburgh fit in well with events in both nations, and helped goals on both sides of the Atlantic.

This expanded narrative of the planning process uncovers many reasons for the exhibition of Smithsonian objects in Edinburgh – the Smithsonian was happy to increase their international and European profile, the International Festival wanted a large and crowd-pleasing central exhibition, and there was the fortuitous matter of James Smithson’s Scottish trip. However, there was also an even less obvious other reason for the show’s staging in Edinburgh, one which was both monetary and personal. This involved the wishes of an American philanthropist, Arthur M. Sackler. Sackler was a successful medical doctor, and also an avid collector of Asian art and artefacts. He routinely lent objects from his collections to the Smithsonian, and right before his death in 1987 his whole collection was donated to the institution, where it now forms the nucleus of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

Understandably, in the early 1980s the Smithsonian Institution authorities were courting Sackler and were consequently very open to his suggestions. It seems that he was acquainted with Frank Dunlop, and was fond of Edinburgh in general. Thus, he supported the idea of a partnership between the Smithsonian and the International Festival, and when the exhibition was announced he donated, or

¹⁹⁹ Reagan Doctrine, 1985. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/17741.htm>>

arranged for the donation of, much of the money from private and corporate sponsors which allowed *Treasures From the Smithsonian Institution* to be presented free of charge. Sackler and Dunlop worked together to get the exhibition off the ground, and Sackler was quoted as saying that he hoped for further collaboration between the Royal Scottish Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, and his collections.²⁰⁰ Indeed, the Sackler objects were prominently mentioned in many reviews of the exhibition.²⁰¹ It is certain that the influence of Sackler helped encourage the Smithsonian authorities to agree to the exhibition, which was much different than the large-scale travelling exhibitions they usually create.

After this first contact was made, the details of a proposed exhibition were gradually hammered out. Interestingly, the Royal Scottish Museum was not the first choice of location. An internal memo from Ripley to his assistant director, Ralph Rinzler, shows that the Smithsonian officials were relying on Frank Dunlop to procure a hosting location and that a variety of sites – ‘either the Royal College of Art in the Grassmarket, or the Royal Academy of Art, Princes Street, or perhaps the Royal Scottish Museum (once again in the running)’²⁰² - were all being considered. It is unclear why the RSM had at first been discarded, as in the end it was deemed the only suitable space. Other venues had already committed their space for the Festival or, as in the case of the briefly-considered National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, were thought ‘both less accessible and less prestigious’ than the RSM.²⁰³ In the end, the RSM was the chosen space, and the Smithsonian Director approached Norman Tebble, the Museum Director, about it. He first explained the invitation from Dunlop and the proposed scope of the exhibition, before saying that ‘It occurs to us that it would be as appropriate as it would be eminently desirable if

²⁰⁰ "One Man's Plan for the Athens of the North," *Sunday Times* 19 August 1984.

²⁰¹ The contributions of the Sackler collection collectively are mentioned 12 times in the 19 UK newspaper articles which reviewed the exhibition. The only object mentioned more frequently was the lunar rover, or ‘moon buggy’.

²⁰² Memo from S. Dillon Ripley to Ralph Rinzler, titled ‘Edinburgh Festival Miscellany’, 20 October 1983. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

²⁰³ ‘Partial List of Contacts made by Ralph Rinzler on behalf of the SI Edinburgh program during his October visit’, undated. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

the exhibition could be mounted at the RSM.²⁰⁴ A month later Smithsonian director Ripley wrote to Frank Dunlop, finally formally accepting the invitation to produce a show for the Edinburgh International Festival.²⁰⁵ Thus, while the basic storyline is the same, the details, as is often the case, show a slightly messier process of negotiation about how and where the Smithsonian would participate in the Festival.

Building the Smithsonian Institution

In its eventual form and narrative *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Scottish Museum* echoed much of the Smithsonian itself. The unique history of the institution and the role it plays in American cultural identity came with its objects to Edinburgh and were one of the components of its success there. The Smithsonian Institution began its life in 1826 when James Smithson left a bequest of \$508,318.46 to the people of the United States. Smithson, born in 1765, was the illegitimate son of Hugh Smithson, later to become the Duke of Northumberland, and Elizabeth Keate Hungerford Macie, a widow with royal connections. In his younger years he was known as James Lewis Macie, and he kept this name until his mother's death in 1800. Afterwards he adopted his father's surname. He was a distinguished chemist and mineralogist during his time at Oxford, and was also active in the intellectual and scientific life of London, becoming one of the youngest members of the Royal Society upon his election in 1787. He published at least 27 scholarly scientific papers during his lifetime.²⁰⁶

When he died in Italy at the age of 64 he left his fortune to a nephew, but with the caveat that if the nephew died childless the money would go to 'the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among

²⁰⁴ International Telex cable from S. Dillon Ripley to Norman Tebble, 30 December 1983. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

²⁰⁵ International Telex cable from S. Dillon Ripley to Frank Dunlop, 24 January 1984. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

²⁰⁶ Nina Burleigh, *The Stranger and the Statesman: James Smithson, John Quincy Adams, and the Making of America's Greatest Museum: The Smithsonian* (New York, 2004).

men.²⁰⁷ Of course, in practice the endowment of a major cultural institution takes more than willing it to be so. The American government was unsure whether to accept the money in the first place, and when they finally decided to do that in August 1836, they had to battle in British courts against appeals from the mother of Smithson's nephew. Andrew Jackson, the US president, sent Richard Rush as the American delegate for the case, and he spent two years arguing in the Court of Chancery against a number of counter-claims from the various branches of Smithson's family.

While the court battles were raging, arguments about the constitutionality – or lack thereof – of accepting the bequest went on back in the United States. In the mid – nineteenth century the United States still had a fairly weak central government and the doctrine of 'states-rights' was considered largely sacrosanct. Therefore, the states, and the individual governments of the states, had more power in decision-making than did the federal level. By accepting a donation on behalf of the entire country, politicians were afraid that the power of the states would be undermined. However, in the end it was deemed constitutional by a committee in the House of Representatives and the money was accepted.²⁰⁸ In effect, accepting the money and pledging to create a new Smithsonian Institution was one of the first overtly national acts of government, though there had been a nominally national one for years. Decisions like this helped solidify a sense of American nation-ness that gradually took over from smaller state or regional identities. Therefore, even before the form of the Smithsonian was decided, it was helping to symbolize American identity.

There was no wording in James Smithson's bequest that expressly designated what the Smithsonian Institution was to do, other than the oft-quoted 'increase and diffusion of knowledge'. So, after the money was accepted, and the court case in England won, there were still many details to clarify. Richard Rush, President Jackson's emissary, collected all of James Smithson's scientific collections, library, and research notes, sold off all his other goods, and had the proceeds made into gold

²⁰⁷ Smithsonian Institution Library, 'From Smithson to Smithsonian: The Birth of An Institution', (<http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Smithson-to-Smithsonian/intro.html>).

²⁰⁸ "House Report," (21 December 1835). Accessed through 'From Smithson to Smithsonian' Exhibition, < <http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Smithson-to-Smithsonian/natinte2.htm>>

sovereigns. Rush and his eleven chests of Smithson booty arrived in the US in September 1838, and the money was transferred to the US Treasury, yielding the \$508,318.46 sum which is considered to be the founding amount for the Institution.

In the beginning most scholars and politicians advocated the foundation of a national university – especially one with a focus on science and invention. There were few other models of a national institution to choose from, and the centrality of science learning that could be available in an educational setting was seen to be a way to honour Smithson's own interests. However, other voices fought for an institution of teacher training, or one just centred on teaching the classics, so that the knowledge there could not be used for military gain. However, the discussion gradually widened, and in 1840 a group of politicians formed, calling themselves the National Institute for the Promotion of Science.²⁰⁹ While they were eventually defeated by the lobbying of academic scientists, disgruntled at political intrusion into their world, the National Institute members were the first to raise the idea of a National Museum. They wanted to use the Smithson bequest to showcase artefacts of the American past and its leaders, and to document the natural resources of North America as they continued to be discovered. They published a manifesto titled 'A Plea for a National Museum and Botanic Garden to be Founded on the Smithsonian Institution at the City of Washington' and presented it at a meeting of the Chester County (Pennsylvania) Cabinet of Natural Science on 3 December 1841.²¹⁰

Between 1840 and 1846 the debate raged on, with suggestions such as a National Scientific Institute, a National Library, and a National Observatory jostling with the ever-present National University in editorials, public speeches, and on the floor of Congress in turn. Finally, on 10 August 1846, President James K. Polk signed 'An Act to Establish the Smithsonian Institution'. It was an interesting compromise, as it included provisions for

...suitable rooms or halls for the reception and arrangement,
upon a liberal scale, of objects of natural history, including

²⁰⁹ This was led by Representative Joel R. Poinsett of South Carolina.

²¹⁰ William Darlington, "A Plea for a National Museum and Botanic Garden to be Founded on the Smithsonian Institution at the City of Washington," (West-Chester, Pennsylvania, 1841). Online at Smithsonian Institution Archives, <www.si.edu/libraries>

a geological and mineralogical cabinet, also a chemistry laboratory, a library, a gallery of art, and the necessary lecture halls...all objects of art and of foreign and curious research, and all objects of natural history, plants, and geological and mineralogical specimens, belonging, or hereafter to belong, to the United States, which may be in the city of Washington, in whosoever custody the same may be shall be delivered [to the Smithsonian]...and shall be arranged in such order and so classed, as best [to] facilitate the examination and study of them...²¹¹

This vague and amorphous definition allowed for at least something of what everyone wanted, while also leaving the shape of the Institution flexible enough to handle future changes.

Concepts and Contents

Thus it is that the Smithsonian came to take its central role in American cultural life. Today its complex of 19 museums and art galleries, as well as other connected research stations, observatories, groups of scholars, and the zoological park is the largest collection of associated museum institutions in the world. Most of the museums and other work remains in Washington DC, though there are outlying stations in New York and also in Panama. It is considered to be the largest museum complex in the world, and is still growing. It claims to hold over 136 million objects in its stores, from the ancient to the modern.²¹² It is from this history and vast store of information that a travelling exhibition was put together to go to Edinburgh in 1984. The previous year, 1983, had seen the publication of a book titled *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution*. This work brought together beautifully photographed visions of the 'best' objects from across the collections, as well as a semi-scholarly look at the role of objects, and the Smithsonian, in American history and culture. S. Dillon Ripley, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, said in the foreword that

The truth which lies in objects, so much better than in words, will out, but not necessarily today or even tomorrow...so this

²¹¹ "An Act to Establish the "Smithsonian Institution" for the Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge Among Men'," (10 August 1846). Online at Smithsonian Institution Archives, <www.si.edu/exhibitions/smithson-to-smithsonian/1846act.htm>

²¹² 'About the Smithsonian' <<http://www.si.edu/about/>>

book of history, the tale of our ‘Treasures’, embodies the perceived truth as seen at the time by those who have shaped the Smithsonian... What could be better than to follow our mandate ‘for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men’ by telling and retelling this fascinating and evanescent story of how we grew, step by step, into the pyramid of learning represented by 135 years of trial-and-error learning about America and Americans...²¹³

The objects selected for the book were meant to convey to the reader a sense of the Institution, and through that a sense of the nation. Just as at the beginning of its conception the Institution helped to solidify national identity, so it continued, but on an increasingly accessible and popular level. The *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution* book presented the Institution as keeper of the nation, but also tried hard to make clear that it was a nation for and of everyone, represented in their mix of collections from both ‘high’ and ‘popular’ cultures.

It was this book that made it possible for a travelling exhibition to be designed so quickly for the Edinburgh International Festival. Because objects from all over the Institution had already been brought together for *Treasures of the Smithsonian*, it was easier than normal to gather them together once again. Label and caption copy only had to be revised, rather than invented. The majority of the Scottish exhibition catalogue is directly taken from the earlier book, although it was decided in exhibition meetings that ‘text for the catalogue will not necessarily adhere to the objects chosen for the exhibition, nor will all illustrations necessarily be in the exhibition. Donald [McClelland, the exhibition coordinator] estimates a ratio of about 30 illustrations from the exhibition.’²¹⁴ These changes reflected the different context of the exhibition catalogue in Scotland than in the US – rather than just explaining the particular objects, the *Treasures from the Smithsonian* catalogue had to explain some of the history of the institution and the country it was representing, making it a catalogue with a firmer narrative structure than normal.

²¹³ S. Dillon Ripley, ‘Foreword’, in Edwards Park, *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution* (London, 1983). ix.

²¹⁴ Notes from ‘Edinburgh Festival Catalogue’ Meeting, 20 January 1984. SI Archives 06.059, box 13/18.

What Makes An American Icon?

The catalogue for *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Scottish Museum* did insert more history and context for the objects and ideas profiled there than did its American-focussed precursor volume. However the strength of the Edinburgh exhibition was that many of the ‘treasures’ that Smithsonian staff selected did not need any context in order to be understood. National museums continuously have to decide what makes the objects in their collections belong to that nation. Usually this justification revolves around an object’s particular provenance – it can be national if it was used, built, or found in that nation. However, the issue of which nation can claim a particular artefact is a fraught one, and claims for the restitution of important objects are often refuted with the claim that certain objects are of general cultural importance, and can be understood and appreciated by museum visitors whatever their national heritage.²¹⁵ The Smithsonian National Museum of American History spends little time explaining the American-ness of any of their objects. As with other large national institutions, the implicit narrative is that these objects are obviously of the nation because they are displayed within the space of that nation’s museum. The larger cultural understanding of many of the most famous of these objects is strong enough to cope with this lack of stated provenance and national ties. Several of these made the trip to Edinburgh.

Ruby Slippers

The ruby slippers [images 2.16 and 2.17] were worn by Judy Garland in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. They were obtained by an anonymous buyer at an MGM studio in 1970 for \$15,000, and were donated to the museum in 1979. Several pairs were made for the film, and the two in the collection of the Smithsonian come from two separate original pairs, rather than having been made for each other. They are in worse condition than some of the other surviving pairs in the hands of private collectors, but have always attracted a large amount of interest at the museum. In a

²¹⁵ This type of rhetoric is used in cases such as the Parthenon Marbles and the Egyptian artefacts at the British Museum and also, as will be discussed in chapter 5, the Lewis Chessmen.

recent catalogue they are called a ‘...national icon swathed in the magic of its singular aura’, and an academic essay posits that they have ‘become its own symbol, representing nothing so much as its iconic self.’²¹⁶

These slippers, it will be remembered, were also thought to be magical, to contain great power. The slippers were endowed by Hollywood writers – modern mythmakers – with telling a powerful tale about a child’s, and indeed a nation’s, quest to find ‘home’. And with the passing of another generation of Americans, the slippers too have become less connected to a specific history and more a icon of the museum...the Ruby Slippers offer a nice structural parody on reality and illusion, mythmaking and history making, the value of museums and the museumising of value.²¹⁷

When they were first displayed in the 1970s they were meant to represent the start of the film industry, the technological and social advances in the *Wizard of Oz*, such as the development of colour film, and the iconic place that the film has taken on in the contemporary world. Now in the US they say more about the role of the Smithsonian in collecting the by-products of American popular culture. The ruby slippers, like a few other objects such as the puppet used to embody Kermit the Frog from the children’s television show *Sesame Street*, have become icons of the museum itself, as well as the ideas they originally were displayed to represent. When in Scotland and removed from that institutional context, the slippers served more as an object of pilgrimage and awe than connecting to any particular idea of national or museological history. Especially in the context of the Festival, the slippers were treated as an inspiration for performers and a ‘must-see’ attraction,²¹⁸ but spoke more about the international reach of celebrity and Hollywood films than anything particularly American. This globalised narrative was well-suited to the goals of most of the players in *Treasures from the Smithsonian*, as Scottish and tourist audiences

²¹⁶ Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler, "Introduction," in *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (London, 1997). 5.

²¹⁷ Richard Kurin, "The Hope Diamond: Gem, Jewel, and Icon," in *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (London, 1997). 67-68.

²¹⁸ For examples of this attitude, see "Inspired by Judy's Magic Shoes," *Edinburgh Evening News* 8 August 1984.

were excited to see them, could understand them without a large amount of text or other imposed contextual information, and also probably raised the profile of the Smithsonian in visitor's minds, even if they did not learn anything about American history or culture from viewing their display. Other objects, more closely entwined in a specifically American discourse, did not hold the attention of audiences in the same way as the slippers.

It is surprising, given their rapturous review in the exhibition, how close they came to not being included at all. An early object list, which explains the exhibition by saying that 'it forms a treasury of world art, history and science with an emphasis on America, through objects selected for their visual beauty and for their contribution to the natural order of life' made no mention of the ruby slippers in the 65 objects from the National Museum of American History.²¹⁹ It did make clear the missions of the exhibition, stating that

It is our hope that the Treasures exhibition will broaden the viewer's understanding of America, and that the objects on display reflect our shared heritage with that of Europe and will mark as well the contributions made by American artists and scientists to the intellectual development of mankind.²²⁰

It seems perhaps that the ruby slippers did not fit the first ideas of how to represent the contributions of Americans to the world's intellectual development. The exhibition object list was assembled by asking the directors and curators of the then thirteen different museums to assemble lists of which objects in their collections matched the spirit and mission of the exhibition, and were also hardy enough and portable enough to travel. These lists were then submitted to the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the exhibition team. Mostly they were accepted without question or alteration. However, the curators of the exhibition seem to have wanted to expand the scope into less lofty territory, and did this by approaching the National Museum of American History for some of its more popular items. In a letter, Donald McClelland, the head of the team, requested some objects

²¹⁹ 'Treasures from the SI – August 12-November 4 1984 Royal Scottish Museum Edinburgh Object List'. Undated. SI Archives 01-133, box 3/3.

²²⁰ Ibid.

that had not originally been included in object lists. Among these were the ruby slippers. He wrote

You will note that to the requested loans from your collections a list of objects has been added that form a statement about Popular American culture...I certainly agree that their inclusion in Treasures would add another dimension for Scotland...The History Museum's loan list and the popular culture list form an important part to the Treasures exhibition. Each object makes a strong statement about our Institution, history, and way of life...²²¹

Popular culture, as represented through the ruby slippers, was considered to be iconically American and to have treasure value – and as such, was worthy of inclusion in the exhibition, and perhaps was even obligatory. No objections were raised, and a week later the ruby slippers were highlighted as one of the treasures set to come to the Royal Scottish Museum in an official press release.²²² Once the exhibition was actually underway the slippers got very little in the way of contextual information, but it was not needed. The audience already knew what they were seeing, as they had seen them before in the film, or merely understood them because of their place in the public consciousness that comes out of international entertainment and popular culture. They are a very different type of American icon than others which were brought to Edinburgh, but encompassed the myriad narrative needs of the exhibition and the institutions involved, being both American and global, rare and accessible.

Presenting the Smithsonian Abroad

Having had such obvious antecedents in the form of the *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution* book, the temporary exhibition for Edinburgh could be built fairly easily on the existing scaffolding. The final form of *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* reflected changes in structure and content to appeal to a more international audience, but its core reflected only minor semantic shifts in order to suit the new context. These small changes are seen clearly in even the exhibition's

²²¹ Letter from Donald McClelland to Douglas E. Evelyn, Deputy Head of NMAH. 6 March 1984. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

²²² Royal Scottish Museum Press Release, 12 March 1984. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

name, though coming to that choice required a long period of deliberation. Originally organisers had wanted to reuse the *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution* title that had been given to the 1983 book, at least as a subtitle. The first proposed title was *The Genius of Collecting, the Past to the Future: Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution*.²²³ Because of issues of copyright with the book, this was discarded. The next proposed version was *America's Smithsonian: Treasures from the National Museum of the United States*, though this too was rejected, as 'a change was needed to avoid the misperception that the Smithsonian Institution is one museum and that we are the United States Government.'²²⁴ Other draft titles were variations on the themes of America, treasures, and the Smithsonian, with a compromise finally being reached with the book's publishers to allow a modest change to satisfy copyright – and thus *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* was born.²²⁵ The substitution of 'from' for 'of' may have been a minor one to placate the copyright lawyers. However, it also signalled some big changes in the larger narrative goals of the exhibition. The objects' relocation to Scotland had major implications for their meaning and display. Whereas the 1983 book was meant largely to show a nation what treasures it possessed, the journey that the new exhibition took removed these treasures from their national context, and embedded them in the heart of another cultural space. The narratives that the selected objects carried with them to Edinburgh had to be recognisable and understandable to international audiences, while still retaining a recognisable 'American-ness'.

Attaining this level of narrative flexibility and strength would have been a difficult task even with all of the millions of objects in the vaults of the Smithsonian. Instead, curators had to pick 260, each of which had to be transported thousands of miles and set up in a space entirely different to the one they usually occupied. The objects were flown to Scotland by the US Air Force in three cargo planes, and a small army of curators and other Smithsonian staff came as well.²²⁶ The Air Force

²²³ 'Preliminary Object Selection List', undated. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

²²⁴ 'Debate on Exhibition Title', undated. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

²²⁵ Other options included *Treasures from the Museums of the Smithsonian*, *Treasures from the Smithsonian Museums*, *America's Smithsonian: Treasures from its Museums*, and *America's Smithsonian: Treasures from its Collections*. Ibid.

²²⁶ Brock, "'Treasures From the Smithsonian' Review." 63-64.

had been commanded to help out after the Assistant Secretary for Defence received a letter from the Smithsonian Director stating that ‘as the exhibition represents the Smithsonian and American treasures of great artistic, historic, and scientific importance, we judge the assistance of the United States Air Force to be in the national interest.’²²⁷ While in some ways this was a careful manipulation of the situation in order to gain a discount on the sizable cost of transport, it also shows the extent to which the Smithsonian was seen as a guardian of the nation, as integral and important to it as its defence forces.

Once arrived, the exhibition took over the Royal Scottish Museum temporary exhibition hall and the main entry gallery. It composed a mix of freestanding objects, individual cases, and cases for groupings of objects. There were paintings and prints on the walls, as well as sculptures and machinery. In many announcements Frank Dunlop, the Director of the International Festival, and Norman Tebble, Director of the Royal Scottish Museum, touted the breadth of objects to be displayed, saying that the exhibition made sure there was ‘something to interest everyone.’²²⁸ Treasures at the Smithsonian have long been more about their iconic status in American life and culture. This point was made abundantly clear in the many reviews of the exhibition. When asked how the objects on display were chosen, Donald McClelland, International Co-ordinator of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, said that all the objects were selected because of their ‘significant contribution to the history and culture of our country’.²²⁹ The artefacts selected were therefore from the complete spectrum of Smithsonian collections, resulting in a diversity of representation that provided an ongoing source of fascination for many journalists and observers. Ordinary artefacts rested by the relics of famous people long dead, the work of well-known artists, celebrity cast-offs, and images of important Americans.

While this juxtaposition was perhaps more noticeable in the space of the Royal Scottish Museum, it was not completely out of the ordinary for the

²²⁷ Letter from S. Dillon Ripley to Laurence J. Korb, 18 May 1984. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

²²⁸ Norman Tebble, "Introduction," *Royal Scottish Museum News* Summer 1984.

²²⁹ Donald McClelland, SITES International Co-ordinator, in "'Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution' Review," *Royal Scottish Museum News* Festival 1984.

Smithsonian. For a variety of reasons the collections of the Smithsonian have always had a haphazard feeling to them. Unlike many other national museums, there was little or no established collection when the Smithsonian was founded. Besides the scientific specimens of James Smithson, very few other collections were present in the first days and years of the institution. Also, few of its objects have been acquired purposefully. The museum has always had a strong ethic of donation from individual Americans, and of taking, and displaying the largest amount of these objects possible. Government buildings in the US such as the Patent Office, the Capitol Building and the Post Office have all transferred their holdings of objects to the Smithsonian over the years, resulting in everything from relics of Presidents and Government to a large number of patent models finding a place the collections. By sponsoring so many scientific expeditions, the institution has ended up with large numbers of specimens, and by being connected to the federal government they receive objects of importance to the state. The results of these collecting practices and the wide scope and mission of the institution have been an encyclopaedic collection of objects from all corners of the world and which hold a variety of monetary, historical, and cultural values.

The sheer breadth of the enterprise is perhaps one reason for the particular cultural role held by the Smithsonian. All national museums are seen as important arbiters of national knowledge and narrative. However, whether for reasons particular to America or to itself, the Smithsonian is the holder of a particularly accepted 'truth' and legitimacy for the American public.²³⁰ American national identity is tightly wound up with notions of the individual. From the Pilgrims to Andrew Carnegie to Bill Gates, America's icons are often individuals. It goes along with the myth of self-improvement embodied in the Horatio Alger myth – where a person can come from nothing and work his way up through American society.²³¹

²³⁰ See James B. Gardner, "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public," *The Public Historian* 26(4) (Fall 2004). 11-21. for a curatorial perspective on why the Smithsonian is held to such standards of authenticity.

²³¹ Born in 1832, Horatio Alger was a minister and social worker who wrote 134 short 'dime' novels meant to show poor boys how they could succeed in life using honesty, hard work, and determination. His work has been considered emblematic of the idea of the 'American Dream' which emerged into popular discourse at about the

The Smithsonian Institution is considered to have unimpeachable authority on the subject of America and American history and culture. Smithsonian officials acknowledge the sometimes-problematic nature of those expectations.

Like Webster or Oxford, dictionaries par excellence, the definitions contained in the world of the Smithsonian are always taken as ‘the last word’, the labels on the exhibits beyond question, the epitome of veracity... This is a weighty responsibility. Are we really as correct and as profoundly so as we sound? I do not know, suspecting only as a scientific sceptic that the ultimate truth on almost any subject will always remain elusive, slipping between the sentences, intriguing us with the very *exceptions* which can never be explained by footnotes alone.²³²

These expectations have, to some extent, been created by the Institution itself, and especially by the National Museum of American History (hereafter NMAH). Items usually found in the collections of the NMAH were the majority of the objects breathlessly noted by previews and reviews of the *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* in Edinburgh. It is almost as if the NMAH functioned as a kind of copyright library of American culture.

Whereas the original establishment of the Smithsonian Institution called for the immediate transfer of any objects of interest which were already in Washington DC, the modern Smithsonian Institution is the recipient of anything of cultural interest from anywhere in the US. This includes items from popular culture, such as props from television shows, items associated with iconic places or people. A recent large example of this was the acquisition of the entire kitchen belonging to Julia Child, a famous cookery writer and presenter. They did not want just any kitchen – they wanted this very specific one.²³³ The Smithsonian approach to telling stories

same time. Now, a ‘Horatio Alger story’ is commonly understood to be one where the hero triumphs over adversity and makes themselves into a success – usually with large amounts of money included. For more see Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (Oxford, 1994).

²³² S. Dillon Ripley, ‘Foreword’, Park, *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution*.

²³³ She was given a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honour in America in 2003. The official commendation said that ‘With this kitchen, the Museum has acquired an "object" that perfectly represents Julia Child's extraordinary influence on the way Americans think about their food and its history.’

about the past is linked into the individualism of the American experience and the narrative role of the iconic object. The question of how to present this type of museum artefact and experience to a new audience was one of the major questions hovering around the design process for *Treasures from the Smithsonian*.

In a pre-exhibition memo about the prospective form of the exhibition, the director of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) said that

I feel the idea of organizing a general exhibition drawing on SI collections which is geared to the publication of *Treasures of the Smithsonian* is the best way to go...a general approach such as this will not only be an opportunity to share the history of the Institution but also its three-dimensional wonders, information on our research efforts world-wide, and can be tied to the sale of our books and recordings. It will combine the best of substance and good PR.²³⁴

This idea of using the Edinburgh exhibition to celebrate the whole general scope of the Smithsonian as an institution was also echoed by other strong voices early in the design process. The curator of the Castle building, the heart of the Smithsonian, James Goode, also recommended this approach. He said

I believe that the Smithsonian exhibit at the 1984 Edinburgh Festival should be organized around the principal theme of growth and broad scope of the SI. We should select treasures within the SI to illustrate that theme. A second theme – which I think has been generally overlooked – would be to show Scottish and English connections with American cultural development...the effort to focus on beautiful objects which reflect the close ties between American culture and the British should be very popular at the Edinburgh Festival.²³⁵

In the end it was decided that general themes of this kind were the best way in which to present the whole of the Smithsonian in a miniature form and in a very different

<<http://www.medaloffreedom.com/JuliaChild.htm>>. An online version of the exhibit can be seen at Julia Child's Kitchen at the Smithsonian,

<<http://americanhistory.si.edu/juliachild/>>.

²³⁴ Memo from Peggy Loar to Ralph Rinzler, titled 'Smithsonian Participation at the Edinburgh Festival', 4 October 1983. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

²³⁵ Memo from James Goode to Ralph Rinzler, titled 'Edinburgh Festival Ideas', 1 November 1983. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

context than they normally have. To emphasise these ideas of scope and size two very special display cases were created, one for the entry to the exhibition and one for the end.

The previous chapter discussed the complex interplay that can be seen between space and objects in the process of designing a permanent museum. The same issues arise in a temporary exhibition. It is generally accepted that museum objects are multivocalic – they can say more than one thing. Yet, when an object is put on display, one of its stories is always privileged above others. This is an idea that will continue to be examined in the exhibitions profiled in later chapters, and one that is itself multifaceted. The specific issue to consider here though is how the meaning of the object, the story that it is allowed to tell, is influenced by the context in which it is displayed. Like words in a sentence, objects are put into display cases, and while each individual object says something on its own it also has a meaning as a component of the whole. The designers of *Treasures from the Smithsonian* were aware of the ways that they could manipulate objects and space to create certain moods and ideas in their audiences. The key way they did this was by the assembly of those two important book-ending cases, which were called ‘Diversity I’ and ‘Diversity II’.

The ‘Diversity’ cases were meant to encapsulate the themes of the exhibition, setting up the viewer for what they were going to encounter, and serving as front and end pieces for the ideas they saw on their journey. The Assistant Director of the exhibition, Mary Dillon, said that ‘Planning “Diversity I” was like writing a good lead sentence to a novel...It puts one right in the thick of the show. It says “We have all these incredible objects. Watch out!”’²³⁶ Startling juxtapositions and intentional blurring of the usual lines between art, ethnography, and historical artefact were consciously manipulated in the Diversity cases in order to create a sense of awe in the visitors before they encountered the majority of the show.

Though this approach has been used by museums more and more since the advent of the ‘new museology’ in the 1990s, it was novel at the time of the 1984

²³⁶ Mary Dillon quoted in Wasserman, "Smithsonian Featured at Edinburgh Festival."

Scottish exhibition.²³⁷ The contents of ‘Diversity I’ included a banjo from the National Museum of American History, a portrait of Benjamin Franklin from the Portrait Gallery, a satellite from the Air and Space Museum, and an intricately carved box from the Museum of African Art.²³⁸ These two display cases contained in miniature all that visitors were about to see in the exhibition, which itself was a miniaturised version of a much larger museum complex. In essence, this is what temporary exhibitions do – bring the heart of one nation’s material culture to another location and context. Because of the concentration of scope involved the narratives layered on each particular object get both more complicated as they try to convey more information, and also simpler as they are divorced from the cultural expectations audiences in their own national context bring to the museum with them.

The Appeal of the Temporary Exhibition

Visitor figures show that more people visit a large national museum for the first time during a temporary exhibition than any other time.²³⁹ This mass appeal can be a great benefit for the that museums stage the temporary exhibit, for the host institution gets increased attention, and so does the lending institution. It allows a flexibility in display message to suit a particular predicted audience, a feature that is often lacking in permanent cases. It can also address up-to-date issues, as it is only expected to last for a few months. These multiple layers of flexibility make the temporary exhibition a good forum for using objects to make specific cultural points. Usually it is the host or lender of the exhibition who uses the temporary exhibition to show a different side to the objects, and through them perhaps a different culture or idea.²⁴⁰ However, because of the other cultural force involved in *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* – the Edinburgh International Festival – there was also another view being imposed onto the artefacts. Frank Dunlop, the Director of the

²³⁷ Many of the exhibitions profiled in books such as Karp, ed., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. and Reesa Greenberg, ed., *Thinking About Exhibitions*. reflect the change in museum display modes.

²³⁸ Wasserman, "Smithsonian Featured at Edinburgh Festival."

²³⁹ Oral history interview conducted by the author with Catherine Holden, Director of Marketing for NMS. 13 March 2007.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

Festival, told an American newspaper that he had asked the Smithsonian to participate because ‘I want to show Europeans, who tend to think there is no American culture, how wrong they were, how many good things existed.’²⁴¹ There were, therefore, three levels of expectation and narrative imposed on *Treasures from the Smithsonian*. The lender wanted to showcase the ‘diversity’ of its collections, the Festival wanted to say something about the wealth of American culture, and the host, the Royal Scottish Museum, wanted to emphasise itself as an internationally important institution. The first two goals were fairly easily met by the shape and contents of the exhibition itself. The third, in both its reasoning and fulfilment, was harder both to achieve and assess.

The temporary exhibition of American artefacts in the Royal Scottish Museum was an example of the power of temporary exhibitions to confer legitimacy. Because of the larger shadow cast by the Smithsonian Institution, the Royal Scottish Museum gained attention and prominence both nationally and internationally. The Smithsonian benefited as well, of course, but the end beneficiary was the RSM, and more largely, the idea of internationally important museums in Scotland. Though the RSM called itself the ‘largest comprehensive museum in Europe’²⁴² when filling out a facilities report for the Smithsonian prior to being approved as a host institution, within Scotland and the United Kingdom its presence and mission had long been overshadowed by the London museums. In the early 1980s Scotland was only just beginning to actively define itself as ‘different’ from the rest of Great Britain. Margaret Thatcher in Government had provoked distinctly different voting patterns in Scotland than in the rest of the country. The discovery of oil in the Scottish North Sea had raised ideas of economic independence, and the Scottish National Party was gaining a larger voice in national politics. All of these things, among many others, made the 1980s a time when Scots began to see themselves in a new light.²⁴³

Bringing an internationally important exhibition, much less one that had been designed particularly for Edinburgh and was going to be seen nowhere else, was a

²⁴¹ Frank Dunlop, quoted in R.W. Apple, "Major US Role Set for Edinburgh," *The New York Times* 19 June 1984.

²⁴² ‘Hosting Museum Facilities Report for the Royal Scottish Museum’. SI Archives 00-069, box 25/28.

²⁴³ For much more on this see McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*. and others.

cultural coup which helped the RSM stake a claim to a national recognition equal to that of London-based museums. The presence of objects normally associated with more internationally known places imbued the halls of the Royal Scottish Museum with some of their powerful aura. Objects bring their power with them in this way routinely. Once they have been entered into the rarefied world of the museum they have an authority that remains with them even outside their normal context. Being able to attract a major exhibition such as this one may have also helped strengthen the ongoing negotiations between Scottish and British authorities over the issue of a national museum for Scotland. As will be discussed in the next chapter, it is clear that *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Scottish Museum* influenced the form and content of another temporary Festival exhibition at the RSM, *The Wealth of a Nation in the National Museums of Scotland*, that placed extraordinary pressure on the government and produced the long-awaited funding promise.

Franklin's, and Washington's, Walking Stick

Most of the contents of *Treasures from the Smithsonian* clearly and easily told stories about the breadth of artefacts in the collections of the Smithsonian, and through that, of the scope of American history and culture. However, some stories did not transfer to Edinburgh in the same straightforward way as others. These complications of narrative can help to illustrate some of the limitations of temporary exhibitions, and the difficulty of transferring national stories beyond the borders of that nation.

Benjamin Franklin is one of the first people that a small American child will learn about in history class – or perhaps in science class, as they deconstruct the iconic ‘kite flying in a thunderstorm’ method of discovering electricity. In many ways Franklin is the iconic American. He came from an undistinguished background, and yet was able to become an important figure in the fields of science, publishing, government service, and many others. One of the icons in the *Treasures from the Smithsonian* show was his walking stick, given to him in the 1780s when he was serving as Ambassador to France [image 2.18]. He used it frequently as he was

increasingly hobbled by the vicissitudes of old age and a good life, and in his will he passed it on to a particular acquaintance. He wrote that

My fine crabtree walking stick with a gold head curiously wrought in the form of a cap of Liberty I give to my friend and the friend of mankind, General Washington. If it were a Sceptre, he has merited it, and would become it.²⁴⁴

General Washington is, of course, George Washington, to whom the former colonists' victory in the War of Independence was attributed and who turned down offers to become the king of the new United States of America. Instead he became the first President, stepping down after two terms of four years each, and thus setting the precedent that is still used today.

Exhibition texts in the National Museum of American History tell the visitor this story, using that exact quote. The labels also say that by the time of his will, the walking stick was already being seen as a symbol of the 'Revolution and its ideals'.²⁴⁵ This is related not only to the specific details of this cane, but also to the ideas associated with canes in general. Gentlemen's canes developed from pilgrim's staffs and swords, and were symbolically valuable as signs of masculinity, power, and class, having developed from swords and other weaponry.²⁴⁶ Because of these deeper meanings in the time at which this object was used, the gift of the walking stick to Franklin, and his later gift of it to Washington, was freighted with meaning about their public personas as men of virtue and knowledge. The particular decoration of the specific stick further heightened this by being imbued with neo-classical references.

The 'liberty cap' which crowns the stick is a symbol of freedom that was used in the French Revolution and also in anti-slavery and other sorts of radical

²⁴⁴ Edwards Park, *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Scottish Museum Edinburgh* (London, 1984). 13.

²⁴⁵ Steven Lubar and Kathleen M. Kendrick, eds., *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian* (London, 2001). 64.

²⁴⁶ See Joseph Amato, *On Foot: A History of Walking* (London, 2004), Veblen Thorstein, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York, 1912). 171.

political movement, though it has its antecedents in Classical Roman society.²⁴⁷

A proposal was made in 1855 to have the female statue at the top of the US Capitol building's imposing dome be a symbol of 'Freedom', complete with liberty cap, but the Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, objected to this as lending support to Abolition and it was replaced with the crested war helmet she still wears now.²⁴⁸ All this meaningful decorative detail contributes to a rich and symbolic history intertwined with that of the country and the ideals enshrined there. One must question, though, whether this artefact would be displayed and featured so prominently if it had not been bequeathed to George Washington, thus layering another level of importance upon it. Because of these multiple layers of meaning, the walking stick was exactly the type of object that the exhibition designers had wanted for *Treasures from the Smithsonian*. Donald McClelland had said that he wanted to display 'George Washington-icon sorts of thing[s], but also objects in storage that hadn't been seen for some time.'²⁴⁹ While the stick had long been on public display, it had not often been put forward as a treasure of the nation. Its worth had instead been directly tied to Washington as former President and father of the country.

The walking stick first became national property in 1843, when the grandnephew of Washington donated it to the United States government in an elaborate ceremony. It was displayed in public for the first time in 1880, when the Patent Office put it in their library along with a sword that had also belonged to George Washington. Then, in 1922, the State Department transferred all government historical collections to the Smithsonian, where the cane sat in a Hall of Presidents in the Natural History Museum before the opening of the National Museum of American History. It had been in the *Treasures of the Smithsonian Institution* book in 1983, and then came to Edinburgh for the later show.

²⁴⁷ For more on the cap of liberty see Jennifer Harris, "The Red Cap of Liberty: A Study of Dress Worn by French Revolutionary Partisans 1789-94," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14 (Spring 1981). 283-312. See also James Epstein, "Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Past and Present* (February 1989). 75-118.

²⁴⁸ History of the Statue of Freedom, The Office of the Architect of the Capitol, <<http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/freedom.cfm>>

²⁴⁹ Donald McClelland, quoted in Wasserman, "Smithsonian Featured at Edinburgh Festival."

These roles show that the walking stick is considered to be an important object in America. It is an icon in the most secular and old-fashioned sense, as a small item that connects to larger ideas of culture and history. The walking stick also has relic value, as it links the viewer to two iconic personages – people without whom it is commonly understood that there would be no nation of which to tell stories. Tracing which person this walking stick has been associated with most strongly at various times and in various spaces is an interesting exercise in the manipulation of meaning. Almost without fail it is, and has been, called ‘George Washington’s walking stick’. Only one of the many newspaper articles about the exhibition in Scotland even mentioned its early connection to Franklin, though that writer did believe that ‘the walking stick Franklin bequeathed to Washington must be the best piece of memorabilia’ in the show.²⁵⁰ Following its life through other exhibitions though, we find that in its most recent incarnation - a small exhibition held at the National Air and Space Museum in 2008 called *Treasures of American History* - the walking stick was presented as a symbol of Benjamin Franklin, with only a passing mention of ‘his friend and fellow revolutionary George Washington.’²⁵¹ The rest of the text is concerned with Franklin’s role in American history and culture. This change is perhaps insignificant, but it is intriguing. While the focus could be attributed to the exhibition’s location in a science-based museum, the placement of the show was coincidental, rather than causal. *Treasures of American History* was organised entirely by staff from the National Museum of American History to serve as a small glimpse into their collections while the rest of the museum was closed for renovation. As a self-contained package, the show could have been displayed in any of the museums that circle the Mall. The National Air and Space Museum was chosen after the exhibition had been designed, as an ongoing reorganisation of their collections meant that there was enough free floor space for visiting artefacts. In Scotland in 1984, it was more important to portray American history as belonging to the statesmen and politicians. Now, over two

²⁵⁰ Edward Gage, "Smithsonian Gift-Horse a Winner," *The Scotsman* 13 August 1984.

²⁵¹ *Treasures of American History Online Exhibition*, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=143&pagekey=225>

decades later and across an ocean, it could be that the scientist is considered a better representative of American-ness.

However it is understood now, in its time in Scotland the walking stick appears to have mystified many observers. While it was mentioned in the press releases (written largely by Smithsonian staff) and thus was highly visible in early preview articles, it seems not to have struck a cord with many visitors or reviews, as it is largely absent from later reports.²⁵² This may have been because of the explicit focus on treasures in the exhibition. ‘Treasures’ are iconic objects in their purest form. They need no connection to anything else in order to be understood. They merely *exist* and in existing, attract attention because of their power to draw the visitor in. Many of the other iconic objects that are used in museums to create certain ideas of identity, narrative, and nation are icons of this type. The problem lies in when they are removed from the context in which that sort of wordless connection works. Within the national public consciousness of the United States, a label such as the one given to the walking stick would be enough to enhance and bring attention to, the iconic value of the object. In Scotland, in the space of another nation’s museum and narrative and divorced from this public consciousness, the aura around the walking stick did not work in the same way.

Smithsonian officials were aware that this would be a problem. The exhibition labeller, Karen Fort, admitted as much when she said that

If something is a treasure it is explicitly so, and you shouldn’t have to explain why. That works for many things in the show, but there are a number, like the walking stick Ben Franklin bequeathed to George Washington, that need more interpretation.²⁵³

The interpretation that was given, however, did not go far enough. It gave it a stronger narrative than other objects, but it did not step outside the assumed information of American nationness, and so was unable to connect as strongly with an audience coming from outside that space. In order to be understood as more than its shape, the walking stick needed to be surrounded by context-giving knowledge about American history and its personalities. Without that assumed information in

²⁵² The walking stick is mentioned by name in only 4 of the 19 British newspaper preview or review articles.

²⁵³ Karen Fort, quoted in Wasserman, "Smithsonian Featured at Edinburgh Festival."

the audience, creating a recognisable narrative around the object was difficult, and perhaps rendered the icon incomprehensible. The net of signifiers of banal nationalism that theorists such as Michael Billig have identified provides the sort of mass public consciousness of the nation and its mythical history that these more complicated icons require in order to operate at their highest narrative potential.²⁵⁴ When outside of its reach and embedded in the space of another nation the larger connections are lost, so that what could be a powerful statement of history and culture becomes merely an interesting curiosity.

The two objects profiled in this chapter illustrate several of the roles and tensions of the iconic object in the temporary exhibit context. Some recognisable icons can be completely stripped of the supporting information that they would have in their home space. This reliance on wonder works better in the temporary exhibition, as the visitor is more apt to be looking for entertainment than for information, and they recognise and even expect a lack of context. The temporary exhibition is a pilgrimage to rare sights, rather than the trip into a history book that is often expected of a museum. Conversely, other, less celebrated, objects need more context than they would normally have in order to be understood in the temporary space. It is arguable which of the two objects said more about ‘America’ and its nationness to international audiences. Even their treasure value was subject to interpretation. There is only one iconic walking stick, and the museum placed a million dollar price tag on it for insurance estimates.²⁵⁵ In contrast, there are several pairs of ruby slippers from the original film of *The Wizard of Oz*, each slightly different and all worn by Judy Garland. In terms of rarity, then, the walking stick would be the most ‘treasured’. However, the ruby slippers have come to take a place in popular culture that is unlikely to be matched by the walking stick, however avid aficionados of Franklin, Washington, or walking sticks in general become. The slippers have become an icon both within and without the museum,²⁵⁶ whereas the

²⁵⁴ See Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

²⁵⁵ ‘Receipt of Delivery, George Washington’s Walking Stick.’ SI Archives 00.069. box 25/28.

²⁵⁶ The ongoing icon status of the Ruby Slippers became clear when they were a starring feature of New York Fashion Week 2008, being reinterpreted by many major designers as part of a major display. See Eric Wilson, ‘We’re Off to See the

walking stick needs the academic legitimacy and the narrative support that the museum can bring in order to be understood as an icon of American history and culture.

Exhibitionary Outcomes

These objects and the hundreds of other Smithsonian artefacts took over the main iconic space of the Royal Scottish Museum – the vast and soaring Great Hall, with its allusions to the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibitions. This space had always been designated as a temporary exhibition space, and had hosted a large and varied group of shows.²⁵⁷ However, it is also the main and, at that time, the only entryway into the museum. This combination of circumstances set up a situation where visitors entering the Royal *Scottish* Museum were first encountering *American* national objects. This is one of the multiplicities of meaning that a temporary exhibition can impose on museum space. By being located and ‘read’ in a nominally Scottish space, the American artefacts were not as purely American as they would be if seen in the space of their nation. By the same token, being exposed to those from outside that national context would have changed the Scottishness of the Scottish objects.

It can be argued that in 1984 the RSM was not truly as Scottish national museum, as it did not set out to tell the story of the nation in the same way that the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland did. This is a problem that will be explored more fully in following chapters as we delve deeper into what makes a national museum national, but it is worth considering briefly here as well. For the purpose of this exhibition the Royal Scottish Museum had been framed both as a representative institution of Scottishness and as an international and European venue, through the influence of the Festival. Even though its objects were mostly concerned with things from other cultures that had been brought back to Scotland, and the technology of modern life, by being framed as Scottish in relation to the

Ruby Slippers.’ *New York Times Online*. 17 July 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/17/fashion/17ROW.html?_r=1&ref=fashion>

²⁵⁷ For more on this, including floor plans of some early temporary exhibitions, see Douglas A. Allan, *Exhibitions Era from War to Peace: Seventeen Years of Temporary Exhibitions at the Royal Scottish Museum* (Edinburgh). Undated.

Smithsonian's Americanness, the objects within took on a stronger Scottish narrative. The explicit narratives imposed by the visiting artefacts changed the meanings of the permanent displays as well. Temporary exhibitions often have this effect of reframing the meaning of the host institution's icons, just as the loan icons change by being seen in different space.

Like many issues around iconic objects, these changes cannot be measured quantifiably. However, there are many outcomes of the temporary exhibition that can. *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* was free for the public, and the Smithsonian and other donors paid all costs. This meant that, unlike many other travelling or temporary exhibitions, the RSM as host did not have to pay anything to host the show. However, they also did not profit as much as they would have done otherwise. Deals were worked out prior to opening that saw ninety percent of all profits on Smithsonian-sponsored events and merchandise sales returned to America.²⁵⁸ Not all benefits of the exhibition were monetary though. Because of the scale of the show, the RSM got press coverage that it would not have normally, especially in the London-based papers. The staff at the RSM was also able to leverage the huge infrastructure of the Smithsonian to expand the show beyond Edinburgh, by asking them to create a series of text panels with information and pictures of the objects to be displayed which toured rural communities and schools in Scotland before the opening of the larger exhibition.²⁵⁹ These were then reused when they travelled to other non-museum public spaces in the US.²⁶⁰ There was also a considerable amount of talk about the interaction between the Smithsonian and the RSM leading to a reciprocal exhibition of Scottish treasures in the US at a later date. This was of especial interest to the Scottish Education Department, whose

²⁵⁸ Memo from Ralph Rinzler to Executive Committee Members, titled 'Interim Report on Edinburgh Festival Participation', 21 August 1984. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

²⁵⁹ See letter from Sheila M. Brock (education officer at RSM) to Donald McClelland, 13 February 1984. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

²⁶⁰ Locations included the Broward County Fair and the South Florida Fair. See itinerary and memo from 'Vera' to 'Fred/Janet/Gwen' titled 'Mini-Treasures', 31 May 1985. SI Archives 487, box 39/105.

representative, Nigel Pittman, was intensely interested in the possibilities of spreading Scottish culture internationally.²⁶¹

It seems that this did not happen, though the specific reasons are unclear. Neither did Arthur Sackler's ambition of a series of collaborative exhibitions between Scotland and the US. Much as there was a several-decade intermission between the first American exhibition in Edinburgh, *America Marches with the United Nations*, and the 1984 show, there was again a significant gap before the next museological connection. However, eventually the two countries and their respective national museums connected again, though in a different way. Temporary exhibitions do not always take place in the space of traditional museum halls. The Smithsonian has been pioneering in the development of new ways to bring the museum to the people, and one of the long-established ways in which they do that is at a ten-day open-air cultural festival. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is a museum enterprise, but is not artefact-based in the same way as usual museum exhibitions. *Scotland at the Smithsonian* was one of three main themes at the 2003 Festival. The festival programme outlined it thus:

Through dynamic performances, demonstrations, and educational programs, more than one hundred of Scotland's finest musicians, storytellers, cooks, craftspeople, and scholars will demonstrate and celebrate the living traditions that make and sustain Scotland's distinctive culture. From the Highlands and Islands to the Borders, inner-city Glasgow to Edinburgh's Royal Mile, the shop floor and mills of Dundee to the oil fields of Aberdeen, Scotland's heritage, regional cultures, and occupations will be highlighted and honored.²⁶²

Curatorial staff from the National Museums of Scotland was intensely involved in creating the programme for the Festival and a delegation of staff went to Washington DC for the opening, just as Smithsonian staff had come to Scotland in the 1980s. It presented narratives that showcased many varied and wide-ranging glimpses at Scottish life and culture, both historic and contemporary, just as the earlier show had

²⁶¹ Letter from Nigel Pittman to Peggy Loar, 11 September 1984. SI Archives 000367, box 42/48.

²⁶² Scotland at the Smithsonian,
<<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/Festival2003/scotland.htm>>

done. There was no one overarching narrative of history or nationness, and many ideas were presented in a small space for a popular audience.

Despite the many echoes, *Scotland at the Smithsonian* was obviously an event that differed from the traditional museum exhibition, whether temporary or permanent. The setting and expectations of Folklife Festivals, with their focus on experiential learning, living history, and relatively limited presentation of objects creates an atmosphere not found in museum exhibition halls. However, the show served to show the multitude of ways that connections between institutions can be made, and the different ways in which national culture can be demonstrated under the aegis of museums. It is probable that in the late 1980s the National Museums of Scotland did not have the money or other resources to mount a travelling exhibition of their treasures, and it is possible that even without the earlier museum connections Scotland would have been featured at the Folklife Festival. However, by looking at the several ways and times in which Scottish objects and culture have come in contact with the American icons, a narrative about nation, identity, and cultural links can emerge. *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* was very popular. Attendance numbers were double those of the previous year's Festival show, and 'at several points during the second weekend, the museum was obligated to close its doors due to overcrowding.'²⁶³

This had many causes, including the internationally known objects that were on show, the large amount of media coverage, and the 'wow' factor of American objects being suddenly accessible. To some extent temporary exhibitions always attract more attention than their more staid permanent equivalents. The attraction can be heightened if the exhibition is framed in order to draw attention to the rarity and celebrity value of the objects featured and if attention is purposely attracted to the exhibition and its artefacts as something out of the ordinary. *Treasures from the Smithsonian at the Royal Scottish Museum* did this very well. But is this only possible when the objects on show are foreign in some way, and thus stand out more sharply in their new temporary surroundings? The success of *Treasures from the*

²⁶³ Memo from Ralph Rinzler to Executive Committee Members, titled 'Interim Report on Edinburgh Festival Participation', 21 August 1984. SI Archives 00.069, box 25/28.

Smithsonian inspired the National Museums of Scotland to assemble their own treasures for temporary display several years later, in an exhibition called *The Wealth of a Nation in the National Museums of Scotland*. As well as echoing many of the narratives and design elements first seen in *Treasures of the Smithsonian*, *The Wealth of a Nation* also had political undertones and tacit goals, much as the Smithsonian predecessor had. That exhibition, its motives, outcomes, and the questions it raised about displaying the nation within its own space, is the subject of the next chapter.

1989

Politicising the Nation's Artefacts:
The Wealth of a Nation

Temporary exhibitions are not always about objects from foreign lands being displayed to a new and unusual audience. Sometimes they are a space for the temporary reframing of well-known objects and the creation of narratives that are relevant to the particular moment in time. Inspired by the large scale of the temporary exhibition *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution at the Royal Scottish Museum* and its focus on creating a narrative of American identity through the objects held in the collection of the national museums, museum officials in Scotland created a similarly inspired temporary exhibition at the Royal Museum of Scotland (previously the Royal Scottish Museum) during the Edinburgh International Festival of 1989. Like the one that preceded it, this show significantly shaped the eventual form and narrational contents of the permanent Museum of Scotland, and impacted the way in which material culture was presented and understood as part of a national heritage.

It is this exhibition – *The Wealth of a Nation in the National Museums of Scotland* – that will be the centre of this chapter. More particularly, the political aims of the exhibition and the context of the time will be examined, in order to see what narratives of Scotland were considered salient in 1989, and how the objects were manipulated to fulfil political and cultural agendas. While the Americans were trying to show the wide span of their collections, and to present their nation to a largely foreign audience, *Wealth of a Nation* was a showing of Scotland in Scotland – but it was carefully constructed to tell a story of Scotland that had not usually been so overtly visible. Taking a closer look at the mechanics of the exhibition, as well as

some of the objects that were held up as icons of Scottishness tell us more about how Scottish identity could be, and has been, showcased through artefacts. It also sheds light on the varying reasons for temporary exhibitions, and deepens understanding of the eventual Museum of Scotland, which became a permanent version of this earlier temporary show.

Object-ifying the Political

Many, if not all, museum exhibitions have a political undertone. They are designed and presented in a specific way because of the context of the society in which they are developed – and that context includes the political mood of the time. However, this political narrative in exhibitions is usually tacit. To find it one must delve behind the scenes, as was the case with the Smithsonian exhibition. Yet *The Wealth of a Nation* wove certain political goals into the very centre of its public storyline.

Part of its purpose was to draw attention to the distinctiveness and diverse nature of the Scottish material held by NMS [National Museums of Scotland], and *to emphasise the need to display it in a way that will fulfil its educational and cultural potential*. The exhibition was intended not only to allow the opportunity to see much material that is normally in store or inadequately displayed, but *to reinforce the message that a new museum is required to tell and display the story of Scotland*.²⁶⁴ (emphasis added)

Where the mission of the previous ‘blockbuster’ exhibition had been only to showcase the grandeur of America through its material culture and, through the popular appeal of the show, open the International Festival to a wider audience, the missions of the new temporary exhibition had even more political and cultural import. In 1989 the summer blockbuster was to not only have a longer run than previously (opening on 9 June 1989 and closing on 31 December) but also a larger remit. It was meant to be the impetus for the creation of a new Museum, and in doing so, hoped to force public and governmental recognition of Scottish nationness.

²⁶⁴ "'The Wealth of A Nation' Review," in *National Museums of Scotland Annual Report April 1989-March 1990* (Edinburgh, 1990). 7.

The presence, or lack thereof, of a national museum of Scottish history had long been a fraught issue.²⁶⁵ The decision to demonstrate the physical need for a new space by placing many supposedly neglected ‘treasures’ on display was just a new tactic in an old fight. However, the new approach embraced by the temporary exhibition made the case in a subtle, yet effective way. Part of this success was due to the framing of the exhibition, some to the objects selected, and some to the design of the exhibition space. All of these factors will be discussed here, as will how they came together in the show as a whole. The outcomes of the exhibition are also tinged with the influence of less quantifiable factors such as timing and the larger political climate. Without any one of these components *The Wealth of a Nation* might not have had the cultural and physical repercussions that it had.

The grand success of the *Treasures from the Smithsonian* show had demonstrated that putting on a ‘blockbuster’ temporary exhibition during the Edinburgh International Festival was a way to guarantee substantial attendance figures and national media coverage. Both of these things were important for *The Wealth of a Nation*, given its overt political agenda. Publicity was key to the missions of the exhibition, as was the public pressure that might be mounted if enough people were aware of its goals. In the stridently toned foreword that he contributed to the book which accompanied the exhibition, Magnus Magnusson, a well-known journalist and personality, claimed that

In order to house and conserve and display the Wealth of the Nation as it deserves, we need a new Museum of Scotland building to give it the setting it deserves. At no time in our history have we had an adequate home in which to display our wonderfully rich cultural heritage to its best advantage and to the best advantage of the nation. At no time have we had a great national building in which to tell the story of Scotland’s people and show all of her most treasured possessions ...only a new and visionary Museum of Scotland will do full justice to the collections that make up the real Wealth of a Nation.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ For much more on the process of fighting for and creating the Museum of Scotland see chapter 1 of this work.

²⁶⁶ Magnus Magnusson, "Foreword," in *The Wealth of A Nation in the National Museums of Scotland*, ed. Jenni Calder (Glasgow, 1989). viii-ix.

The media also echoed this message, reviewing and previewing the show as, for example, ‘an exhibition celebrating a great heritage and at the same time lamenting the lack of place where it can be adequately displayed.’²⁶⁷ The objects in the show were selected not only because of their beauty or rarity, but also to make the point that without a new museum they would never be shown at their best. The exhibition was put together mindfully to create and solidify those ideas. So too was the accompanying book, in itself much more solid than the usual temporary exhibition catalogue, that acted as a portable and less-constrained version of the show.

Framing the Wealth of the Nation

Over 500 objects were selected for *Wealth of the Nation*. Some of those were taken from their regular display cases in exhibits at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, but most were taken out of storage or conservation labs so they could be shown publicly for the first time. This is part of the appeal and power of the temporary exhibition as a whole. The mystique inherent in the notion of a limited time offer and the sense of superiority that comes with being given access to a privileged glimpse of things normally hidden in the depths both enhance the appeal of the objects on display.

As discussed in the introduction to this work, Walter Benjamin suggested that ‘authentic’ objects have an aura, or power to speak, that is missing in the replica artefact. For him, ‘the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition’²⁶⁸ and denudes it of its original power. He was writing here of lithography, photography and other means of reproducing images of art for a mass market, but his points can equally apply to the historical museum and its artefacts. The power of the history museum is its ability to present the public with the ‘real thing’, with the authentic remnants of the past. Benjamin saw authenticity as ‘the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.’²⁶⁹ He then continued, ‘Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is

²⁶⁷ Allen Wright, "Making a Point About Penury," *The Scotsman* 5 June 1989.

²⁶⁸ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 215.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.²⁷⁰ The weight of history is what makes an object powerful, and the more that it is reproduced and separated from that history the less powerful it is.

Because hidden, undisplayed objects are by their nature unlikely to have been reproduced, they are sometimes the most powerful objects of all. Visitors to the museum have no preconceived ideas about these hidden objects, and their very rarity and lack of context serves to draw the viewer in, promising as they do so the possibility of new and exciting knowledge. Museums have long held the role of guardians of cultural secrets, locking the best of material culture away from the damaging hordes of society and allowing only the worthy access to them. This exclusionary, guarding type of rhetoric can be seen in the very stones of the museums themselves. Though it was more common when museums were first becoming public spaces,²⁷¹ it persists even in the post-modern structures such as the Museum of Scotland building, where the entrance was constructed to visually echo the tower of a keep, or castle. These architectural strategies reinforce the idea that the contents of the museum within are somehow special and outside the space of ordinary life. Statements like this have served to separate the space of the museum from the space of everyday life, and to create the correct feelings and behaviours in those that were able to cross into the museum zone.²⁷²

The temporary exhibition, being a space apart within the larger space of the museum, can also reinforce the ideas of exclusion or distinction set up first by the larger space. Even the titles of the two temporary exhibitions profiled so far – *Treasures from the Smithsonian* and *Wealth of a Nation* – make clear the idea that the contents are in some way valuable and worthy of adulation, or at least highly focussed attention. These naming conventions, the use of a clearly defined space which is not that of the ‘regular’ exhibits, and the limited time and rare contents of a temporary exhibition are all ways in which the Benjamin-ian aura of the objects can be enhanced. Though the two titles echo one another, they also reflect the particular

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ For more on this, see Prior, *Museums and Modernity*.

²⁷² for much more on the symbolic importance of museum architecture see Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*. And Prior, *Museums and Modernity*.

circumstances, contexts, and goals of each. *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* was meant to be popular, wide-ranging, and intriguing, and to draw attention to its international pedigree. The concept of ‘treasures’ was ideally suited to those goals. *The Wealth of a Nation*, while similar in approach, was able to imbue its title with added layers of significance. ‘Wealth’ implies an investment in the future, not just the past and its bounty that is connoted in ‘treasure’. This invocation of the future and its potential was critical in the context of the exhibition’s political aims. Also important, given the exhibition’s location in Edinburgh, was the mimicking of Adam Smith’s seminal Enlightenment text *The Wealth of Nations*. The title of the show was constructed to further particular narratives, just as the objects within it were.²⁷³

The organisers of *The Wealth of a Nation* would have wanted the objects that they were displaying to have as much aura as possible. Aura-filled, or iconic, objects draw the viewer in, connecting them to a much larger narrative than that of their specific history. They have enough power to stand alone, devoid of interpretation, and yet still manage to create a story of their own. The other strength of the iconic object is that many stories can be mapped onto it, given slight changes in placement or context. In that way museum icons function in the same way as words or narrative images within a language. Theorists of language in the field known as semiotics speak of icons within a slightly different context than that of the museum, but their points are worth investigating briefly to understand both narrative and object better. Semiotics is the study of linguistic signs, or the words we have assigned to stand in for various ideas. For the semiotician Charles Peirce, signs can be categorised into two overlapping triadic systems.²⁷⁴ Firstly, there is the triad of the *representamen*, the *interpretant* and the *object*. The *representamen* is the material form of the sign – or in the world of the museum the actual artefact that is on display. The *interpretant* is the idea that the *representamen* inspires in the mind of the viewer, and the semiotic *object* is the larger idea that the *representamen* and the *interpretant* create

²⁷³ I am indebted here to conversations with and comments from Geoff Swinney, Curator of Fish and Mollusks, National Museums Scotland, who was one of the curators involved in *The Wealth of a Nation*.

²⁷⁴ The Peirce Edition Project, ed., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings Volume 2 (1893-1913)*, vol. II (Bloomington, 1998). 13.

together. With this triad both the object and the viewer produce knowledge, and then it is consumed.²⁷⁵

The second of Peirce's triads has just to do with the forms or types taken by the signs that function as the *representamen*. There are signs that are icons, symbols, and indices. For Peirce, 'an *icon* is a sign which stands for its object because as a thing perceived it excites an idea naturally allied to the idea that object would excite.' Icons in semiotic language stand in for an idea that they resemble.

...in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that this is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream – not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an *icon*.²⁷⁶

A semiotic icon is the concrete and tangible form of a shared cultural idea. It is a specific sign that has the power to move beyond the specific and into the realm of the general. This combination of the general and the particular is what museums seem to strive for in their displays, so it is quite logical that a museum collection would be made up of icons and exhibitions that cause them to function as such.

The need for and place of icons in the museum exhibition becomes especially clear when looking at the temporary exhibitions, such as *The Wealth of a Nation*, that are created with a very specific mission in mind. The iconic value of the object is heightened not only because of the factors already addressed – the defined space and time frame, as well as the display of objects not normally seen – but because everything must contribute to the overall narrative of the endeavour. The extent to which there is an overarching storyline differs in each exhibition. The *Treasures of the Smithsonian* was meant to be a aesthetic experience that together triggered certain ideas of America, but without hewing to a coherently linear path. The general principles of this were echoed in *The Wealth of the Nation*, but also aspired to a much more specific outcome, as we saw earlier. Looking at how exactly certain

²⁷⁵ Ideas of cultural production and consumption are also found in the works of theorists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Pierre Bourdieu.

²⁷⁶ Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, eds., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume I (1867-1893)*, II vols., vol. I (Bloomington, 1992). 226-228.

iconic objects were selected and used in the exhibition will show how that outcome was manipulated through the narrative of the display.

The Icons of a Nation

The Wealth of a Nation exhibition was an exercise in envisioning and imagining a new Museum of Scotland, and how it might present the objects of Scottish material culture. It was a first chance to set these icons up on their own and see what they could be made to say about Scottish history. Some of the display strategies first seen in *A Wealth of a Nation* were repeated in the Museum when it opened almost a decade later, and some, though changed in physical incarnation, remain the same in spirit. Icons were born over the course of the *Wealth of a Nation* that then lived on to speak throughout the process of creating the Museum and on to today.

Chief among these was the small shrine known as the Monymusk Reliquary [image 3.19]. Today it is the first object that a visitor to the modern half of the National Museum of Scotland encounters, right in the entrance to the gallery known as ‘The Kingdom of the Scots’, which covers the time period between 1100 and 1707 [image 3.20]. That gallery addresses three main ideas about the time period: Scotland was European, Scotland was Independent, and Scotland was Celtic.²⁷⁷ In one of the first incarnations of proposed narrative for permanent gallery space, it was said that ‘Visitors should be encouraged to feel that they are stepping not just into medieval Scotland but into a treasure house of Scotland’s recorded past. The first objects they see must convey that message.’²⁷⁸ The Monymusk Reliquary was able to fulfil that role in the permanent museum because of the narrative power it had been given in *The Wealth of a Nation*. A preview of the exhibition perhaps said it best:

Malcolm Rifkind [the Secretary of State for Scotland] will find the Monymusk Reliquary waiting for him when he arrives on Friday at the Royal Museum of Scotland to open an exhibition called ‘The Wealth of a Nation’. Traditionally associated with St. Columba, this revered object was a talisman carried at the Battle of Bannockburn. The trustees of the National Museums

²⁷⁷ Interview with Professor Michael Lynch, 9 June 2005.

²⁷⁸ *Museum of Scotland Project*. ‘Scotland in History 1100-1707 - Ground Floor Gallery Storyboard’ October/November 1993. 8.

of Scotland seem to be confident that it will do the trick again and bring them victory in their long campaign to secure a home for Scotland's national collection of historical treasures. One of the most precious possessions of the nation, this little travelling shrine is being placed at the entrance of the exhibition...²⁷⁹

This quote shows that in 1989 the reliquary was iconic enough to encompass all the hopes layered on to the *Wealth of a Nation* exhibition. But how did it get to that point? Looking at the particular history of this iconic object can help to show how it took on the power that gave it pride of place in this specific exhibition context.

The Monymusk Reliquary, like any icon, is both an object and an idea. Its story will illustrate the growth of both of its aspects, its object form that you see on display, and the reason *why* it is displayed. In 1859 a small silver, wood, and enamel hinged box was shown to a group of scholars in Aberdeen. It had been discovered in a corner of an old attic castle belonging to the Grant family of Monymusk. Then, in 1880, it was displayed for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. After that meeting Joseph Anderson, Keeper of the Society's Museum, wrote up a notice, positing that the box was in fact a long-lost unidentified object, listed in medieval documents as the *brechbennoch* of Saint Columba. This was the beginning of the story that created the national icon that is put on show.

The *brechbennoch* was mentioned from the 1200s as a *vexillum*. *Vexillum*, technically, means *banner*, but scholars such as Joseph Anderson believed even prior to the discovery of the Monymusk example, that *vexillum* could be a more general term used to refer to things that were carried in front of armies to ensure success on the field. Using that description the reliquary, could be the mysterious *vexillum*. This point was repeatedly brought up in Anderson's first article about the subject.²⁸⁰ He was uncertain as to the reliquary's exact provenance, other than the fact that it had been in the possession of the Grant family at Monymusk for a long time. He

²⁷⁹ Wright, "Making a Point About Penury."

²⁸⁰ see, for example, Joseph Anderson, "Notice of An Ancient Celtic Reliquary Exhibited to the Society by Sir Archibald Grant, Bart., of Monymusk.," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1879-1880). 435.

desperately wanted it to be the *brecbennoch* however. Doubts did slip in but were quickly brushed aside, as he said

if this reliquary, which is still preserved at Monymusk, be not the missing *Brecbennoch*...it can at least be said of it that its form is that of a *vexillum*...it is, moreover, the only example of its class now remaining in Scotland, and the beauty and specially Celtic character of its ornamentation invest it with an interest of no ordinary kind, independent of all such questions of historical association.²⁸¹

Whatever his desires for the story, at this point he also recognised it as an important object in its own right.

This idea faded away as Anderson and others became increasingly sure that the reliquary was also the *brecbennoch*. Its importance as a highly decorative and ancient shrine object became secondary to finding proof that it was the *brecbennoch*. Nearly twenty years later Anderson again wrote about the Monymusk Reliquary. There he acknowledged that

the Monymusk shrine has no known history. It is unquestionably a reliquary of the Celtic Church, which enshrined an unknown relic of the very first order of importance...but absolutely nothing is known about it to account for its presence and preservation at Monymusk.²⁸²

After this revelation, which would appear to be the death-knell of reports of the *brecbennoch*, Anderson restated the connections he longed to make twenty years back, linking the reliquary with ‘one of the most famous of the Scottish enshrined relics of Saint Columba’.²⁸³ He did not clarify his statements, but instead expounded on the tenuous links he was aiming for. He claimed special status for this Columba relic, ‘a relic which, though its nature is unspecified, bore a name which implies that it was enshrined in such a shrine as this.’²⁸⁴ An uncertain statement, surely, but it served as a next step in creating a national icon.

²⁸¹ Ibid. 435.

²⁸² Joseph Anderson, "The Architecturally Shaped Shrines and Other Reliquaries of the Early Celtic Church in Scotland and Ireland," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1909-1910). 264.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

After a period of silence, the object came up for sale in 1933. The negotiation was fraught but the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland acquired the reliquary. Notes on the acquisition ignore all previous doubt and say that ‘it is manifestly impossible to question the identification of the reliquary...with the *Brecbennoch* of these medieval documents.’²⁸⁵ The connection between the actual object and the idea of the object had been established solidly, from its beginnings as wishful thinking to a truth that was ‘manifestly impossible’ to deny.

It remained thus for many decades to follow. The Monymusk Reliquary was accepted as the *brecbennoch* of Saint Columba, and as such it was invaluable to the Museum. It was the object that had rallied the troops at Bannockburn and also the finest emblem of Scottish identity from a time where there barely was a Scotland with which to identify. The Monymusk Reliquary was an art piece valued for its ornamentation and unique enamelling techniques. However, the Reliquary-as-*brecbennoch* was historically valuable, associated with certain important people and events, and this made it even more important.

This, then, was the first object that visitors to the *Wealth of a Nation* encountered. It had been placed at the entrance to make a point – but the idea in the Monymusk Reliquary was not the same as in the rest of the exhibition. The Director of the National Museums of Scotland at the time of the exhibition, Robert Anderson, had described the content and context of the show by saying that

The emphasis in *The Wealth of a Nation* will *not* be on static, individual objects to be looked at for their own sakes. The exhibits are intended to reflect the beliefs and achievements of the land, as well as daily life, commerce, religion, and technological change. We also want to show how these objects can be used.²⁸⁶

While this objective may well have been reached by the multitude of other artefacts on display, it is clear that the Monymusk Reliquary and several other objects were of value to the exhibition precisely because they were not placed in deep levels of cultural context. The Reliquary had a label laying out its story and connections to St.

²⁸⁵ Francis C. Eeles, "The Monymusk Reliquary or Brecbennoch of St. Columba," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1934). 436.

²⁸⁶ Robert Anderson, as quoted in Catherine Lockerbie, "A Proud Nation Prepares to Show Off Its Treasures," *The Scotsman* 20 January 1989.

Columba and Bannockburn, but it was not linked explicitly to ‘the beliefs and achievements of the land’, nor was it demonstrated how such an object would be used.

Indeed, the Monymusk Reliquary and a few other entry objects were treated very differently than the rest of the exhibition, and in that way served not only as an introduction to the larger space, but also as a link to the yet-to-be-imagined space of the Museum of Scotland. As we have seen, for varying reasons the design brief for the Museum of Scotland privileged space and the solitary object over the older museum concept of a profusion of artefacts and information. In *The Wealth of a Nation* only those objects at the beginning – the Reliquary and the object it was posed with, a wooden statue of St. Andrew – had any amount of empty space around them. The rest of the objects, for reasons that will be discussed later, were crowded very close to one another. Carol Duncan believes that the more space that separates an object from other artefacts, the greater its iconic power or aura.²⁸⁷ By setting these two objects apart from the rest they were given the scope to say more than their neighbours, and it is clear that they were meant to be the icons that drew visitors through the rest of the exhibition.

Prior to its central role in *The Wealth of a Nation* the Monymusk Reliquary was in a case at the National Museum of Antiquities with many other objects, clearly just one more artefact among many in the collections. It was hard to see or assign any particular importance to the little box on the lower tier of a large display case [image 3.21]. Over the years, as its prominence increased, so did the amount of empty, reverential space framing it. So it was that in *Wealth of a Nation* it shared a case set-aside at the beginning with one other iconic object. The statue of St. Andrew, patron saint of Scotland and potent national symbol, had been taken out of storage for this exhibition. It was also used as the figurehead of another campaign for a new museum at the time, when it appeared on the cover of a pamphlet entitled *St. Andrew: Will He Ever See the Light?*. In this campaign the statue acted as a symbol of the hundreds of Scottish cultural artefacts languishing in storage for lack of dedicated display space, and also, in a wider context, for the Scottish Office

²⁸⁷ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*. 17.

administration based in St. Andrew's House and their refusal to 'see the light' and fund a Museum of Scotland. Thus there was a symbolic double importance to putting the Monymusk Reliquary and the St. Andrew statue together in the temporary exhibition. However, the iconic value of both objects was increased even further when they were installed in the Museum of Scotland. Today both are found at the start of the Kingdom of the Scots exhibitions, but each sits nobly ensconced in separate glass cases, located several metres apart, though still in the same line of sight [image 3.22]. This placement can be seen to show the increase in aura and iconic value that both the reliquary and the statue have experienced as they moved from mere antiquities in a historical museum to star representatives of a temporary exhibition, to symbols of a nation, installed at the forefront of a museum devoted to that nation. It is also a concrete conclusion to the campaign for the Museum of Scotland, as St. Andrew, used as the figurehead for the 'Will He Ever See the Light' pamphlet, is situated directly underneath a spotlight. Thus, a narrative is created, as the Monymusk Reliquary leads directly on to St. Andrew, now firmly 'seeing' the light in its permanent museum home.

The lack of established links to the rest of the narrative of *The Wealth of a Nation* demonstrated by the Monymusk Reliquary and St. Andrew statue would have heightened what author Stephen Greenblatt terms the 'resonance and wonder' of the objects contained within. Artefacts can have qualities of resonance, which he terms 'the power of the object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by the viewer to stand.'²⁸⁸ They can also be full of wonder, which is for Greenblatt 'the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.'²⁸⁹ Usually modern permanent exhibitions rely more on resonance, and temporary exhibitions call more on wonder.

²⁸⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (London, 1991). 42.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

This was obviously the case with the *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* temporary exhibition. Because those objects were so far from their normal national context – America – and because of the motive and concerns that prompted that exhibition, the objects could just show themselves and be admired for how different and wondrous they were. They did not need to evoke larger idea in the minds of their viewer. However, the case was not necessarily the same with the later *Wealth of a Nation*. Because this was a nation being displayed within its own space, the objects would have a certain amount of resonance for the audience already. The particular political narratives and motives of the exhibition only heightened this. For these reasons the resonance of the chosen iconic objects had to create not only an idea of what these objects were and why they were important, but also that they deserved their own space of permanent display. Greenblatt might be echoing the subconscious desires of the exhibition designers when he says that ‘a resonant exhibition often pulls the viewer away from the celebration of isolated objects and towards a sense of implied, only half visible relationships and questions.’²⁹⁰ These questions, in the case of *The Wealth of a Nation*, were about the place of material history in the culture of a nation, and of the need for designated space to house such. They created this response in their viewers by manipulating the relationship between object and space within the temporary exhibition area, in such a way as to make thoughts about space and object persist after the visit was over.

The Space of the Nation

This account of the changing placements of the Monymusk Reliquary and the statue of St. Andrew help to illustrate the power of space in determining the story that objects can tell. Space was used in *Wealth of a Nation*, as well as in almost all museum exhibitions, to help heighten the messages of the curatorial narrative. Given all that has been said about the political missions of the exhibitions, it is understandable that the exhibit designers would use every possible tool to create the right atmosphere in the exhibition.

²⁹⁰ Ibid. 45.

The emphasis in the campaign for a new museum - from the *St. Andrew: Will He Ever See the Light?* pamphlet through *The Wealth of a Nation* - was on the sheer numbers of artefacts that were important to a full understanding of Scottish history and culture, and that were not being displayed effectively, safely, or at all in the existing National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Again and again artefacts were linked to national identity, and care of artefacts to care of the nation. The exhibition catalogue began with this impassioned commentary:

For the real resources of a nation are its people; and the story of that people is uttered through what they have left of themselves to posterity, the material of their culture, to be unearthed by the archaeologist, cherished by the antiquarian and illuminated by the scholar. It's not artefacts that make a nation; but it is the artefacts made by people and for people that speak most clearly of the quality of people and provide tangible expressions of the qualities that have made Scotland the nation she is.²⁹¹

The subtext here is that without the artefacts, the objects of history, it would be impossible to tell what Scotland is or was as a nation. Through this rhetoric the importance of the objects to the nation was established. Next on the agenda was to foreground the idea of the sheer number of crucial objects that there were in the collections. This was done deftly by saying that

The National Museums of Scotland have the finest and most extensive collections of Scottish material in existence. These collections form a marvellous treasury of Scotland's past, held in trust for the nation. The function of a great national museum is to preserve and elucidate and present to the world that heritage of the land, that patrimony of the intellect; for these collections form the landscapes of the past that it is the business of the museum to map.²⁹²

Through these two sections of book text it is easy to see how the exhibition curators created a climate in which issues of nation, artefact, and space could and would be discussed. However, space played a role that was not merely confined to theoretical discussions. Space was very consciously engineered to create certain feelings and impressions within the exhibition hall and the text of the exhibition narrative.

²⁹¹ Magnusson, "Foreword." vii.

²⁹² Ibid.

The curators of *The Wealth of a Nation* – David Bryden, David Caldwell, and Geoff Swinney – and their designers used space, or the lack thereof, to their advantage. They sought to create an illusion of an overflowing abundance of objects with little or no space between them. One case, called the ‘Cornucopia’, held a treasure-chest overflowing with silver and gemstones, along with a stuffed magpie with a gem in its beak. The intended message was that while the museum possessed a large number of treasures, it was not merely a magpie collecting glittering goods. Rather, the case was meant to create a view of the museum as a place where treasure was collected and framed as of importance to the nation – changing treasure into wealth.²⁹³ This aesthetic and message suited the purpose of the exhibition – showing as it did that these objects needed more space so that they could be displayed better. The head designer of the exhibition, James Simpson, is said to have deliberately crowded cases with objects and restricted the ease of travel through the area in order to heighten the visitor’s consciousness of the amount of objects and lack of space.²⁹⁴ This is completely different to how things are displayed in most exhibitions, but in this context the use of space added another layer of meaning onto the experience. It led the viewer through the stunning myriad of objects held by the National Museums of Scotland, while asking them to think widely about the role of museums and their collections within the nation, rather than about the specific details of particular artefacts.

Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution had also taken this approach, though the motives were different. Both shows were aiming not to tell just one story about their nation or their collections, but rather to showcase just how many stories could be told by the collected artefacts. Cases at the centre of the exhibition space focussed directly on this, by displaying not only objects but also the material used by curators to prepare them for display, and some of the academic papers that had come out of research into natural history sections of the collections. The idea was balance the glittery wealth of the nation shown in the Cornucopia display with the more understated, but no less important, role that national collections could hold in

²⁹³ Comments from Geoff Swinney, 7 February 2009.

²⁹⁴ In Wright, "Making a Point About Penury."

international scholarly networks.²⁹⁵ Robert Anderson, Museum Director, also stressed the profound and thoughtful nature of attending an exhibition, with statements to the press that framed the exhibition as an intellectual exercise, saying that

Exhibitions like *The Wealth of a Nation* can be used to illustrate national history, to tell a story. But we must be careful not to trivialise what museums are. They are serious places with serious things which can teach the public about the past.²⁹⁶

However, he also emphasised more casual learning, saying that the exhibition ‘offers the visitor an opportunity to look with fresh eyes at the vitality and creativity of human societies, past and present.’²⁹⁷ While this statement avoids any mention of what society it is that the exhibition sought to present, at other times the Director consciously framed the show as integral to Scotland. When he claimed that ‘We [the curators at NMS] want to stimulate thought about the national collections as an invaluable resource for Scotland and see how different objects can be said to reflect the nation’s wealth’²⁹⁸ he could have been quoting from that other temporary exhibition – *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution*. Thus, although the differences in the two exhibitions have been already discussed and remain valid, it is worthwhile reflecting for a minute on the similarities between them, and what that could mean for national museums, artefacts, and identity.

Temporary Nations

What does it mean for a nation to be represented in miniature, during a temporary exhibition? How is it that objects can come to hold the meaning of something much larger? About 260 artefacts were present during *Treasures from the Smithsonian*. Over 500 made it into *The Wealth of a Nation*. Do the sheer numbers of

²⁹⁵ Comments by Geoff Swinney, 7 February 2009. Also Jenni Calder, ed., *The Wealth of A Nation in the National Museums of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1989). 128-129.

²⁹⁶ In Barbara Buchan, "The Director Has a Dream," *The Edinburgh Evening News* 2 June 1989.

²⁹⁷ In Rena Boyd, "Riches of Scotland: Capitol Exhibits Nation's Wealth," *Edinburgh Evening News* 20 January 1989.

²⁹⁸ In Lockerbie, "A Proud Nation Prepares to Show Off Its Treasures."

objects tell us anything about the nations involved? The smaller amount of items in the earlier exhibition had been made to speak about a much larger nation, although they did not attempt to create the same type of exhaustive narrative that would cover the whole of the nation and its history. Objects are, of course, naturally multivocalic. Material culture history differs from textual history in this way, simply because the historical object can tell more than one story. Texts can of course be interpreted in varying ways depending on the viewpoint of their reader and the context in which they are deconstructed. However, they are seen to be more limited – the casual viewer will take the text as fixed and static, but will be more open to seeing multiple stories in the objects. Though one story will be privileged because of its placement on artefact labels, visitors may or may not choose to read the text, and instead will see in the object the story that they prefer. We have seen how curators and exhibition designers can use the actual multivocality of the objects in order to create various narratives with the same objects in different contexts. The public, though, also use the multivocality of objects. Audience surveys routinely highlight the fact that visitors rarely interpret the artefacts on display in the way that the curators intended them. Exhibitions are read by visitors, and each visitor and each time period will create different visions of the object on display. The objects selected and the museum professionals who put them on display produce the knowledge in the exhibition space, but it is consumed by the viewer – and the knowledge produced does not exactly mirror the kinds of knowledge consumed.²⁹⁹

The resulting interpretation [of the displayed artefacts] arises not from the objects as such; it arises from the meeting between the objects and the mind of the viewer. The interpretation, therefore, is not the true meaning of the object, it is an individual's construction of its meaning, and so, strictly, an illusion created so that it fits into our individual imaginative world.³⁰⁰

This process of production and consumption is prevalent throughout museum and gallery spaces and forms a critical part of the theoretical literature on the subject.³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ See work such as Eileen Hooper-Greenfield, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London, 1992). and the education section of MacDonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*. for more on the interplay between visitor impressions and curatorial intent.

³⁰⁰ Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections*. 220.

The process of production and consumption of knowledge becomes more noticeable, and more fraught, however, in the space of the temporary exhibition. Because of the limited number of objects available for display and the limited time in which it will be available to visitors, as well as the weight of expectations and narratives placed on them, issues of how the objects are presented and how the experience is framed for the audience become even more critical than usual. Whereas in the permanent exhibits iconic objects can be interspersed with smaller objects that serve more to reinforce the points already made than to speak loudly on their own, the temporary exhibition needs only the clearest of icons in order to support the narratives presented. Just as the Smithsonian exhibition designers selected each object because of its place in American history and culture, so that it could best help them create a limited version of their nation, the *Wealth of a Nation* curators had to comb through the collections to choose things that spoke of Scotland the nation and of the wealth of its material history. These missions and the nature of their display space meant that the iconic value of the objects used was heightened. However, it was not only the exhibition itself that created narratives around *The Wealth of a Nation*. There were other forms of narration and story telling being presented to the public in tandem with the show, and each of those shows another aspect of the exhibition, its social and temporal context, and the tensions it had to navigate. While one primary focus of the exhibition was to show the scope and importance of the collections in Scotland to an audience in an aesthetically-pleasing way, it also had to be seen to fail at this mission. To be too successful would have negated its political aims of exerting pressure for a new museum. This central dilemma between display and politics coloured many of the exhibition's forms and contents.³⁰²

The Narratives of the Nation

Spatial and contextual manipulation of objects allows curators to create an artefactual narrative within exhibition space. This type of narrative exists both in temporary and permanent exhibitions, though it is perhaps more noticeable in the

³⁰¹ See for instance Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice trans. (London, 1984).

³⁰² Comments from Geoff Swinney, 7 February 2009.

limited space and time of the temporary show. These narratives do not just spring into being of their own accord, but rather are constructed purposely by exhibition designers and curators. These professionals create a story much as writers do, but in place of words and paragraphs, museum narratives are built out of objects, display cases, and explanatory panels. A handbook on how to create temporary exhibitions tells curators that ‘Preparing an exhibition is a lot more than simply gathering together several objects and placing them in a pleasing arrangement. When selecting your own things, ask the question: *What do I wish to accomplish?*’ [original emphasis].³⁰³ Even once the objects are selected there is a great deal of manipulation that takes place to create the correct feelings, storylines, and spaces.

Designing museums exhibitions is the art and science of arranging the visual, spatial, and material elements of an environment into a composition that visitors move through. This is done to accomplish pre-established goals. The presentation of exhibitions in museums should never be haphazard or left to chance.³⁰⁴

Usually, though, a visitor will be unaware of the exact constructed nature of the three-dimensional text in a museum, as they have been socially conditioned to see museums as the holders of ‘truth’, and to think of objects as silent testaments to the things which they have seen over their material lives.

Visitors, too, as we have seen, create their own narratives in the museum. Although the ‘serendipitous discovery’ philosophy of architectural firm Benson + Forsyth created difficulties in the creation of the Museum of Scotland,³⁰⁵ it also has a certain amount of merit. Even in a very regimented space it is impossible to completely dictate what a visitor will look at, in what order, and how they will choose to interpret what they see. This is as true with the mass of objects in an exhibition as it is with the individual ‘object reading’ that was discussed above. Thus, there is any number of individual narratives coming out of the exhibition space to complement or challenge the curatorial one.

³⁰³ Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, *Good Show!* 3.

³⁰⁴ David Dean, *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* (London, 1994). 32.

³⁰⁵ As was discussed in detail in the first chapter.

However, these object- and space-based narratives that rely on the arrangement of artefacts in a particular space are not the only ones to circulate around a temporary exhibition. The exhibition catalogue is a critical and usually omnipresent component of any exhibition. Historically, exhibition catalogues took the place of object labels, and were carried through the museum by visitors so that they could refer to them for more information as they gazed at any particular object.³⁰⁶ Now, though, they are more important as a commodity than as useful guide. They serve as a source of income for the museum, allowing them to profit from what can often be the expensive undertaking of creating and mounting an exhibition, and also take on iconic value of their own as status objects that can represent the owner's sophistication or cultural value.

What a catalogue does most clearly, though, is provide a different sort of narrative take on the exhibition.³⁰⁷ Transferring the exhibition experience to text produces a distorted version of the experience, allowing both clarification and obscuring of the information presented there as it moves into the new two-dimensional form. The multivocality of objects – their ability to tell more than one story at a time, depending on how they are framed and presented or read – is necessarily flattened in a written text. Only one interpretation is available to the reader of a catalogue, whereas individual visitors to an exhibition can, as aforementioned, construct their own personal vision of the object and its story outside of the narrative given in the space.

However, at the same time as narrowing the scopes of narrative temporary exhibitions also widen its path. There is more focus on individual objects in temporary exhibition catalogues than in any other form of museum literature. It is one of the few places in which specific objects are given as much attention as the history of the whole institution. The objects are the focus of a temporary exhibition, instead of merely being an ancillary feature – which is how they are often treated in guidebooks, press releases, or histories of the museum. However, there are two ways

³⁰⁶ Kenneth Hudson, *A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought* (London, 1975).

³⁰⁷ Peter Vergo, "The Reticent Object," in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London, 1989). 50.

in which objects can be presented in catalogues. Echoing the dilemma of narrative form in the creation of the Museum of Scotland, catalogues can use objects to either illustrate a story or to tell one of their own. The American exhibition had chosen to use the objects pictured in that catalogue as attractive additions to the complete story of America being laid out in the text. The *Wealth of a Nation* catalogue, conversely, had few narrative essays, and fewer still that dealt with the history of the nation. Instead, the bulk of the book/catalogue was made up of short essays on the state of material culture and museums in Scotland, and then an indexed list of all the objects featured in the exhibition, arranged by type and with scientific and catalogue data included.³⁰⁸ In this way the catalogue was more an encyclopaedia of Scottish material culture than a history of Scotland contained in the artistic medium of an exhibition catalogue. This mirrors a larger split in the creation of exhibition catalogues, and one that will be returned to in greater depth in the next chapter. In the particular case of *The Wealth of a Nation*, though, the design of the catalogue reflected the missions of the exhibition itself – to showcase the objects of Scottish significance in all their multitude, to an audience made up largely of those who already would have known the bigger contextual history. The objects in the exhibition, as in the catalogue, were meant to be important as and for themselves, without any need to be explained.

Some objects, however, can gain a considerable amount of aura and importance when they are explained and situated in context. We have seen this to be the case with the Monymusk Reliquary, where its story was entirely changed depending on the context in which it was seen. It is not always such a noticeable re-situation of aura that comes with contextualisation, but rather a subtle enhancement of something that is independently of aesthetic or historical value. When given its correct framing and history these objects can become even more important for the temporary exhibition, and for the museum in which it will reside permanently. This can be seen in the story of another ‘star’ iconic object from *The Wealth of a Nation*. In this case, the historical research that proved the object’s provenance managed to tie it both to an iconic individual, but also to past incarnations of Scotland the

³⁰⁸ Calder, ed., *The Wealth of A Nation*.

Nation, which heightened the object's presence and story in the more modern time of the temporary exhibition.

Proving the National

Stories about the identity of objects and their provenance can be complex. On one hand they enhance the aura of the artefact by providing the solid veneer of authenticity. However, as was seen in the case of the Monymusk Reliquary, they are sometimes hard to prove, even when they have persisted for decades and centuries. In the 1960s it came to the attention of the National Museum of Antiquities and the Royal Museum that there was a silver canteen set supposedly connected to the Stuart dynasty. Christie's sold it on 20 March 1963 for £7,200. At the time of the sale, the object was framed and presented in tandem with a story about the canteen, and who and what it has witnessed in its life. This story, while intriguing and embedded within historical detail, was not accepted as a true and authentic provenance.

The unofficial narrative said that in 1740 a Scottish Jacobite family had commissioned the Edinburgh Jacobite silversmith Ebenezer Oliphant to make a gift for the twenty-first birthday of Prince Charles Edward Stuart. Oliphant made a canteen picnic set, intended to be used when travelling or hunting. It included two beakers, two sets of cutlery, a combined corkscrew and nutmeg grinder for the preparation of spiced wine, a teaspoon that doubled as a marrow-scoop, and a little container for various condiments [image 3.23]. All of this could fit into the highly decorated outer case, with a little dram cup that attached to the lid. Oliphant probably only made the outer case and beakers, and then fitted in other pre-made objects into the green velvet covered organiser. When the canteen was completed in 1741 it was sent to Rome with one of the many nobles and messengers that went frequently back and forth between the courts at the time. The narrative goes on to say that the Prince was very pleased with his gift, and he brought it with him when he landed in Scotland in 1745 to stake his claim for the throne. The Jacobite cause did well, only to then be pushed back and suffer a massive defeat on the fields of Culloden in April 1746. The Prince managed to escape the carnage of the battle and its aftermath, but had to flee without any of his baggage. Hanoverian troops ransacked the carriages that had been left behind, finding the canteen and passing it along to the commander

of the loyalist forces, the Duke of Cumberland. Cumberland gave it to George Keppel, Lord Bury, his aide-de-camp, as a payment for loyal service both during the battle and afterwards, when he was sent to London to spread the word of victory.³⁰⁹

This was the story with which the object was presented for sale in 1963. There were some historically proven parts to the narrative. Lord Bury later became the third Earl of Albemarle, and the canteen remained a family heirloom for many years. It was mentioned in the will of George Thomas, 6th Earl of Albemarle, on 17th May 1888 as

The silver bowl and cover and travelling case of Prince Charles Stuart the Pretender, found in his tent at Culloden and given immediately after the battle by his royal highness the Duke of Cumberland to his aide-de-camp George Viscount Bury, afterwards 3rd Earl of Albemarle.³¹⁰

The canteen continued in the hands of the Albemarle family for two centuries, occasionally being loaned out for exhibit, but mostly remaining a family object, albeit one with a celebrated history.³¹¹ In 1963, as mentioned above, it was exhibited at Christie's as part of their 'Royal Gifts' sale. The Trustees of the National Museum of Antiquities tried then to acquire it, but failed due to lack of funds. Instead, it went to a Scottish collector, and then continued to bounce between collectors for some years, largely staying in Scotland.³¹²

With its removal from the Albemarle family, though, the canteen seems to have lost some of its history as well, at least briefly. In 1967 the Royal Scottish Museum organised an exhibit titled *Treasures from Scottish Houses* for the twenty-first Edinburgh International Festival. In the catalogue the canteen, on loan from Honourable Alan Mackay of Enterkine, was described as nothing more than 'Camp

³⁰⁹ Interview with George Dalgleish.

³¹⁰ Will of George Thomas 6th Earl of Albemarle, 17th May 1888, in the files of George Dalgleish, National Museum of Scotland.

³¹¹ The canteen was shown publicly three times before its sale: London 1931, Loan Exhibit of Scottish Art; London 1939, Royal Academy Exhibition of Scottish Art; Edinburgh 1949, Royal Stuart Exhibition. Cited in George Dalgleish, "The Silver Travelling Canteen of Prince Charles Edward Stuart," in *Food, Drink, and Travelling Accessories: Essays in Honour of Gosta Berg*, ed. Alexander Fenton and Janken Myrdal (Edinburgh, 1988).

³¹² This narrative is most clearly set out in Dalgleish's essay cited above.

Canteen, Scottish (Edinburgh), 1740-1741.³¹³ The detailed specification of the appearance and contents of the canteen made clear that it was the one formerly belonging to the Albemarle, but absolutely no mention was made of any links, supposed or actual, with the Stuarts, Culloden, or even the Albemarle family. The presence of the object had taken over any larger stories that it might have been held to tell, though Christie's had been very willing to tell those stories to push a Scottish sale, and others had long told the stories in order to ground themselves in where they were and what they had done historically.

This case highlights the ambiguities of provenance, its necessity, and its institutional use. In the modern museum context, objects are expected to have provable and authentic provenances. Having these gives the artefact the legitimacy it needs to be worthy of a place in the museum. This was not always the case. Earlier collectors such as William Hamilton, John Soane and Walter Scott bestowed authority on their objects merely by having them. The presence of the object in the collections of these great men was proof enough that they were what they said they were.³¹⁴ Authenticity, then, is not a static truth but rather something that changes over time. Provenance, which now has to be 'proven' with documentation and scientific tests, used to be a matter of word of mouth. Cultural theorist Dean MacCannell believes that the establishment of proven authenticity is one of the ways in which the modern world enshrines its objects, and thus sets them apart from the life of the ordinary. This has to happen prior to what he calls the *naming phase* of the sacralisation process. Before an object can be sacralised, or given the legitimacy to be placed in a museum, it must be authenticated.

...a great deal of work goes into the authentication of the candidate for sacralization. Objects are x-rayed, baked, photographed with special equipment and examined by experts. Reports are filed testifying to the object's aesthetic, historical, monetary, recreational and social values.³¹⁵

³¹³ *Treasures from Scottish Houses: Twenty-first Edinburgh International Festival, Royal Scottish Museum Edinburgh, August-September 1967, (Edinburgh, 1967).* object number 204.

³¹⁴ See Ian Jenkins, and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection* (London, 1996).

³¹⁵ MacCannell, *The Tourist*. 44.

The object that fails these tests – that is deemed inauthentic – is immediately considered less valuable, if it is worth anything at all. If a museum is ‘caught’ displaying an inauthentic piece then some of its credibility and legitimacy as an institution of history is tarnished. Because museums are expected to preserve and display the authentic, the presence of the inauthentic damages the mission of the whole. However, overtly commercial enterprises such as the auction-house are not seen as this same type of mediator for truth. Thus, Christie’s could frame the canteen set using the story from the Albemarle family, even though it was not authenticated through the normal processes of provenance, which at that time would have focussed mostly on a paper trail of documentation through the centuries. Four years later, though, the museum context in which the canteen was displayed had to opt for a more cautious framing and strict view of authentication, to avoid any criticism. What was authentic in the auction was not so in the space of a temporary exhibition.

The familial narrative that linked Ebenezer Oliphant, the canteen, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, and the Earl of Albemarle would not disappear forever though. It would return, and be better documented, but simultaneously new questions would be raised – this time about the one part of the story that seemed never to have been doubted; the essential Scottishness of the artefact. The canteen was put up for sale again in 1984, this time by a dealer who wanted to export it to a collector in America. He approached the museum before finalising the deal, however, to give them the opportunity to match the offer he had, and thus to secure the canteen for display in Scotland. Museum resources were immediately mobilised to prevent the canteen from leaving the country, applying for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and other sources.

However, doubts had come up about the exact provenance of the artefact. If it was not what it claimed to be, was it really worth ‘saving’ for the nation? Sceptics had even begun to doubt that the canteen could possibly have been made in Scotland. They pointed primarily to the decoration on the exterior cover of the canteen. It is lushly ‘chased’ in the rococo style, covered with engravings of thistles, a medal of Saint Andrew, the Prince of Wales feathers, and other iconography. Supporters of the canteen-as-Jacobite-relic story saw these designs as proof of the connection with the Stuart dynasty. The decoration and symbolism was a sign of who Charles Edward

was thought to be. The Collar of the Thistle was bestowed on him when he was young, as was the designation as the Prince of Wales and the Saint Andrew medal that depicted the Order of the Thistle. The decoration of the canteen was not meant just to look attractive, but also to send a message of identity and belonging, telegraphing both what the giver of the gift valued and what the recipient was meant to embody.³¹⁶

However, to other observers it was this very decoration that proved that the canteen could not be authentic, either as a piece of Jacobite history or as a noted example of Scottish silver making. The rococo art of chasing was not believed to be well known or well developed in Scotland at the time, and conventional wisdom in the 1980s held that the style, while long-practiced in France, did not become truly widespread in Britain until the Victorian period. Its presence on the canteen meant, to many, that it could not truly be a Scottish object of the 1740s, and therefore could not have any links with Prince Charles Edward Stuart, and was not worth a large campaign to raise the £145,000 necessary to procure it for the Museum. Even the public got into the debate, as can be witnessed in the letters section of the *Times*. On the first of November 1984, the newspaper ran a letter from a Miss Judith Bannister, who said that ‘I do not believe that any silver chaser of 1740, either in Edinburgh or in London, would have treated the decoration in so typical a Victorian manner.’ She then continued, theorising that a more obvious course of reasoning would be that it was ‘being later decorated in retrospective and nostalgic honour of the Young Pretender.’³¹⁷ This appeared to be the general consensus. When the National Museums of Scotland appealed to the National Heritage Memorial Fund for help raising the purchase price, the fund responded with a list of detailed reservations about the authentication. Could a Scottish craftsman really have made something that was so unlike that which was being produced by English silversmiths at the same time?

³¹⁶ Interview with George Dalgleish, also Dalgleish, "The Silver Travelling Canteen of Prince Charles Edward Stuart.", George Dalgleish and Henry Steuart Fotheringham, *Silver: Made in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2008).

³¹⁷ both quotes from Letters, Miss Judith Bannister, *The Times* 11 January 1984.

Research into the nature of silversmith training in the eighteenth century, links between Jacobite networks in Scotland and France, and detailed examination of the object in question were all undertaken in an effort to prove the authenticity of the icon. In the end the Heritage Lottery Fund was presented with a letter of rebuttal by curators, former curators, and the director of the Museum, as well as experts from the Victoria and Albert Museum. This said that the new research had proven that Edinburgh silversmiths were often in receipt of training from France that exposed them to skills and styles that England did not see until much later. Ebenezer Oliphant, being a known sympathiser with the Jacobite cause, was more likely was usual in the craft to have had these connections, given the Stewart dynasty's relationship with France. This, along with documentary evidence from the Albemarle family and other chroniclers of Culloden, made it extremely likely that the canteen had an authentic provenance as a relic of the Bonnie Prince. With this proof and the support it brought from the Lottery Fund, the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland was able to appeal for the withholding of an export licence, stopping the sale of the canteen abroad. This gave them time to launch a successful public campaign to 'save it [the canteen] for the Scottish people'³¹⁸ Finally it was purchased, and its first major public viewing was in *The Wealth of a Nation*, where it was presented both as an important relic of the Jacobites and as a detailed example of Edinburgh silver manufacture.³¹⁹ It was especially suited for display in the temporary exhibition, as the campaign for its purchase had already drawn attention to issues such as the dispersal of 'Scottish treasures' outside the nation and the need to preserve these important objects for the public. All these ideas were central to the narratives of *The Wealth of the Nation*, and the way in which they could be 'read' in the canteen strengthened their potency and added a veneer of immediacy to the project.

The canteen is now displayed as the centrepiece of the Museum's exhibit on the Jacobites and Culloden, and considered the most important of all the relics and

³¹⁸ George Dalgleish and Dallas Mehan, eds., *I am Come Home': Treasures of Prince Charles Edward Stuart* (Edinburgh, 1985).6.

³¹⁹ See Calder, ed., *The Wealth of A Nation*. Pages 36 (for Jacobite overtones) and 73 (for silver).

personal possessions of Prince Charlie.³²⁰ Potential narratives about the artefact as an important piece of Edinburgh silver, or as proof of artistic and trade links between Scotland and France, have to be left to other, more specific, temporary exhibitions. In the permanent galleries of the Museum of Scotland it is part of the story of the Scottish nation as a whole, and thus its Jacobite narrative is foregrounded.

The Monymusk Reliquary, statue of St. Andrew, and canteen set can all be easily understood as ‘treasures’ of the nation. They are all old, rare, and associated with important and heroic figures from the Scottish past. Many of the other objects in *The Wealth of the Nation* were less obviously tied to the nation, even as curatorial staff included them in the narratives of the show. Modern objects, such as specially commissioned outfit of tweed made in 1985,³²¹ were displayed, as were selections of twentieth-century glassware.³²² Paintings and historic photographs shared space with art tapestries, fossils, and semi-precious stones. While discussing the Transport collection the exhibition book/catalogue made a statement that could apply more widely to the whole show: that ‘the bulk of the material has a Scottish provenance although manufactured elsewhere’.³²³ What defined the majority of the objects in *The Wealth of the Nation* was a less-definable ‘Scottish provenance’ than that which was seen in the iconic objects profiled above. However, the important idea for the narrative of the show was about the spread and scope of objects held by the National Museums of Scotland, from which the individual Scottishness of each artefact could be assumed. Because of this expansive nature the catalogue from *The Wealth of a Nation* is still often cited as a comprehensive look at the national collections, giving it a life above and beyond that of most more ephemeral temporary exhibition catalogues.

Most temporary exhibitions are mounted to attract new and diverse audiences to the museum.³²⁴ They also serve to cast the permanent exhibitions in new light, and

³²⁰ Dalgleish and Mehan, eds., *I am Come Home': Treasures of Prince Charles Edward Stuart*. 3.

³²¹ Calder, ed., *The Wealth of A Nation*. 70.

³²² Ibid. 83, 104.

³²³ Ibid. 180.

³²⁴ Interview with Catherine Holden, NMS Director of Marketing.

to give new narratives a chance to be explored. *The Wealth of a Nation* did all this, and also much more. Because of its political and social mission to change the way that the material culture history of Scotland from ancient times to the present was displayed and thought of, it took on a more significant role than other temporary exhibitions. The next chapters will profile several temporary exhibitions that hew more closely to the common understanding of the temporary exhibition model. In this, they mirror the ‘nation within a nation’ idea first seen in *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution*. However, due to the very different social and political context in which they were displayed, these more recent shows served to highlight aspects of their nations, and Scotland, that were not seen in the 1980s.

2005 & 2006

Forging New Links:
*The Hermitage Exhibitions –
 Nicholas and Alexandra and Beyond the Palace Walls*

The Wealth of a Nation paved the way for the creation of the Museum of Scotland, which allowed for the establishment of a new object-centred narrative of Scottish history. However, this focus on the home nation did not mean that museums in Scotland became introspective. The International Festival remained a time for the National Museums of Scotland to emphasise its connections with other large institutions, and to host exhibitions that framed its permanent collections in new ways. Earlier shows had relied on the unilateral narratives of one institution, even as these nations were displayed in a new space. However, more collaborative temporary exhibitions allowed new storylines to emerge, which were not native to either of the partner museums and would not exist without the moment in time when the new display was created. It was this sort of new narrative, produced in partnership with a new type of museum, which came to the National Museum of Scotland in 2005 and 2006.

The institutions that had first generated temporary exhibitions in Scotland were explicitly national museums – ones whose guiding narratives were of the history of the nation and its objects. This, however, is not the only possible format for a large museum. There is also the type that some scholars of museum studies have termed ‘universal survey’ institutions.³²⁵ Their collections hold a representative

³²⁵ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3 (1980).

sample of art and objects from across the world, and signal national identity through displays of power, rather than displays of national events or personages. Treasures of acknowledged universal importance thus stand to represent the relative power of the displaying nation, and make statements on their taste and sense of civilisation. The iconic objects held in these institutions differ from the ones already profiled as they do not attempt to represent a story of national history. Instead, their aura is all about the power of the icon to transgress national boundaries and speak to all of human history. Institutions such as the British Museum and the Louvre hold collections of these universal icons of culture, which are expected to resonate with audiences regardless of their particular nationality.

Universal or not, museums are all national in location, as they are all situated in a particular state, and in most cases were established with significant government help. Ernest Gellner and other theorists of the modernist strand of nationalism studies would remind us that the boundaries of ‘state’ and ‘nation’ are often far from congruent.³²⁶ Nonetheless, state institutions such as museums are expected to represent the nation in the public consciousness. By their very presence, national museums elide the difference between nation and state, creating as they do so a unitary identity, where a perhaps-conflicted identity can be clarified and set into the very stones of the buildings.³²⁷

So far in this analysis, most attention has been given to Scotland as the home of a national museum. However, the Royal Museum of Scotland, though connected physically and institutionally to the new Museum of Scotland and falling under the larger umbrella of the National Museums of Scotland is closer to a universal survey museum than an explicitly national one.³²⁸ It was inspired by the Great Exhibition of 1851, where many Scottish industrial products had been shown, and was initially called the Industrial Museum of Scotland.³²⁹ It included substantial natural history

³²⁶ For more on this see for example Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Also Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*.

³²⁷ For more on this idea, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Chapter 10.

³²⁸ Issues of naming are very complex, and will be more clearly addressed in chapter 6. I am using what was the common naming practice for each institution and organisation at the time in which the chapter is set.

³²⁹ Waterston, *Collections in Context*. 87.

collections, and was, a decade after its founding, further expanded by being renamed the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art.³³⁰ In 1904 it became the Royal Scottish Museum, by which point it encompassed artefacts from natural history, ethnography, and many other disciplines. It had no one overarching narrative, and was not concerned with the particular history of the nation. This universal identity remained and was even strengthened after the creation of the Museum of Scotland. Anything not directly related to the history of Scotland in the collections of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland had been transferred to the depositories of the Royal Scottish Museum, and vice versa, after the 1985 formation of the National Museums of Scotland. By the opening of the Museum of Scotland in 1998 this universal/national spilt had been embedded in the stones of the new dual building, with the motto 'The World to Scotland –Scotland to the World' carved into the threshold between the old museum building which housed what was by then known as the Royal Museum and the new Museum of Scotland.

It was in the space of the Royal Museum that most temporary exhibitions have been held, but it is the story of the particular nations involved that have been the central focus. A pair of temporary exhibitions in 2005 and 2006 came to Scotland from The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, an institution that has similar tensions between the national and the universal. The collaboration created new storylines for both host and loan museum that called upon their dual identities, and allowed interesting new narrative features to emerge that spoke not only of the two nations involved, but of more universal themes as well.

Establishing links with large museums such as the Hermitage can be extremely beneficial for a smaller partner institution. However, it can also be useful for the larger museum, providing a way to reinterpret itself and break out of old stereotypes, as well as providing an opportunity to re-evaluate their collections and narratives. Because of the level of expectations placed on them, the large iconic institutions often have less scope to change their exhibitions, reinterpret their collections, or try something new. The visitor to this type of institution expects certain things, and to see them in a certain context. The British Museum could not

³³⁰ Ibid. 102, 124.

just place the Elgin Marbles in any ordinary exhibit room, interspersed with other objects of antiquity. The public expects them to be special, and so they must be framed as such. They also have to be easily accessible to the audience, not demanding too much self-direction from the majority of the visitors that are going primarily to see them.³³¹

This issue of the framing of the iconic object within an iconic space will be addressed at greater length further on, but it is worth considering briefly here. At points in their history certain institutions become associated with particular iconic objects. The museum can then heighten the implicit aura of these objects by framing them differently for the larger expected audience. Within this sacred and delineated space, then, the aura and power of the iconic object grows merely because it has been set apart from the ‘regular’ museum artefacts. Thus a cycle of iconicity is created, from which it is nearly impossible to break, especially in the current climate of the heritage sector, where ‘audience response’ seems to be the guiding principle. If the visitor demands it, the museum must to some extent give into their expectations.³³² Temporary exhibitions can reinforce these expectations in their narratives, in crowd-pleasing shows such as that of the terracotta army at the British Museum, but they can also challenge them, providing an opportunity to try out new narratives, with new icons, to new audiences.³³³

Making Contact, Building Bridges

Russia and Scotland would not at first glance seem to be the most obvious partners for a joint venture. Where the United States is a country of immigrants, many of whom claim and celebrate Scottish roots, Russia does not have that history. However, there have been many historic and cultural connections between the two

³³¹ Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: The Blockbuster Show.", David A. Garvin, "Blockbusters: The Economics of Mass Entertainment," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 5(1) (June 1981). 1-20.

³³² John Miller, "The Show You Love to Hate: A Psychology of the Mega-Exhibition," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Bruce W. Ferguson Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne (London, 1996). 269-274.

³³³ Books such as Sheila Watson, ed., *Museums and Their Communities* (London, 2007). cover the contested and sometimes controversial nature of recent temporary exhibitions.

countries. At the height of the Romantic era the poetry of Robert Burns and the novels of Walter Scott became fashionable in Russia, creating a strata of the Russian elite who glamorised the wild awesome landscapes of the Scottish Highlands.³³⁴ There were also many ties between the Russian ruling families and their counterparts in Britain, along with the many travellers, missionaries, soldiers and teachers from Scotland and Britain who lived and worked in Russia. These themes were highlighted in the catalogue and advertising material for both of the temporary exhibitions.³³⁵ What were less well explained were the larger contemporaneous global and societal contexts that shaped the connections between the two nations and their museums.

Though the court of the Tsars had been internationally focussed and succeeding monarchs prided themselves on their familial and cultural ties to Western Europe, isolationism took hold with the rise of the Bolsheviks. This inward vision intensified and persisted throughout the Soviet era. But, with the fall of the Communist state in the 1990s, bridges to the West were recreated. In decades where the political and economic structure of Russia was struggling to find stability, cultural outreach focussed international attention on the rich history of the county, rather than on the more difficult current situations. Given all this, as well as the detailed themes of the two exhibitions to be mounted, the connection between the Hermitage and the museum in Scotland come to seem clearer. It was a way to re-establish and reemphasise ties between two cultures that were formerly close, and to do it in a way that would be of benefit to two separate museum institutions. For the National Museums of Scotland it was a way to raise its profile both within and without the UK and to attract new visitors.³³⁶ For the Hermitage it was a way to reframe parts of the collections while exposing itself to an audience outside Russia.

³³⁴ Gleb Struve, "Russian Friends and Correspondents of Sir Walter Scott," *Comparative Literature* 2(4) (Autumn 1950).

³³⁵ *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum*, (Edinburgh, 2006), *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*, (Edinburgh, 2005).

³³⁶ Interview with Catherine Holden, NMS Director of Marketing.

The State Hermitage Museum has been open to the public in some form since 1714,³³⁷ though most sources date it only from Empress Catherine II's purchase of its first substantial collection in 1764.³³⁸ It has existed in many different locations and forms over the centuries, and now takes up the entirety of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, formerly one of the homes of the Tsars. The Hermitage is of the same universal spread and international calibre as the Louvre as a museum of art history. It also contains historical objects, as does the Louvre, but in both cases the art triumphs in the public vision of the museum's role.

However, in 2004 several curators and members of staff at the Royal Museum approached their colleagues at the Hermitage about mounting a series of exhibitions in Edinburgh that would highlight some of these lesser-known parts of the State Hermitage collections, and thus would expose the depths of the Hermitage's collections beyond iconic pieces of art. These exhibitions would take advantage of the summer Festival season in Edinburgh, and the added publicity gained by an international spectacle of rarely seen objects would hopefully be a blockbuster, of benefit to both associated institutions.³³⁹

The 'blockbuster' exhibition relies on a near-perfect convergence of subject matter, style of presentation, and timing, as well as a smattering of luck. The work put into creating 'hype' around the exhibition is always important, and the Edinburgh International Festival provides more than enough media and public relations coverage to create a certain level of excitement, and capture audience attention. While a museum can never be entirely sure of creating a blockbuster, there are certain things that can be done to make the outcome more likely.

Primary among these is the selection of subject. Something that fires the imagination with grand sweeping narratives, and that is also well established in public consciousness is a good starting point. If it can possibly include the universally titillating themes of opulence, death, and mystery, it is likely to succeed.

³³⁷ Geraldine Norman, *The Hermitage: The Biography of a Great Museum* (London, 1997). 11.

³³⁸ This is the official date given on the Hermitage website timeline, <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/05/hm5_1.html>

³³⁹ "Nicholas and Alexandra," *NMS Explore: The Magazine for Supporters of NMS* Summer 2005. 6-7.

Like a novel or a film, museum visitors often see an exhibition as an escape from the reality of their lives. The extra-ordinary and the fantastic, the luxurious or the shocking are always attractive because they appeal to the emotions as well as the mind. This has always been the case, from the earliest proto-public museums, the cabinets of curiosity³⁴⁰ to the first ‘blockbuster exhibition’, that of the treasures of King Tut.³⁴¹ The recipe seems to ask for a representation of ubiquitous human values, added to the basic factors that create and emphasise the aura of museums and their objects at any time. In this way, a blockbuster can be seen as the distilled essence of what museum should strive to do more generally.

Nicholas and Alexandra

The first exhibition in the National Museums of Scotland-Hermitage collaboration, *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*, had in its very nature all the ingredients for a blockbuster. While the Russian state and the Soviet government largely put the tsarist history behind them for decades, the Western world remained fascinated with tales of tragic royalty, ill-fated opulence, and mysterious death, all of which were contained in the story of Russia’s doomed final rulers. Some scholars would reference the work of Edward Said and say that this interest is another facet of Western Orientalism as played out against the ‘exotic’ and ‘Eastern’.³⁴² To an extent this generalisation makes sense. Fascinations with Russia and the Imperial courts throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even later, had all the hallmarks of more classic Said-formulated Orientalism. There were the traveller’s accounts speaking of the richness and strange habits of the courts, as well as mentions of the Tsars as ‘Oriental despots’. However, I believe that to limit the discussion of the allure of Russian Imperial history to Orientalism is to ignore wider underlying issues such as the aspirational allure of luxury goods. The Imperial families of Russia were famously acquisitive, and employed large numbers of craftspeople to create new treasures for them, as well as inspiring others. The public has long been intrigued to see these sort of goods, especially if they had previously

³⁴⁰ c.f. Stewart, *On Longing*.

³⁴¹ Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: The Blockbuster Show."

³⁴² See more in Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1995 [1978]).

been hidden away in royal coffers. One has only to witness the queues at the crown jewel rooms of both the Tower of London and Edinburgh Castle to see that interest in the shiny artefacts of ruling families is driven by urges more universal than solely Orientalism.

To some extent this desire is why museums exist. In a time where very few can entertain like a Russian Tsar, all can at least see the luxury that once surrounded them. Treasure, riches, rarity – all are words of great power and mystique, as well as being words that are repeated over and over in the published catalogues and other publicity for temporary exhibitions. The close association of these types of descriptors with royal families, especially that of Russia, can help to explain why the Tsars are perennial favourites for various temporary exhibitions. Some are historically-focussed, such as *Nicholas and Alexandra*, and some are design-centred, such as *Magnificence of the Tsars*, an exhibition of Imperial costume at the Victoria and Albert Museum.³⁴³ However, the central storyline of these shows, no matter what discipline they are framed within, is that of the opulence and essential foreignness of the Tsars and their lifestyle.

The Russian Imperial court realised quite early on that accumulating luxurious and historically valued goods would increase the esteem in which they were held by their Western neighbours. Empress Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great, was the doyenne of this sort of thinking, and she has no qualms about opening the Imperial coffers for symbolic purchases like a 1,222 piece dining set from Wedgwood, each with different hand-painted views of Britain.³⁴⁴ This huge commission was displayed in London prior to being sent from the factory in 1774, and some pieces were also displayed in 1909, before returning for a major Wedgwood show at the Victoria and Albert Museum.³⁴⁵

Being able to make such a large purchase from Britain's pre-eminent designer, especially of items decorated with quintessentially British scenes, was important to Catherine, as she wanted to both impress other heads-of-state and also

³⁴³ That exhibition ran from 10 December 2008 – 29 March 2009.

<<http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/fashion/tsars/>>

³⁴⁴ Norman, *The Hermitage*. 35.

³⁴⁵ Hilary Young, *The Genius of Wedgwood* (London, 1995).

make her own courtiers closer to the British style.³⁴⁶ In addition to the Frog Service and several other Wedgwood commissions, Catherine also amassed a huge collection of European Art. The first purchase of paintings was the collection of Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky, a Prussian trader who was faced with bankruptcy. His collection included 317 paintings by Flemish and Dutch masters including 13 Rembrandts, 11 Rubens, and a Titian.³⁴⁷ In her lifetime she acquired 4,000 paintings,, 38,000 books, 10,000 engraved gems, 10,000 drawings, 16,000 coins and medals and a sizeable natural history collection.³⁴⁸

The original Hermitage was inspired by Peter the Great's trip to France, where he was much taken with Versailles and in particular the small house that Louis IV called his 'hermitage'. When Peter returned to Russia he built for himself the Peterhof, a model of Versailles complete with small 'hermitage' outbuilding.³⁴⁹ His descendant, the Empress Elizabeth, designed her palace, Tsarskoe Selo, after his designs, and also included a 'hermitage' - in this case a large Baroque dining room for private meals with her confidants and beautiful pictures on the wall.³⁵⁰ Following the tradition, when Catherine II had her own palace, the Winter Palace, she had a small addition put onto it, which she called 'her hermitage'.³⁵¹ This was both a place to put her treasures that were overflowing the rest of the Winter Palace, and interestingly, a guesthouse for Voltaire, one of Catherine's frequent correspondents, if he ever came to Russia.³⁵² Another major expansion, called the Old Hermitage, was built in 1770. By creating these treasure houses Catherine, herself an iconic personality who was well aware of the importance of creating a public persona, was helping to form the first strands of ornate mythology that would grow to encompass her ill-fated successor Nicholas II.

Nicholas II, the great-great-great-grandson of Catherine II, thus grew up in an environment full of the very best objects from across Europe, and naturally became

³⁴⁶ David Bindman, "The Genius of Wedgwood, London, Victoria and Albert Museum," *The Burlington Magazine* 137(1110) (1995). 635-657.

³⁴⁷ Norman, *The Hermitage*. 28-29.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 1-4.

³⁵⁰ Robert K. Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra* (New York, 1967). 111-112.

³⁵¹ Norman, *The Hermitage*. 36-37.

³⁵² Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*. 230.

accustomed to having gilded treasures all around him. It was these treasures of his reign, as well as his eventual tragic demise, that led to the positive reception that the exhibition received in Scotland.³⁵³ Bolshevik revolutionaries shot Nicholas, his wife Alexandra, their four daughters and one young son, in 1918 – though these facts remained a mystery for many decades afterwards.³⁵⁴ The opulence and luxury that surrounded the last Romanov family and their death, as well as the many Hollywood films that the story inspired,³⁵⁵ made the story of Nicholas and Alexandra an exciting concept for the designers and marketers of temporary exhibitions. Its popularity as a narrative and exhibition helped to explain why the planning for *Nicholas & Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* in Edinburgh could be completed much more quickly than is usual for major temporary exhibitions. Ordinarily, an exhibition of this size and scope would be three years in the planning. Instead, working together, National Museum of Scotland and State Hermitage Museum staff got everything constructed in twelve months.³⁵⁶ This speed was possible for a number of reasons.

Firstly, like the quickly-assembled Smithsonian exhibition, the Edinburgh exhibition was preceded by a similar show organised by the Hermitage. From 1999 to 2001 an exhibition titled *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family of Tsarist Russia* toured three sites in the United States. The exhibition was co-organised by the State Hermitage Museum and a company called Broughton International.³⁵⁷ This company is one of a growing number of professional organisations that design, coordinate, and market self-contained exhibitions. Broughton says that they specialise in procuring internationally famous objects for

³⁵³ Interview with Jane Carmichael, Director of Collections, National Museums Scotland. 16 February 2007.

³⁵⁴ The book by Anthony Summers and Tom Mangold, *The File on the Tsar* (London, 1976). came out of a BBC documentary in the 1970s that investigated the disappearance and death of the Tsar and his family.

³⁵⁵ There are at least 8 films or TV productions about the last Romanovs: *Rasputin and the Empress* (1933), *Anastasia* (1956), *Rasputin: The Mad Monk* (1966), *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971), *Fall of Eagles* (1974), *Anastasia: Mystery of Anna* (1983), *Rasputin* (1996), and the animated *Anastasia* (1997).

³⁵⁶ Stuart Johnstone, "Russian Revelations: Memories of the Last Tsar and His Family," *Dundee Evening Telegraph* 21 July 2005.

³⁵⁷ See exhibition website, <www.nicholasandalexandra.com>

smaller or lesser-known museums that want a boost of publicity and attendance.³⁵⁸ By any measure, this first incarnation of the Nicholas and Alexandra exhibition was a roaring success. Its host museums in Wilmington Delaware, Mobile Alabama, and San Diego California all had large numbers of visitors, an increase in entrance fees, and empty shelves in their gift shops.

The website and exhibition catalogue for this first incarnation says that

The exhibition was conceived as a way to show the human side of the well-known story of the last imperial family of Russia – the love story, their devotion to family, the unparalleled splendour of the Russian court, and the tragic fate which befell them.³⁵⁹

To do this, the exhibition was divided into five themes: The Family, The Church, Wedding and Coronation, The Wardrobe, and Court Life.³⁶⁰ In contrast, the NMS exhibition

...tells the story of the last imperial family of Russia. Through the very personal items connected to the family – including court costumes, uniforms, paintings, furniture, and toys – it is possible to gain an understanding of the relationships and events which eventually cost them their lives. At times it is a very moving and human story, set against the backdrop of a society in the midst of significant change.³⁶¹

There were more themes – 10 major ones, each with affiliated sub-themes – and the story follows a much more narrative arc. However, the similarities in rhetoric are obvious, and most of the objects from the American exhibition were also seen in Scotland, with many others added in.

The American travelling exhibition about Nicholas and Alexandra meant that the collections of the Hermitage had already been assessed for objects that could help to tell their story. Some of the material culture narrative was already established, and would have made the planning of any related narrative easier. However, that is not to say that the processes were identical. The American incarnation has been generic,

³⁵⁸ Broughton International Inc website, <www.broughtonmasterpiece.com>. Accessed in August 2007, apparently not online anymore in June 2008.

³⁵⁹ *Nicholas and Alexandra* website

³⁶⁰ *ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. x-xi

meant to showcase treasures, tell a brief story, and act in precisely the same way in a variety of spaces. It was to stand completely alone and be consumed by the visitors with little need to access a deeper meaning than that of ‘treasure’. The storyline about the individuals involved acted merely as a way into the life of the objects and all their glory, as well as providing the suitably tragic ending. The Scottish exhibition, on the other hand, was orchestrated by a designated team of National Museum of Scotland staff, in concert with their colleagues in St. Petersburg.³⁶² Not only was it to show the human side of historical personages, it was also meant to highlight the long-standing links between Scotland and Russia. This was a major addition to the existing framework of previous Nicholas-and-Alexandra-based exhibits and books, as well as something that the Hermitage exhibition in Scotland had in common with its Smithsonian predecessor, *Treasures from the Smithsonian*.

The addition of personal story and national links to the narrative of the exhibition also meant that the objects were treated differently than in the American incarnation of the exhibition. In a unique twist to the common construction of temporary exhibitions, the NMS curatorial team was allowed to roam freely through the Hermitage collections and personally select the objects they wished to use. Only one object out of the hundreds on the wish list was refused – and this, a ceremonial throne, was on the grounds of conservation and condition, not because the Hermitage curators did not want it used in the exhibition.³⁶³ The curators tried specifically to locate and display objects that highlighted the connections between Imperial Russia and Britain, and particularly Scotland.³⁶⁴

National Icons, but of Which Nation?

In the foreword to the *Nicholas and Alexandra* catalogue, the Director of the National Museums of Scotland, Gordon Rintoul, posited that

The links between Scotland and Russia go back many centuries. Scots were instrumental in the formation of the

³⁶² Interview with Jane Carmichael, 16 February 2007.

³⁶³ Iain Wilson, "Russia Opens Door on Tragic Tale: Nicholas and Alexandra Treasures Head for Edinburgh," *Glasgow Herald* 11 April 2005.

³⁶⁴ Interview with Jane Carmichael, 16 February 2007.

Russian Navy...Scots served as soldiers, physicians, and governesses to the Russian Imperial families and aristocracy. The architect Charles Cameron, another Scot, was responsible for some of the finest buildings commissioned by Catherine the Great. To this day there continues to be an enduring affinity between Scotland and Russia.³⁶⁵

These connections, as well as the cultural ones mentioned earlier, were continually emphasised to legitimise the Hermitage's visit to Edinburgh – in much the same way as the story of James Smithson's trip to Scotland was used to underpin the Smithsonian's visit to the RSM twenty years before. Rintoul then continued on this same theme even as he thanks the exhibition sponsors, Scottish and Newcastle, lauding them by claiming that 'the activities of the company in Russia today continue the long-established trade links between our two countries'.³⁶⁶ The director of the State Hermitage Museum provided a non-economic rationale for the long-established and growing connections between the two countries. When asked by a journalist about why the Hermitage agreed to help with the exhibition, he first gave generic explanations, such as increased publicity for his museum. He then veered from the normal bland path of public relations to say that '...the character, the personality of the Scottish people is a little bit like the Russian people. They are very much different from the people in England.'³⁶⁷ This gives a bit of the flavour of the rhetoric that surrounded the connection between Scotland and Russia in the exhibition. Each of the objects in the show was framed in the catalogue and text to be highlight their emotional charge. This was especially true of objects that could be held to represent both nations in their provenance.

Whether these dual narratives of nation would have been noticeable without the particular constructed context of the exhibition is a theoretical question, and one where I fall in the middle of two extremes. Constructivists such as Pierre Bourdieu would say that the object itself is inherently mute, and that all the meaning it has is a result of how it has been manipulated and framed. Objectivists, such as Bruno

³⁶⁵ Gordon Rintoul, "Foreword," in *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* (Edinburgh, 2005). x.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* xi.

³⁶⁷ Wilson, "Russia Opens Door on Tragic Tale: Nicholas and Alexandra Treasures Head for Edinburgh."

Latour, on the other hand, believe that the object, any object, speaks of and for itself, despite efforts to alter its voice.³⁶⁸ Both of these viewpoints have their adherents and are useful intellectual angles from which to look at museums and their objects and exhibitions. But each artefact, each exhibit, each institution, will call on elements of each. The iconic object does speak for itself, regardless of context. At the same time, because of their multivocality, the stories told with and by objects can be changed by changes in context and time – something that has also been explored here. A good exhibition takes the objects that naturally fit into a given narrative and then enhance that part of their story by creating the correct frame around them, so that the visitor to the exhibition sees the narrative that the curators chose to present at any given time. This is just what the curatorial team in charge of *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* did. They consciously chose objects that represented the links between Scotland and Russia, and then strengthened those narratives through the use of the other trappings of an exhibition, such as labelling, photographs, videos, and catalogue text.

Icons and Iconic Objects

One of the most interesting feats of the *Nicholas and Alexandra* exhibition was the display of a 120 metre-long painted panorama scene of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations, which showed the royal parades and events that occurred during the Jubilee. Paintings are liminal objects in the world of museums, belonging as they can both to museums of fine art and museums of history. Their meaning would necessarily change given which of these two contexts they were seen in, and the decision of where to place them is thus often a fraught one. However, they also very easily become iconic artefacts. Indeed, they were the first objects to be considered 'iconic'. Because they actually depict the people, and often the ideas, that they are trying to evoke, paintings are one step closer to a 'pure' icon than objects – which rely more on the viewer to understand what they stand for – are. Charles Peirce reminds his readers that even the best portrait is not an entirely pure icon,

³⁶⁸ For more on these issues see Nick Zangwill, "Against the Sociology of the Aesthetic," *Cultural Values* 6 (4) (2002). 443-452. Also George Dickie. 'Art and Value.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40(2) (April 2000). 228-241.

because I am greatly influenced by knowing that it is an *effect*, through the artist, caused by the original's appearance... Besides, I know that portraits have but the slightest resemblance to their originals, except in certain conventional respects, and after a conventional scale of values...³⁶⁹

The viewer of the painting is not just seeing events as they unfolded, but they are also seeing something of the artist who is recording them. This layer of interpretation keeps the painting from being purely iconic. Also, expanding Peirce's formulation a little, the iconic object (or painting) does not only represent the people depicted within it. The iconic painting can also transmit ideas about the nation that holds or displays it, and many other things as well.

When a painting is chosen for display in a history museum or exhibition, it becomes an object of history, rather than an object of artistic value. The impact of crossing this line of interpretation can be seen by looking at the differing ways paintings are labelled and presented in portrait galleries versus galleries of art. National Portrait Galleries tell the history of the nation through portraits of those people who have impacted its history and formation. Labelling on these paintings is mostly concerned with the subject of the portrait, rather than the artist. National Galleries of Art, conversely, treat the portraits that they display as examples of a certain artist or artistic style, and puts less emphasis on contextualising the subject.³⁷⁰ When a painting is used in a temporary exhibition such as *Nicholas and Alexandra*, care has to be taken to contextualise it, not only for its contents, but so that its place in the exhibition narrative is clear. Adding this contextual meaning onto the object is important even in the case of iconic paintings, if it is meant to say something that supports the larger exhibitionary storyline.

The aforementioned panoramic painting was the largest object in the *Last Tsar and Tsarina* exhibition at the Royal Scottish Museum. Nicholas and Alexandra

³⁶⁹ Charles Peirce, "Elements of Logic," in *Collected Papers of Charles Saunders Peirce*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Wiess, & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, 1932). 92.

³⁷⁰ This dichotomy is most noticeable when the portrait gallery and the art gallery are close by, such as in the case of the (British) National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery next door to each other in Trafalgar Square. The (American) National Portrait Gallery and the Museum of American Art actually share a building, making the split in interpretation even easier to see.

commissioned the panorama because they were unable to attend the festivities, but wanted to witness them for themselves. Both the tsar and his wife were related to Victoria – Nicholas as first cousin to future king George V, and by the marriage of his sister to Victoria's son Alfred in 1874. Alexandra was a granddaughter to the queen. They were also emotionally close to the matriarch, and she was one of the most fervent supporters of their marriage, which Nicholas' parents did not approve. In this way, Nicholas and his family were themselves representations of the many-faceted links between Britain, Scotland, and Russia. After this, young Nicholas spent considerable time with his relations in Britain, and got along with Victoria so well that she routinely addressed letters to 'dearest Nicky'.³⁷¹ Alexandra was called Alice, or more commonly Alix, when she lived in England. The girl's mother had died when Alix was very young, and she rapidly became a firm favourite with the old lady. Alix spent large amounts of time on her grandmother's estate at Balmoral, and the pair went together to many social and state events, such as the Glasgow Exhibition of 1888. With Victoria close to both, she was overjoyed when the engagement was announced, and it appears that she became even fonder of the pair thereafter. Thus, the pair was disappointed not to be able to make the long trip from the Russian Empire to Britain.

They commissioned this in-depth look at the festivities in order to make up for their loss. The painter, Pavel Yakovlevich Piasetsky, came to Britain to make sketches of the country, but also used magazines and other paintings for reference.³⁷² The panorama had long been in the possession of the Hermitage Museum, but had not been on display. This was mostly due to lack of space, which also meant that the contents of the painting had never been fully investigated. When Maureen Barrie and Godfrey Evans, the two NMS curators on the *Nicholas and Alexandra* project, arrived in St. Petersburg, Hermitage curators pointed out that they believed there was some Scottish connection to the painted panorama. Barrie reminisced in an article on the exhibition about the moment of discovery, when the pair and their colleagues at the Hermitage unrolled the panorama bit by bit, and their disappointment at not

³⁷¹ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. 64.

³⁷² *Ibid.* 150. Object number E37.

being able to identify anything as Scottish.³⁷³ Finally, just at the end of the roll of canvas, there was a recognisable scene of Leith Harbour, with Edinburgh in the background. This was possibly a reference to the visit a year earlier that Nicholas and Alexandra had made to visit their ‘dear granny’ at Balmoral [image 4.24]. Jubilation reigned in the storerooms at this proof of the iconic connections between Scotland and Russia.

After such a discovery, of course the panorama had to be a central part of the exhibition in Edinburgh. In order to avoid conflicts of space, the whole length of the panorama was filmed, and the film ran in a continuous loop throughout the exhibition. Not only was this the first time that the painting had been out of Russia, it was also its first time on public display anywhere. The video, as well as the placement of the object at the centre of a Scottish exhibition, helped to give the painting a context of the familial relations to Britain, and made it embody the guiding narrative of the exhibition as a whole. The painting became representative not only of Russian-Scottish connections in the time of Nicholas II but also of the modern links between NMS and the Hermitage. Other video displays were also used, showing scenes of Nicholas and Alexandra at Balmoral, and the state funeral that was held for the family in 1998. All of these further enhanced the story that the objects were already telling about the connections between this doomed royal family and the nation where their artefacts were displayed in 2005.

Nicholas II in Modernity

A completely different type of iconic object – one which is much closer to the original meaning of ‘icon’ - was also on display for the first time, and acted as a critical connection point in the narrative which was being woven between Scotland and Russia, though it was unconnected to the Hermitage and was not a conventional museum artefact. A traditional Orthodox religious icon of Nicholas II, it joined several other religious icons and paintings in the Museum hall, though it has a rather more complicated back-story and daily location than the storage halls of the Hermitage [image 4.25].

³⁷³ Caroline Jessop, "From Russia with Love," *Scottish Field* 1 August 2005. 64.

As an engagement and wedding present, in 1894 Victoria appointed Nicholas a commander-in-chief of the Royal Scots Greys, one of the then elite cavalry divisions of the British Army. Nicholas was happy with the gift, repeatedly remarking on how honoured he was to be connected to this illustrious division. He wrote to his 'dearest Grandmama' that

Words fail me to express my surprise and the pleasure I felt upon receiving the news that you had the kindness of appointing me Colonel-in Chief of the beautiful Royal Scots Greys, just the regiment I saw and admired so last summer at Aldershot. I shall be so happy and proud to appear one day before you in their uniform.³⁷⁴

By the first of December of that year Nicholas had already received an official monthly account of the regiment from Lieutenant-Colonel Welby, along with a letter of welcome. An official uniform was made for Nicholas at the request of Edward, Prince of Wales (who Nicholas referred to as 'Uncle Bertie') by the tailor to the officers, and it was brought to Russia in 1895 by an official delegation of Welby and three other Royal Scots Greys officers. They also presented their new commander with an official portrait of him leading the regiment. Unfortunately in the conversion of measurements between metric and Imperial, something had gone awry, and the uniform arrived slightly too small, but it was altered on the spot and quickly became a favourite with Nicholas.³⁷⁵

In 1896, four months after their coronation, Nicholas and Alexandra and their first baby, the grand duchess Olga, travelled from Russia to visit their dear relation Victoria. They sailed into the Firth of Forth, where a reception was held for them in Leith. They then took the train from Waverly Station in Edinburgh to Balmoral, where an honour guard of Scot's Greys was waiting to welcome their leader. Nicholas wore his uniform, and appears to have spent a considerable portion of his

³⁷⁴ Tsar Nicolas II to Queen Victoria, 16 November 1894. Quoted in *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* (Edinburgh, 2005). 66.

³⁷⁵ "Why a Picture of Former Russian Ruler Nicholas II Travels with Scots Soldiers in Training - and on the Battlefield: How a Tsar Became a Guards Icon," *Edinburgh Evening News* 8 July 2005. 24.

two-week stay devoting himself to reading regimental accounts, greeting his officers, and bestowing honours on worthy soldiers.³⁷⁶

While he could not obviously be directly leading a British Army unit while he himself was in Russia, Nicholas' interest in the Royal Scots Greys remained strong throughout his life. He received copies of all regimental reviews and battlefield citations, along with dispatches and reports of notable events, acts of heroism or tragedies. It seems there was always a sense that he was looking over the regiment from afar. This impression was hardened as he routinely singled out particularly laudable soldiers and sent them insignia of his other regiments from Russia. He also arranged to award medals for bravery to twenty soldiers in 1915.³⁷⁷

Nicholas and his family were executed as the Bolsheviks rose to power in 1918. The assassination heralded the start of Communist rule in Russia, and led to the formation of the Soviet Union. The Tsars were expunged from official history. However, with the loosening of doctrine and boundaries, the Imperial past was gradually reclaimed. The burial site of most of the Romanovs was discovered in 1979, but not made public until 1989 and 1990.³⁷⁸ The burial site was fully excavated in 1991, but definite identification took time. Many tests were run, including bringing the remains to the UK so that DNA testing could link them to current members of the British Royal Family.³⁷⁹ Finally, on 30 January 1998, the bodies of Nicholas, Alexandra, and three of their five children were positively identified.³⁸⁰ A huge state funeral was held in St. Catherine's Chapel in the Peter and Paul cathedral in St. Petersburg on 17 July 1998, exactly eighty years after their death.³⁸¹ In August 2007 the enquiry into the death of the Romanovs was reopened,

³⁷⁶ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina.*

³⁷⁷ "Why a Picture of Former Russian Ruler Nicholas II Travels with Scots Soldiers in Training - and on the Battlefield: How a Tsar Became a Guards Icon." 24-25.

³⁷⁸ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* (Edinburgh, 2005). 119.

³⁷⁹ Peter Gill et al., "Identification of the remains of the Romanov family by DNA analysis," *Nature Genetics* 6(2) (1994). 130-135.

³⁸⁰ John Curtis Perry and Constantine Pleshakov, *The Flight of the Romanovs: A Family Saga* (New York, 1999). Chapter 16.

³⁸¹ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina.* 116-119.

and additional remains were discovered to be those of the missing children, Maria and Alexei.³⁸²

In the eighty years before the State funeral, new commanders-in-chief had been appointed for the regiment formerly known as the Royal Scots Greys. However, interest in their former leader, the doomed Tsar, had remained, and it had revitalised with the discovery of the bodies. Because of this, as well as Nicholas' evident love of the regiment, a delegation of officers from the new incarnation of the old Royal Scots Greys, now called the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabineers and Greys), was invited to take a major role in the funeral ceremonies. So, dressed in official ceremonial uniforms, regimental pipers from Scotland preceded the coffin of the erstwhile Emperor of all Russia down the aisle.³⁸³

With religion and history increasing out in the open in a new Russia, interest in the Romanovs remained strong after the funerals. Indeed, on the 14th of August 2000 the family was canonised as saints in the Russian Orthodox Church. Prayers were composed to the new saints, addressing them as 'Holy Royal Martyrs', who were meant to aid anyone under suspicion wrongly or in need of protection.³⁸⁴ Official icons were made, and the Royal Martyrs were enfolded in the centre of the Church. The Royal Scots Greys had evidently made an impression at the funeral, for they were presented with their own icon of Holy Tsar-Nicholas in 2001 by the Caledonian Society of Moscow on behalf of all the people of Russia, a gift that caused a symbolic reconnection between the regiment and their former leader.³⁸⁵ Barring its time as museum artefact in the *Nicholas and Alexandra* blockbuster, the icon travels continuously with the regiment on training and deployment, and is considered a good luck charm. It arrived at the exhibition a week late because it was

³⁸² "Lost Romanov Bones 'Identified'," *BBC News* 28 September 2007, "Russia Dig Finds 'Tsar's Family'," *BBC News* 24 August 2007.

³⁸³ "Why a Picture of Former Russian Ruler Nicholas II Travels with Scots Soldiers in Training - and on the Battlefield: How a Tsar Became a Guards Icon."

³⁸⁴ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. 120.

³⁸⁵ "Why a Picture of Former Russian Ruler Nicholas II Travels with Scots Soldiers in Training - and on the Battlefield: How a Tsar Became a Guards Icon." 25.

with the troops training in Canada, and it could not be transferred until military manoeuvres were safely finished.³⁸⁶

The exhibition shows many links between Nicholas and his Scottish regiment, exhibiting pictures and paintings of him in uniform, the dispatches he wrote, and the medals he gave to Scots soldiers. However, it is this modern object, the military-religious icon, that seems to most effectively emerge from its display to become more than an artefact. I have argued throughout this work that an ‘iconic object’ can take many forms, some of which are fairly insignificant in outside appearances. Not all iconic objects are recognisable from first glance, and some fade away in the company of their shinier, but not as theoretically meaningful, counterparts. However, here is a case where an icon is iconic, where the gilded object has an importance as bright as its colouring. It embodies the spirit of the exhibition, and also shows how wide a gulf there was between this Scottish *Nicholas and Alexandra* and its sanitised American ancestor. This icon would not have had much meaning if it had been displayed in Mobile Alabama or San Diego. It would have been reduced by those contexts and spaces to just another one of the many lavishly decorated religious icons that are at the heart of Russian Orthodoxy. It might have said something about the death and afterlife of Nicholas and the regaining of his central role in Russian national mythology. However, the emotional and historical tug of the icon seen in Edinburgh has to do with more than that. This is an object that connects to the people who are seeing it, and to the particular time in which it is displayed. That is the power of an iconic object, whether or not it is a traditional religious icon itself.

Blockbuster Icons

A focus on links between Nicholas, Alexandra, and Scotland that had often been largely ignored did not mean that death and riches were absent from the exhibition. The two objects most frequently mentioned by visitors and media reports were blockbuster icons of the most commonly accepted sort. Though blockbuster rhetoric often employs terms such as ‘glittering’ profligately, the *Nicholas and*

³⁸⁶ Ibid. 24.

Alexandra show was full of objects studded with gems that, under the spotlights in their display cases, did actually glitter. The most extreme example in the exhibition was a miniature replica of the Imperial regalia made by the famous craftsmen at the Fabergé Company. It was made in 1900 for the International Exhibition in Paris, and was later purchased by the Romanovs and kept in the Gallery of Treasures in the Winter Palace [image 4.26]. Many of the reviews published in the media mentioned the regalia, most with an associated picture, and descriptions such as ‘opulent’ and ‘glittering’.³⁸⁷ Most also chose to quote both the object label and the catalogue in their precise reporting that the regalia was made of ‘Gold, silver, platinum, diamonds, spinel, pearls, sapphires, rose quartzite, wood, and velvet’.³⁸⁸

This is an impressive object in spite of – or because of – being only 7.3 by 5.4 by 15.8 centimetres at the largest points.³⁸⁹ Visitors have long been attracted to miniaturised objects.³⁹⁰ However, the bigger reason that it garnered so much attention is that it matched the public ideal of what an exhibition on Imperial Russia should contain. The iconic idea of Russian culture at the time of the Tsars has been constructed as a narrative about luxurious overindulgence, which then led to rebellion and overthrow of the greedy elite. This cultural trope was prevalent in media reports about the exhibition. The regalia

...provides perhaps the most jaw-dropping moment...it is awe-inspiring, but it is also a poignant reminder of the self-indulgence that eventually ushered in the revolution.³⁹¹

Along with article titles such as ‘Why the Russian Revolution Had to Happen’,³⁹² it is easy to spot the biases about the role of Russian opulence in its eventual downfall.

³⁸⁷ Of nineteen reviews, twelve mentioned the Fabergé regalia, and eight of those had a picture of it.

³⁸⁸ *Nicholas and Alexandra* artefact label D14, also *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. 138.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ Stewart, *On Longing*.

³⁹¹ Duncan Forgan, "Glittering Tsar of a Show Will Crown Them All," *Edinburgh Evening News* 15 July 2005. 20.

³⁹² "Why the Russian Revolution Had to Happen," *Sunday Herald* 24 July 2005.

The Fabergé objects worked as icons for the exhibition because they serve as uncomplicated symbols of a story everyone already knows.

Narratives like this are common to exhibitions where a particular national identity is displayed in the space of another nation. Certain types of objects serve as cultural shorthand for specific national identities. The artefacts acquire their representative generic iconicity in a variety of ways – through the influence of the media and popular culture, or as a consequence of their ubiquity in one area and rarity in others, or in some particular and indefinable quirk of fate – and once established, the connections between object and nation are hard to eradicate. In the American case, moon rockets and cowboy hats from popular television shows reinforced ideas of American identity with its connections to scientific and cultural hegemony. It was these sort of objects which best represented the national goals of the exhibition, and they were highlighted. Even though *Nicholas and Alexandra* came from a universal survey museum, it was still attempting to say something specific about national history, and so its narratives did not differ greatly from those in earlier shows. Nominally the story of monarchy, the exhibition became a story of the nation, because of the deep connections between the nation and the imperial leader. Objects that represented the idea of ‘monarchy’ helped to tell this story.

The Tsarevich's Shirt

Beyond glitter, the other common idea of Russia in the age of Imperialism, and especially in the age of Nicholas and Alexandra, is the spectre of death and tragedy. The second-most popular object to be enshrined as a representative of the mass of treasures of the exhibition was meant to evoke these other feelings in the viewer. This was a bloodstained shirt worn by the young Nicholas, not yet a tsar, on a visit to Japan where an attempt was made on his life [image 4.27]. The catalogue tells the story this way:

During a visit to the town of Otsu on 29 April 1891, a Japanese policemen hit Nicholas over the head with a sabre. The man was overpowered and Nicholas was not seriously injured. The Japanese Emperor came to see him and remained in Kyoto until he [Nicholas] had recovered. Alexander III [the Tsar] ordered his son to return home. The Japanese Emperor accompanied the Tsarevich to the docks

at Kobe, where he boarded the *Pamiat Azov* and set sail for Vladivostock.³⁹³

Interestingly, though the title of the object is ‘The shirt Nicholas II was wearing during the assassination attempt on him in Japan in 1891’,³⁹⁴ the description puts little weight on the bloodstain itself and focuses on the political outcome of the event, rather than the macabre reminders of it. In contrast, it was the blood that made this object a favourite of the press. The interest in this particular artefact is not hidden away, either. ‘Bloody Shirt’s the Tsar Attraction at City Show’ was one of the first articles to be written about the exhibition, and it claimed that ‘the most grisly exhibit will be the bloodstained shirt worn by the future Tsar when he survived an assassination attempt as a young child.’³⁹⁵

Like the miniature Fabergé regalia set, the shirt would probably have been an interesting and intriguing object in any context. If any important person, especially one of royal blood, had survived an assassination attempt and the bloodstained clothing worn at the time were displayed some years later, people would experience a type of resonance at seeing it. However, it is hard not to believe that this particular shirt is more powerful because of the ultimate fate of its owner. Much of the conjecture and conspiracy theories surrounding the deaths and lives of the Romanov family was either ignored or glossed over in both the exhibition and the surrounding media and printed materials. Most visitors, however, would have come in contact with many of the basic facts about the last of the Romanovs before their visit. Dark and mysterious stories like this are common cultural capital, and would have created expectations in the mind of visitors. The narrative of exhibitions read by visitors is shaped by these pre-existing expectations, and could have altered the way objects were encountered by the audience. Thus, a shirt which, to curatorial staff, speaks of a superficial injury inflicted in the name of politics can also prompt thinking about a

³⁹³ *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. 140.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ Sam Halsted, "Bloody Shirt the Tsar Attraction at City Show," *Edinburgh Evening News* 2 February 2005. 10. Nicholas was actually 22 at the time of the attack. See George Alexander Lensen, "The Attempt on the Life of Nicholas II in Japan," *Russian Review* 20 (3) (July 1961). 232-253. for more on the incident.

much more vicious attack conducted in the name of revolution. Again we see the power of iconic objects to create the framework of narrative for an exhibition.

The combination of commonly recognised artefacts from the State Hermitage Museum, objects usually held in store there, and items gathered from sources such as the Queen's private collection at Balmoral and the Scottish Army led *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina* to be one of the most successful exhibitions in the history of the National Museums of Scotland. It attracted 71000 visitors over its relatively short time at the museum.³⁹⁶ It is routinely considered a 'summer blockbuster', and was a triumph for both museums involved.³⁹⁷ It did what was wanted – raised the profile of the NMS internationally, attracted new audiences, and earned money for the institution. In that way, it was much the same as both the *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* and the *Wealth of a Nation* exhibitions from decades earlier. However, some other temporary exhibitions do not have these expectations.

Beyond the Palace Walls

The summer after *Nicholas and Alexandra*, the National Museum of Scotland hosted another temporary exhibition that had been developed in concert with the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. This one was a very different experience, though, with different goals, a different target audience, and a different type of artefactual narrative. *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the Hermitage Museum* ran in the same exhibition space as *Nicholas and Alexandra* at the National Museum of Scotland from 14 July to 5 November 2006. Again, it was a new exhibition designed by the teams at two museums, based on several temporary exhibitions that had gone before, including a similar undertaking in Amsterdam in 2004. However, like *Nicholas and Alexandra*, *Beyond the Palace Walls* was made unique through being designed and shown in Scottish space.

The exhibit was created to display the wealth of a collection, rather than to tell a story. Thus, objects were arranged thematically, based on form and origin, rather than chronology, or in a way that would evoke visions of personages from the

³⁹⁶ *NMS Review 06: Looking Back, Looking Forward. 2.*

³⁹⁷ See, for example, *Ibid. 4.*

past. It echoed the American exhibition *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution*, far more than it did its Hermitage predecessor. The objects were the stars, more than in any other exhibition discussed so far. They were powerful because they were being displayed solely for themselves – their shape, craftsmanship, life stories, and so on – not for what they could say about anything else.³⁹⁸

At least, this is how the catalogue sought to frame the exhibition. Usually, even when the object is central to the story, and when it is meant to be speaking for itself rather than illustrating an existing narrative, the artefact is often overlaid, or even obscured, by the expectations it bears. Here, the only story given was about the objects, how they came to be in the museum, and what they had been discovered to mean for, and by, scholars of the field. In fact, it was a deliberate choice to cut the possible narratives down to one that centred just on the artefacts. Islamic culture was, in 2006, an intensely fraught social and political issue. Terrorist attacks, most particularly the bombings in London underground trains and busses on 7 July 2005 had made many issues around Islam and its objects difficult to address. Keeping the focus on the artefacts, their construction and beauty, allowed the museum to avoid other potentially troublesome stories about religion, culture, or history.

As different as this exhibition was to its predecessor, some common themes emerged in Gordon Rintoul's introduction to the later catalogue, even as the paths diverge. He wrote that

The latest exhibition, *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum*, has been built on the foundations of mutual respect and friendship forged during last summer's highly successful exhibition *Nicholas and Alexandra*. It examines the beauty and diversity to be found in the networks of Islamic cultures and demonstrates its willingness to adopt and adapt the traditions and craftsmanship of other cultures into a myriad of art forms. The exhibition is rich in costume, textiles, and paintings, and features breathtaking works of art wrought in precious metals often studded with precious stones.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ See, for example, the rhetoric used in the catalogue *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum*.

³⁹⁹ Gordon Rintoul, "Foreword," in *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum: Islamic Art in a World Context* (Edinburgh, 2006). vii.

It seems museums staff were themselves acknowledging that this was an exhibition that used the collections of the two museums for very different reasons than did the earlier collaboration. *Beyond the Palace Walls* had the treasures and international cachet that are present in most blockbusters, but lacked the strong, recognisable central identity or narrative that pulls in large crowds. There was no iconic image, person, or idea for the theme of ‘Islamic Art’. The show, in attempting to avoid potentially controversial statements about identity and culture, instead reduced the weight and span of Islamic culture to an appreciation of the aesthetic and provided little context or extra information. In a way such a one-dimensional subject was perfect for exploration in a temporary exhibition, as people will come in to learn something new, and the educational mission of the institution and its artefacts can shine. However, without a pre-formed expectation many visitors will hesitate to enter an exhibition – especially one that includes the payment of an entrance fee.

This mix of factors meant that *Beyond the Palace Walls* was bound to attract a different type and scope of audience than *Nicholas and Alexandra*, including more specialists with a particular interest in Islamic Art, who were glad of an opportunity to see a group of objects not normally on public display or easily.⁴⁰⁰ In this way the 2006 exhibition was an anomaly. It had more in common with the earliest ages of museums and their functions than with the current cult of continually increasing access, visitor numbers, and marketing. Because of their temporary nature these exhibitions create an impetus to visit. In everyday life the museum is present and perceived as never changing. It does not matter if you visit one day, or the next, or the next year. It will still be there – but the temporary exhibition comes in a blaze of hype and only stays for a clearly delineated and limited amount of time, creating an immediate need to visit and increasing visitor numbers.⁴⁰¹

It has not always been so, however. For most of the nineteenth century, museums, even when nominally ‘public’, were for the use of educated men who wished to consult the collections for the benefit of their scholarly work. Exhibits were laid out and categorised by their contents, rather than any sort of larger narrative or aesthetic concerns. Artefacts were largely un-labelled, as the assumption

⁴⁰⁰ Interviews with Catherine Holden and Jane Carmichael.

⁴⁰¹ Interview with Catherine Holden, 13 March 2007.

was that anyone looking at the cases would have enough intrinsic understanding of the subject to know what it was they were looking at. This was a crucial way in which the museum differentiated itself from other public institutions, as a visitor had to meet a certain threshold of civilisation in order to enter.⁴⁰²

Of course, all the objects that were part of *Beyond the Palace Walls* were expertly labelled, and anyone could have entered and enjoyed the exhibition. However, more context was needed in order for it to be understood. The Head of Collections for National Museums Scotland said that it was

a pretty arcane subject. It was very interesting to those people with an interest in that area, but it's not something with a hugely wide appeal. And if you take that out of context it needs a lot of interpretation to an audience that's unfamiliar with it...⁴⁰³

She then continued by clarifying the other reasons why the two exhibitions from the Hermitage were received so differently when they came to Edinburgh. It had to do with the nature of the story that was being told in each.

It's very hard, I think, to simply display beauty and culture. For the general public to really get interested you need a name that they recognise and you need a really good personal history as well. And then there is drama.⁴⁰⁴

This statement highlights the differences between art exhibitions and history exhibitions. *Beyond the Palace Walls* was closer to an art show, where objects are displayed for their aesthetic qualities, than to a historical one where there is a defined narrative being evoked by the artefacts on display. One of the reasons that *Beyond the Palace Walls* seemed weaker in execution and audience response than *Nicholas and Alexandra* was because of the separation between its artistic nature and the national historical space in which it was displayed. Visitors to the National Museums of Scotland expect artefacts that will tell them something about the nation, or at least something that will have the type of narrative expected for a history museum. By not

⁴⁰² See for example Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum.*, Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals.*, and Prior, *Museums and Modernity*. All of these use the ideas of *field* and *habitus* from Pierre Bourdieu.

⁴⁰³ Jane Carmichael, in interview 13 February 2007.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

having this type of narrative, *Beyond the Palace Walls* challenged visitor expectations and understandings.

The divergence between the two sister exhibitions was visible also in the catalogue. Where *Nicholas and Alexandra* and *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* had historical essays that only tangentially involved the objects, *Beyond the Palace Walls* used the objects in the catalogue to illustrate essays about workmanship, style, and evolution of design. Again we see that in this exhibition it was the artefacts that were the central draw, rather than any romantic narrative or big idea of national identity. Instead of telling a story, the catalogue acted as a space for the objects to speak more freely and make connections that would not be possible within the actual exhibition space. In that way, this catalogue provided a more accurate vision of the exhibition than do most. The images of the objects were interspersed throughout the text in the way that they would have been approached in the exhibition space, and the associated text was in the style of what an educated observer would already know about the objects, rather than something completely new and outside the artefacts.⁴⁰⁵

There were four sections in the text: Early Islamic Art Until the Mongol Invasion, Islamic Art and China, Islamic Art and Europe, and Diplomacy, Warfare, and Trade: The Muslim World and Russia, each following the same format. There was a brief introductory essay, and then descriptions and images of each object from that particular theme. Dimensions, material, and provenance were all laid out, as were details of any previous references to the object in exhibitions or printed material.

There was also an appendix listing all the objects from the collections of the National Museum of Scotland that were included in the exhibition.⁴⁰⁶ This points to another interesting detail that makes *Beyond the Palace Walls* differ from most other temporary exhibitions. Whether or not creating the exhibition is a collaborative effort between institutions, usually the contents are in the form of what is called a ‘capsule exhibition’.⁴⁰⁷ This means that all the objects included in the temporary exhibition

⁴⁰⁵ *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum.*

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 222-230.

⁴⁰⁷ Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, *Good Show!*

come from the lending institution, and live within their own little bubble inside the hosting institution's space. While visitors are encouraged to cross the liminal space between the 'regular' and 'temporary' exhibitions, artefacts are not. However, in this case, objects from the two museums were placed next to each other within the space of the temporary exhibition. Because of the unusual feeling of the exhibition, the proximity of these objects from different contexts did not necessarily change the narrative of the whole exhibition at all, but this was mostly because there was little narrative of identity to be had in the beginning.

Exhibitions such as this, which lack a central 'story', are challenging for visitors, and also for analysts. It is considerably easier to reflect on the role of objects in an exhibition narrative if there is a narrative apart from the objects. This is reflected somewhat in the numbers of visitors who came to see *Beyond the Palace Walls*. The 2006 exhibition had 20000 visitors, a huge decrease from the numbers seen at *Nicholas and Alexandra* the year before.⁴⁰⁸ It is simpler to see the representative power of iconic artefacts when there is already an idea of the story they are meant to represent. This is not to say that there were no iconic objects in the *Beyond the Palace Walls* exhibition. Rather, it means that they were iconic in a way that is distinct from anything we have already seen, and one which is harder to articulate in the normal frameworks. They served as icons of commercialism or of institutional triumphs, rather than of grander ideas of nation, identity, modernity, or any other elite theoretical concept. Though displayed in a national museum, it was not a 'national' exhibition, and its narratives proved much more difficult to present through the artefacts displayed.

Rarities, Commodities, and Icons

The object that was most highlighted in reviews and in the catalogue for *Beyond the Palace Walls* was an 'eighteenth century Ottoman tent, which has never before been on display'.⁴⁰⁹ The rest of the exhibition was abstractly and physically arranged around this very imposing object. Visitors actually walked through the tent in order to access the rest of the objects. It became a symbol for all the exhibition

⁴⁰⁸ Interview with Jane Carmichael, 16 February 2007.

⁴⁰⁹ Rintoul, "Foreword." 2006. viii.

was doing to extract forgotten treasures of Islamic art from dusty store cupboards and put them on public display. Attention was paid to the amount of conservation time used to make it ready for display, and also to the fact that it is the most complete representation of this type of object known to exist. This rhetoric plays on a theme common to all the temporary exhibitions that we have investigated so far – that the particular objects involved can only be seen during a particular limited time in a specific space in Edinburgh. As had been observed especially with the American objects in *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution*, the power of the artefact only increases further if the objects involved are not normally on display in their home spaces. There is a feeling of entitlement or object lust that comes with being able to see something that you are being told is important, and that other people do not get to see.⁴¹⁰ Walter Benjamin believed that an object is more sacred the fewer the number of eyes that have profaned it. Thus, some religious icons are brought out of their secret, sacred, spaces only for special holy days.⁴¹¹ The museum, as keeper of the sacred relics of the nation, acts in much the same way as earlier holy spaces.

If the rare and hidden object is iconic, so too is its exact opposite. This is, of course, the object that everyone can see, and that everyone can own. Each temporary exhibition brings with it its own selection of contents for the obligatory gift shop. In the case of *Beyond the Palace Walls*, the best selling objects in the specialised gift shop during the time of the exhibition were replicas of Turkish and other Islamic tiles, modified for use as coasters, and decorated with the stylised images of flowers and flowing script often seen in illuminated manuscripts and other Islamic objects [see image 4.28 for an example of this type of design].⁴¹² There were several authentic tiles of this sort in the actual exhibition. However, none of the replicas that were for sale were exact copies of the ones seen in the non-commercial space of the museum. In fact, the saleable replicas were not even unique to this particular exhibition. The exact same ones can be bought at gift shops at the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, and most

⁴¹⁰ For more, see MacCannell, *The Tourist*. Also, Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

⁴¹¹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 218-219.

⁴¹² Holden interview.

likely also at a number of other heritage and museum sites.⁴¹³ Thus, these ceramic tiles were not so much a piece of a specific exhibition, but a symbolic icon of the idea of the exhibition. They are attractive decorative objects that whisper ‘Islamic art’, rather than saying anything about ‘a specific exhibition of Islamic Art at the National Museums of Scotland’.

Tiles like this are perfect museum commodities. They are inexpensive, inviting, and a way to have at the same time something specific – a replica of objects seen at a particular exhibition – and something much more general – a cultural artefact that hints at the idea of ‘Islamic art’. The type of artwork on these tiles represents ‘Islam’ in the cultural collective unconscious. The use of Arabic script, the particular colour schemes, and the kind of images reproduced combine to create something that symbolises a particular part of the world and a unique style of artwork, while also being aesthetically pleasing and ‘exotic’ when displayed in a home setting. Just as the purchase of an exhibition catalogue can imply that a consumer is cultured and knowledgeable, regardless of whether they actually read it, the purchase of an item such as the Islamic tiles can speak more about the owner of the object than the exhibition at which it was purchased.

The Visual Grammar of Exhibition Catalogues

There has already been considerable incidental discussion in this work about various catalogues made for temporary exhibitions. However, since these two exhibitions were both collaborations between the same two teams of curators and same two publishing units, and yet they produced two different types of catalogues, the issue now deserves more focussed attention. By looking at the different approaches to catalogue presentation, we can see yet another way in which objects are used to represent ideas, theories, and experiences in the ever-changing context of the museum. And, of course, the catalogues themselves are objects – they are collected, consumed, and displayed by the museum visitor in order to tell others about themselves – or at least about how they would like to be perceived. Therefore, the catalogue is both a platform for the display of iconic objects and an iconic object

⁴¹³ Personal observations made during multiple fieldwork and pleasure visits to sites.

itself. Looking at how objects and exhibitions are framed in their catalogues can add another layer to the story of the exhibition, as well as helping to clarify the narratives that the professionals involved wanted to integrate in the show. A great deal of thought goes into the materials, the design, and the contents of exhibition catalogues, and like the exhibitions themselves the catalogues show the feeling of a museum at a particular moment in time. Also echoing an exhibition, or any museum display, is that the catalogue can easily be accepted as absolute truth, rather than as another constructed document. This, at least, entitles them to some more attention.

Exhibition catalogues can be divided into two major types. The ones made for the two Hermitage exhibitions each fall into a different category, where they can be joined by the catalogues already discussed in earlier chapters. The first type is the novel-catalogue. In this incarnation, the catalogue is meant primarily to tell a story. That story will follow the theme of the exhibition, whether that theme is obviously articulated within the exhibition or not. *Nicholas and Alexandra* and *Treasures from the Smithsonian* are both examples of this catalogue style. In both shows, the exhibition used objects in order to highlight aspects of national identity, whether that were historic nationness (as in the case of *Nicholas and Alexandra*) or a more contemporary and all-encompassing identity (as was seen in *Treasures from the Smithsonian*). The catalogues expanded on this theme of the nation and its history by presenting a number of narrative essays that delved into particular events or personages who had helped to shape the identity of the nation involved. In the main body of the novel-catalogue, museums, and the particular exhibition concerned, are mentioned only fleetingly. Images of displayed objects are used in the margins and sidebars only to add colour and decorative flourish to a story already in progress.⁴¹⁴ Though often written by experts in the particular nation and their museums, the text makes obvious concessions to the non-expert reader, providing timelines and genealogies for the nations concerned. To read through the central section of a novel-catalogue is strikingly similar to reading a basic history book about the nation, with the addition of colourful anecdotes and pictures of objects. It gives no sense of how the exhibition itself was laid out, or what the experience of walking through it would

⁴¹⁴ See *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*, Park, *Treasures from the Smithsonian*.

have been like. Only in an attached appendix are objects made the focus of study, and these object appendices read like an afterthought for the boffins, rather than an integral part of the whole catalogue.

Another type of approach is used the second category – the scientific catalogue. More like a classic commercial sale catalogue than a lavishly illustrated art book, the scientific type of catalogue is primarily concerned with allowing readers to continue engaging with the objects after they have left the exhibition. *Beyond the Palace Walls* and *A Wealth of a Nation* both did this, though they may have done it each for quite different reasons. Both exhibitions based themselves on the centrality of the tangible object. *Wealth of a Nation* had a political reason for making the objects as obvious in their physicality as possible, whereas *Beyond the Palace Walls* had a more academic slant. However, both based the central premise of their catalogues on the objects, which helped each continue to accomplish the goals first elucidated in the context of a temporary exhibition. The clear object-focus of this approach creates a situation where the objects are leading the text, rather than the other way around. The only bit of text not directly relating to a pictured artefact tends to be setting the context for a group of similar objects.⁴¹⁵ The objects are thoroughly indexed, and the information given about them goes beyond the basic data found in the novel-catalogue. The scientific catalogue is at heart a reference document, and as such tells its readers where to find more related information, and provides a sense of how each object relates to others and to the exhibition ideas as a whole. *Beyond the Palace Walls* took this visual reference idea to an even higher level by including a large number of objects in the catalogue that were not actually in the exhibition. In this way, the catalogue is sometimes a record of the curators' *ideal* exhibition, rather than the one that actually took place. Catalogues are a sanitised version of the exhibition, free of the crowds which obscure carefully designed sets, the miss-reading possible of object labels, and the flexibilities of space that could allow a backwards approach to the exhibition narrative. The catalogue is thus clearer and easier to 'read', but is also necessarily more fixed, one-dimensional, and devoid of context. It cannot incorporate all the layers of meaning that can be found in the

⁴¹⁵ See Calder, ed., *The Wealth of a Nation*. And *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum*.

interplay of object, narrative, and space in the exhibition, but rather attempts to provide something that people often feel is lacking in exhibitions – a strong dose of narrative and background history, as well as more detail on the objects concerned.

Both the novel catalogue and the scientific catalogue tend to sell well, though perhaps to different audiences. The *Wealth of a Nation* catalogue topped the list of Scottish bestsellers when it was released.⁴¹⁶ More so than any other souvenir or replica in a exhibition gift shop, the catalogue gives the buyer a way to bring home the exhibition as a commodity. Visitors consume the temporary exhibition as an experience, but it is an ephemeral one. The catalogue, conversely, is tangible and recognisable. It is both object and narrative, and as such is the perfect souvenir of an artefact-filled experience like the temporary exhibition. Museums try to increase the commodity value of the catalogue by making them bigger, with more full-colour pictures and more lavish production values. The *Nicholas and Alexandra* catalogue was originally meant to be 192 pages, but was increased to 224 pages ‘as publishing staff found themselves entranced by an icon, costume, or family photograph’.⁴¹⁷ Using rhetoric common to most all catalogues, *Nicholas and Alexandra* is ‘lavishly illustrated’, and is ‘truly a timeless memento of a stunning exhibition’.⁴¹⁸ News reports about *Treasures from the Smithsonian* noted that ‘a richly illustrated catalogue has been prepared specially for the occasion’,⁴¹⁹ although official Smithsonian reports noted that sales were slow in the first fortnight of the exhibition.⁴²⁰ The use of words like ‘lavish’ and ‘rich’ to describe catalogues helps to show how they are framed similarly to the objects they profile. Increasingly, the exhibition catalogue – especially one that falls into the category of novel-catalogue – is just as much of an aura-filled iconic object as the artefacts it exists to record.

⁴¹⁶ "'The Wealth of A Nation' Review." 7.

⁴¹⁷ Lesley Taylor, "Nicholas and Alexandra: Creating the Catalogue," *NMS Explore: The Magazine for Supporters of NMS* Autumn 2005. 8.

⁴¹⁸ Both *Ibid*.

⁴¹⁹ "Treasures from the US," *The Scotsman* 11 August 1984.

⁴²⁰ Memo from Ralph Rinzler to Executive Committee Members, titled ‘Interim Report on Edinburgh Festival Participation’. SI Archives 00-069, box 25/28.

To some extent this has always been true. Catalogues in early museums were used for the information they contained, but also for their presentation value.⁴²¹ However, most catalogues in modern institutions were more like guidebooks, designed to alert people to the space they were in and its connection to the nation, rather than create any specific narratives.⁴²² With the birth of the ‘blockbuster’, however, came the lavish catalogue. Because these blockbusters were cultural and social events that were limited in time, it became important to have a permanent reminder, for groups such as people who had seen the show, those who had missed it, and the curators whose project it had been. It is one of the few ways for curators and other expert museum staff to receive lasting recognition for the fleeting narratives they create with their objects, and can also show that a visitor was culturally aware enough to have gone to the museum during the exhibition’s short stay. While temporary exhibition catalogues have become increasingly ornate and popular, an older form of catalogue, that which lists the whole permanent collection of an institution with little contextual information, has become less common. Instead there are catalogues of sections of a permanent collection, modelled after those of temporary exhibitions.⁴²³ These provide ways for the experience of the museum to be consumed outside of museum space, engaging audiences in the museum’s artefactual narratives in a different way.

Collaborative Outcomes

In the summers of 2005 and 2006 there were two exhibitions designed by the same two institutions, showcasing the same nations, and shown in the same spaces, within largely the same contexts. However, as we have seen, they had radically different approaches to the nature of narrative and object in the exhibition, and quite distinct audiences received them very differently. One was a huge show that the museum continues to hold out as an example of how good they can be. The other

⁴²¹ Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Text: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Pittsburgh, 2001). 9.

⁴²² Hooper-Greenfield, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. 182.

⁴²³ See, for example, the catalogue of the V&A’s British Galleries, Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Britain 1500-1900* (London, 2001).

came mostly under the public radar, even after getting positive reviews from critics. Between the two they covered the scope of museum exhibition style, and pointed the way to a more internationally recognised National Museum of Scotland, which, though not present in 2005 or 2006, would bring together the universal museum and the national museum to create yet other new narratives in the future.

Whether the partnership with the State Hermitage will continue is yet to be seen. However, the mere presence of these two exhibitions showed the promise that the National Museum of Scotland is believed to have as an emerging large national museum in a capitol city. The Hermitage exhibitions were the first large international collaborations taken on since the creation of the Museum of Scotland and the amalgamation of the Royal Museum into the National Museums of Scotland management group. Being able to attract and produce big temporary exhibitions like these shows the increasing stability of the institution after a series of major overhauls to its identity and role. The new narratives that the two temporary exhibitions brought to various British and Scottish objects helped situate the artefacts themselves also in the wider international context, and perhaps strengthened their value to their home institution.

However, that identity as the museum of a nation still finding itself after political devolution was not, of course, completely solidified merely by hosting a series of exhibitions from another national museum. The next chapter will look at an exhibition jointly assembled by all the national cultural institutions of Scotland that attempted to produce new ideas about where and what Scotland is. This exhibition, put on as a travelling show for the Year of Highland Culture in 2007, again engaged with ideas of narrative and nation as seen through objects, and opened a window into how the National Museums of Scotland were, and are, involved in producing images of the nation and its history.

What, and Where, is Scotland?:
Fonn's Duthchas: Land and Legacy and Highland 2007

It would seem disingenuous to head a chapter with such a basic question. Objectively, Scotland is pretty easy to locate. It is the northern third of the island also comprising England and Wales, to be found in the sea between Ireland, Scandinavia, and mainland Europe. So much for the 'where'. The 'What' presents a few more challenges, but it too is fairly simple. Scotland is a devolved semi-autonomous governing region, part of the larger United Kingdom. It is exactly here, though, that the problems begin to emerge. That is what Scotland is at the time of writing. However, devolution is a fairly new thing, and the powers of the Scottish Government, formerly the Scottish Executive, are subject to change. Also possibly mutable is Scotland's status within the UK. The main election promise of SNP, currently in control at Holyrood, was a reconsideration of the issue of independence for Scotland.

'What' and 'where' have long been at the heart of the nationalist, and nationalism, project. They are the things that must be defined for a national identity to be created. One of the main premises of nationalism is what many theorists, including Tom Nairn, have identified as its inherent duality or paradox. National feeling relies simultaneously on modernity and history.⁴²⁴ The technology of modernity – mechanised printing, vernacular education, and the rhetoric of global connectedness – is needed to spread the word of nationalism to the masses that make

⁴²⁴ For much more on this, see work by Tom Nairn, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Anthony Smith, among others.

up the nation.⁴²⁵ At the same time, these masses need to believe that they are only the latest incarnation of a timeless national past. Without the weight of history behind them the elites who serve as spokespeople for the new movement have no legitimacy.⁴²⁶

This sort of creation process for the nation was seen primarily in the nineteenth century, and that early version of it will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter. However, it is also a constant process. In contemporary national settings the creation and shoring up of national ideals is done much less self-consciously than previously, but the undertaking is the same. Scotland, with its complicated relationship between nation and state identities, is even more susceptible to the constant reiteration of identity than other countries. Some of the ways in which this is done are quiet – the flags, signage, and other detritus of everyday life discussed by Michael Billig in his work *Banal Nationalism*.⁴²⁷ Others are altogether different events, more specifically delineated as national, and meant to focus attention on the nation. One of those is the centre of this chapter: the 2007 Year of Highland Culture, and particularly its associated exhibition which travelled to various sites around Scotland over the year. Looking at this event will allow for discussion of the role of the Highlands in Scottish identity, how material culture is meant to represent prevailing political roles, and how history is put to the service of the present.

The Highlands and Modern Scotland: the Year of Highland Culture 2007

Even now, mapping exactly where ‘the Highlands’ are can be difficult. Different people all have their own definition. One of the most prevalent modern definitions is the area covered by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the VisitHighlands tourist bureau, as well as the Highlands and Islands parliamentary district⁴²⁸ – the counties of Caithness, Sutherland, Ross and Cromarty, and Inverness,

⁴²⁵ See Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

⁴²⁶ For more on the role of the elite in nation-building, see Hroch, *Social Preconditions of Nationalist Revival*.

⁴²⁷ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

⁴²⁸ Highlands and Islands Enterprise, <<http://www.hie.co.uk>>, VisitHighlands, <<http://www.visithighlands.com>>

as well as most of Argyll and Bute and Moray counties and the council areas of Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles.

Inverness has long been the centre of Highland life, acting as a rival to the Glasgow-Edinburgh industrial and cultural belt of the south.⁴²⁹ In the last few years it has undergone a period of rapid expansion in both cultural and technological terms, becoming one of the growth areas of Scotland. Part of this growth was the development of a new cultural strategy for the area. Inverness was at the heart of the movement to establish the Year of Highland Culture 2007 (later shortened to Highland 2007, which is the phrasing I will use from now on). It started when a bid was put forth for Inverness, and by association the Highland area, to be given European City of Culture designation for the year of 2008. This programme was started in 1985 to show ‘the diverse cultural wealth in Europe and the common threads that make us all European’.⁴³⁰ Cities compete vigorously for the honour and the associated leap in tourism and other funding it brings.⁴³¹ However, in October of 2002 Inverness was cut off the shortlist, and the honour eventually went to Liverpool, official City of Culture 2008.⁴³²

Immediately after it was announced that InvernessHighland – as the bid had been titled – was off the shortlist, plans were made for an alternate role for the area. This was the beginning of the Highland 2007 planning, though the timing was not settled for much longer. At first it was to be in 2008, just as planned. Then it was referred to for 2006, and finally for the year of 2007. In its very first incarnations, Highland 2007 was just a way to use all the effort that was put into the European Capital of Culture bid, without it going to waste because of bureaucratic decisions.

⁴²⁹ Inverness has a population of 52,580 in 2004, according to the Highland Council, <<http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourcouncil/highlandfactsandfigures/highlandprofile.htm>>. This contrasts with Glasgow’s 580,690 and Edinburgh’s 448,624. It is by far the largest population centre in the Highlands and Islands however.

⁴³⁰ European Commission – Culture website <http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc413_en.htm>

⁴³¹ Glasgow 1990, the last British winner, experienced a series of positive results from its participation. See Margaret Ryan, "Boost Continue from Culture Win," *BBC News Online* 30 October 2002. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2375339.stm>>

⁴³² Official website at <<http://www.liverpool08.com/>>

Some sort of effort to showcase Highland culture was going to be made. The form was not certain, but the ideals were.

Funding and support came both from Scottish administration units, such as the Executive and the Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and also from UK-wide bodies like the Heritage Lottery Fund and private companies and corporations, or community boards. Events were also a mix of the governmental and the local or personal. In addition to the ‘flagship’ events such as the launch party or the touring exhibition (of which much more later), anyone could apply to have their event included in the master calendar of Highland 2007 activities [image 5.29]. In this way, it became an amorphous amalgamation of both specially planned occasions and normal events which were reframed as particularly ‘Highland’. But what does it mean to be branded ‘Highland’? Examining why and how this area of Scotland is considered unique will give a clearer view of how those ideas were fostered in 2007.

The Highlands Throughout History

The most common vision of the Highlands is the one that dates to the age of Queen Victoria and her reign of ‘Balmorality’.⁴³³ However, this itself comes from the earlier years of Walter Scott and George IV, and was honed into its packaged ideal by Thomas Cook and Hollywood. Thus, it is necessary to go both forward and back in time from the late nineteenth century in order to understand how the Highlands came to have the place they do in the Scottish psyche.

Hugh Seton-Watson identifies Scotland as one of ‘the old nations of Europe in 1789’.⁴³⁴ This – the start of the French Revolution - is an interesting date to chose, especially when the statement is dissected a bit. The issue of definition of ‘nation’ has been dealt with before in this work, and is too complicated to reiterate in detail here. In short, a nation is a unified group of people, with common culture, memories, territory, which see themselves as similar to each other and different than

⁴³³ For more on this intriguing word, see Angela Morris, David McCrone, and Richard Kiely, *Scotland - The Brand: The Making of Scottish Heritage* (Edinburgh, 1995). And Angus Calder, *Revolving Culture: Notes from the Scottish Republic* (London, 1994).

⁴³⁴ Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States* (London, 1977). 7.

outsiders.⁴³⁵ Across Europe new ideas of nationhood were being explored, some violently. Given all that, is it true to say that at this moment in history, Scotland was a nation?

Forty-three years before Seton-Watson's date, in April 1746, two armies were fighting on Culloden Moor, outside Inverness. On one side were Scottish Jacobites, supporters of the claim of the house of Stewart to the throne of the United Kingdom. On the other was a mix of English and Lowland Scottish troops, under the control of the Hanoverian Duke of Cumberland. Two parts of Scotland were fighting each other over a distinct difference of opinion about the direction in which government should go in the future. This is hardly the act of a strong, unified nation. After the defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden, the Lowland/English vision of Scotland was made to prevail, by stripping the Highlands and their inhabitants of any ways of life or material goods that were visibly different from those practiced elsewhere. This was an attempt to eliminate the Highland/Lowland, Catholic/Presbyterian, Gaelic/Scots/English divide that had persisted in Scotland for centuries, and that had been made visible through the Jacobite risings of the eighteenth century.

So, in 1789 Scotland was still recovering from the emotional scars of an uprising. Though Seton-Watson does go on quickly thereafter to say that Scotland was living in a state under the control of another nation, his statement of nation-ness still creates a unity within Scotland that did not yet exist solidly. The first groups of travellers went to, and reported from, the Highlands beginning soon after the Jacobite defeat in 1746. Due to the demoralising effect of the final battles and the following Proscription Acts, the area was deemed 'safe' for the intrepid few, such as Thomas Pennant and James Boswell.⁴³⁶ These travellers and their accounts were one of the first steps in integrating the Highlands into a new idea of Scotland. However, it was some time later that the conflict was removed enough for the Highland-ness of Scotland to appeal to a mass audience. The propaganda for the Union prioritised

⁴³⁵ This definition owes thanks to the works of Anderson, Gellner, Smith, Brubaker, and others.

⁴³⁶ Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland 1769*. James Boswell, *Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (1775).

visions of the past over the political discussions of the present, which helped to create a unified culture.⁴³⁷

In 1814, Walter Scott published his first novel. *Waverley* was subtitled ‘*Tis Sixty Years Since*’ and recast the final Jacobite struggle in heroic, romantic terms.⁴³⁸ It was precisely the sixty years of the title that allowed this to be done. With the passage of time fact becomes memory, and allows for the formation of nostalgia and myth. Myth can then be integrated into the story of the nation, the ‘romantic past’ that theorists such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson deem indispensable to the formation of national ideals.⁴³⁹ *Waverley* and Scott’s other historical novels became wildly popular outside Scotland – particularly among the elite classes of England and Germany.⁴⁴⁰ This added to the fervour for a Scottishness flavoured with Highlandism that had been started with the publications of James MacPherson’s *Ossian* poems in the 1760s. A craze for all things culturally Scottish took over across Europe and the Americas. Because of the ways in which the Highlands came to stand in for Scotland as a whole, these Highland cultural symbols gradually overtook previous ideas of primitivism and backwardness.⁴⁴¹ Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century Europe and the rest of the world began to see the Highlands as a part of Scotland, whereas before it was all barbarity and wildness.

This view from outside is crucial to the formation of identity, national or otherwise. By the early nineteenth century there was a growing level of comfort with the idea of the Highlands within the rest of Scotland as well. In 1822 King George IV visited Edinburgh. Though monarchs had been nominally the heads of Scotland as well as the rest of the UK since the Union of the Crowns in 1603, this visit marked only the second time in those centuries in which a reigning royal had come to Scotland. The visit was engineered and stage-managed by Walter Scott, and included a large dose of so called ‘Highland’ iconography and pageantry. All the burghers of

⁴³⁷ Murray G. H. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789* (London, 1997). 32.

⁴³⁸ Walter Scott, *Waverley or ‘Tis Sixty Years Since* (Edinburgh, 1815).

⁴³⁹ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁴⁴⁰ For more on this see Murray Pittock, ed., *The Reception of Walter Scott in Europe* (London, 2006).

⁴⁴¹ Murray G. H. Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester, 1999). 43.

Edinburgh had been instructed to order new tartan suits and the King as well came head-to-toe in brilliant plaid. There were pipers and military demonstrations, folk singing and Gaelic poetry.⁴⁴² The Royal visit gave an official seal of approval on the Highland vision of Scotland.⁴⁴³ It was now safe for Scottish identity to include the Highlands, rather than marginalising them as had been previously the case.

And now we come back to Victoria, who greatly expanded on what George IV and Walter Scott had started, and invented the Highland's role in the public image of Scotland. Victoria loved the Highlands and her new residence at Balmoral Castle. Her reign is connected in the public imagination with romantic Highland views, stags in the mist, and tartan in all possible forms. This is an earlier version of what is now marketed to tourists as 'Scotland'. Many of the symbols that had traditionally been 'Highland' became, by the Victorian era, visual shorthand for 'Scotland'. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century Scotland politically and culturally became more comfortable in its union with the United Kingdom. However, as differences between actual cultures in the UK moderated there was a desire to cling to a certain degree of identifiable 'separateness' in Scotland, to emphasise the largely superficial separation from the more powerful England. The trappings of Highland culture were an easy, non-confrontational way to do this. 'The symbols, myths, and tartans of the Highlands were appropriated by Lowland Scots as evidence of their distinctive culture. The irony is that until then the Highlands had been reviled as barbaric, backwards, and savage.'⁴⁴⁴

Material culture thus has long been important in constructions of the Highlands. Objects were the clearest way in which the Victorian Balmoralist Highlands were projected throughout Britain and Europe. Queen Victoria ordered tartan curtains for the newly decorated Balmoral Castle, thus starting off a trend for tartan in all forms and styles.⁴⁴⁵ The tartan object became a stand-in for Scottishness,

⁴⁴² John Prebble, *The King's Jaunt: George IV in Scotland, August 1822; 'one and twenty daft days to go'* (Edinburgh, 2000).

⁴⁴³ Murray G. H. Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London, 1991). 88.

⁴⁴⁴ David McCrone, *Scotland - The Brand*. 57.

⁴⁴⁵ Murray G. H. Pittock, *Scottish Nationality* (Basingstoke, 2001). 85.

where it used to be an overt statement of difference within Scotland.⁴⁴⁶ However, tartan was not the only object of Highlandism that became materialised as a symbol of identity. In fact, this type of Highlandism is often commonly referred to as the ‘biscuit tin’ tartanry. Highland scenes that echoed the qualities of sublime and awe that had been looked for by earlier generations of Highland tourists were painted on all manner of consumer goods, from soap dishes to tea towels to the aforementioned biscuit tins. In this way a degree of Highland identity was embedded in products which otherwise would have had little connection to this type of northern Scottish identity. In later years, after the initial appeal of Victoriana had faded, new material visions of the Highlands developed, focussed around tourist goods such as whisky and shortbread, as well as the kilt and bagpipes of earlier years. These objects, which inhabit the liminal space between saleable commercial goods and tourist souvenirs, are a way in which the idea of the Highlands is made tangible.

In certain ways this materialisation of tourist vision happens in any location that draws visitors. However, there are several reasons why the phenomenon in the Highlands is of more interest than the similar processes in New York or Paris. Firstly, as was mentioned above, ‘the Highlands’ are not defined, or definable, in the same spatial and historic ways as other geographic spaces. Thus the material objects of Highlandism serve as signposts to identify an unmappable location. They also identify in their shapes the ideas that have been, and are, tied to the land. While a tourist in New York may return from there with a branded apple, or a miniature yellow taxi, and a visitor to Paris can easily purchase a keychain version of the Eiffel Tower, these are icons of a different sort. They are iconic incarnations of a very specific place. Their near-universal recognition gives them the power to invoke those places to which they have been tied.⁴⁴⁷ Highland objects, though, get their power from the exact opposite – the lack of specificity makes them much larger, and more comprehensive. Meanings apart from the geographic or touristic can be mapped onto their material forms, to change according to contextual cues. In that way, even

⁴⁴⁶ Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image*. 87.

⁴⁴⁷ See work such as MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, MacCannell, *The Tourist*, Tom Selwyn, ed., *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth-Making in Tourism* (Chichester, 1996), Chris Rojek and John Urry, ed., *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory* (London, 1997).

though museum curators in Scotland have sought to move beyond the ‘tartan and bagpipes’ vision of Scottish material culture,⁴⁴⁸ those very objects have, because of their cultural ubiquity, the same multivocality as more ‘traditional’ museum artefacts which are never seen outside the display case.

Material culture has always been part of producing the varying images of Scotland throughout time, and as we have seen, the Highlands were given the largest role in creating those materials and their associated identities. The Victorian tartan image was slightly overtaken by the later Kailyard vision of bucolic farming communities and the striving young lad, and that in turn faded in favour of a return to the militaristic Scot picture during and after the World Wars. However, all of those iconic images of Scottishness foreground a Highland identity in one way or another. Only the brief inroads of a Red Clydeside, socialist worker persona made any dent in the hegemony of a Highland-dominated public perception of Scottish identity. There has been a complete reversal from historically, when Scottish identity was in conflict with Highland identity, to now when it is subsumed within it.

Creating the Modern Highlands

Today the tourist industry is a major part of the Scottish economy, and a large portion of the images that tourists carry with them when they come to Scotland are Highland ones. Because of the strength and staying power of this iconography the Highlands, or at least a tourist-ready version of them, are vitally important to Scotland economically and politically. However, in reality the Highlands, though now recovering from the economic and demographic collapse that followed the Jacobite defeat, have long been much less prosperous than the rest of the nation. The Year of Highland Culture had to walk a fine line between showcasing the Highlands as they are and were, and the Highlands as the tourists imagine them to be.

The tourist image of the Highlands is influenced by Hollywood productions like *Brigadoon* and *Braveheart*, and is largely still the aforementioned Victorian vision of tartan, heather and mist. In this way it is removed from time, aloof from the

⁴⁴⁸ For more on why this was, see full discussion in Chapter 1.

influences of modernity and change.⁴⁴⁹ This is common in touristic incarnations, and the rhetoric is present all through material promoting the Highlands.

...the Highlands are still a special place and a place apart, enjoyed not only for their unspoilt environment but for their particular sense of the intertwining of past and present. In such atmospheric Highland settings, Neolithic folk, Bronze Age warriors, Picts, Vikings, and clansmen need only your imagination to come alive!⁴⁵⁰

An image is presented of somewhere that the normal processes of time do not occur. Not only is the image removed from time – it is also removed from any particularly identifiable location. The Highlands of tourism are generic and unmappable. This makes them more easily accessible, and also elides any potentially confusing differences between types of Highland experience. The image that is left is one of sanitised, generalised, and universalised tourist destination. Through these processes, the Highlands are presented more as an idea than as an actual place, which is common when an area is repackaged for tourism.⁴⁵¹

The idea of the Highlands in the tourist presentations is also one of the rural countryside. Despite claiming the relatively large city of Inverness as its centre, the vision of the Highlands – both within and without the particular constraints of Highland 2007 – is overwhelmingly non-urban. In a way, this focus merely reflects the geographical realities of Highland Scotland, an area that encompasses a majority of rural space, and is culturally and spatially removed from the urban Central Belt of the Edinburgh-Glasgow axis. However, the conflation of rural with Highland also has to do with the ways in which images of the urban and rural have been constructed over time. Raymond Williams has written that ‘the contrast of country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society.’⁴⁵² He traces the construction of the

⁴⁴⁹ David McCrone, *Scotland - The Brand*. 200.

⁴⁵⁰ VisitHighlands History and Heritage, <<http://www.visithighlands.com/about/history>>

⁴⁵¹ Craig Fees, "Tourism and the Politics of Authenticity in a North Cotswold Town," in *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth-Making in Tourism*, ed. Tom Selwyn (Chichester, 1996). 130.

⁴⁵² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973). 289.

British (and largely English) country/city divide through literature and finds that particular attributes and qualities are ascribed to both city and country over the passage of centuries. 'Clearly ideas of the country and the city have specific contents and histories, but just as clearly, at times, they are forms of isolation and identification of more general processes.'⁴⁵³ The most fixed of these general processes is also the one with the most resonance for the idea of the Highlands packaged for Highland 2007 – that of the country as land of the past.⁴⁵⁴

Privileging the notion of the Highlands as a rural land in close proximity to the romantic and wild past helped present a more accessible scene for the audiences expected at Highland 2007. International tourists, a major expected audience for the Highland 2007 events,⁴⁵⁵ had to be given at least a taste of what they expected when coming to the Highlands. This meant that the vision projected at Highland 2007 events had to, in some extent, match those which dated back to the romanticism of Balmoral, and avoided mentioning the place of the Highlands in the twenty-first century. Though Dean MacCannell argues persuasively that tourists seek authentic experiences,⁴⁵⁶ they also look for inauthenticity, especially when it better matches their internal vision of what should be seen.⁴⁵⁷ For them authenticity lies in how well the 'reality' they are seeing matches what they expect to see. They do not want to be disillusioned by a version of the Highlands that deals with telecommuting, bed and breakfasts, wind farms, or any of the other realities that have supplanted Victorian romantic ideals.

While the place- and time-lessness of the Highlands were being constructed by the tourist board and other agencies, those very attributes were increasing in relevance in the actual Highlands. Though the Highland area had experienced a

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 291.

⁴⁵⁴ See Ibid. 297.

⁴⁵⁵ One of the stated aims of Highland 2007 is the return of a Scottish/Highland diaspora and others from 'key target areas across the world'. See Vision, Aims, and Objectives, <<http://www.highland2007.com/vision-aims-and-objectives.html>>

⁴⁵⁶ MacCannell, *The Tourist*.

⁴⁵⁷ George Ritzer and Allen Liska, "'McDisneyization' and Post-Tourism: Complementary Perspectives on Contemporary Tourism," in *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, ed. Chris Rojek and John Urry (London, 1997). 107.

resurgence in population, language, and culture in the last several decades, the growth was not uniformly spread throughout the massive area called ‘Highlands’. A ‘Gaelic Renaissance’ began in the 1960s outside the Highlands with members of the diaspora becoming interested in the distinctive language and culture of the area. This led in the 1970s and 1980s to a series of more political movements and government policies directed at supporting the use of Gaelic in Highland communities.⁴⁵⁸

However, this was just a different version of the same ignorance about time and place. These policies assumed that the language of ‘the Highlands’ was, and always had been, Gaelic before the forced imposition of English.⁴⁵⁹ However, this has never been the case. Norse has had a strong influence on the area, as well as Scots, English and French. The Hebrides, Orkney, and Shetland all have very different histories and identities than that which is considered stereotypically ‘Highland’ as well.

All these complications are just a quick way to show the multiple layers that had to be present in Highland 2007. Most of them were showcased in the flagship event of the year – a touring exhibition comprised of objects and documents from the three major national culture institutions, the National Museums of Scotland, the National Galleries of Scotland, and the National Library of Scotland.

A Very National Exhibition

Fonn’s Duthchas: Land and Legacy was a nominally Highland exhibition that was actually national on many levels. It took objects from three national collections, toured them to several sites around a nation, and presented itself as an exhibition about a nation – or at least a region of a nation which was critical in the formation of national identity. All the other exhibitions profiled in this work have either been permanent galleries or temporary shows. *Fonn’s Duthchas*, in contrast, was a travelling exhibition. And though temporary exhibitions and their travelling cousins have many features in common, it is useful to distinguish between the two, as their differences mean some large changes for the objects they feature.

⁴⁵⁸ Sharon MacDonald, *Reimagining Culture: History, Identities, and the Gaelic Renaissance* (Oxford, 1997). 6.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 36.

Both temporary and travelling exhibitions bring together material from loan institutions, transport it to a different space, and display it for a limited time at a host institution. There are varying degrees of control for contents, narrative, and arrangement held by both loan and host museums. In this much, then, the two forms are equivalent. However, a temporary exhibition is a singular collaboration between the institutions involved. It is a unique show, created for a particular institution, for show in a given period of time, and will never be seen in that form again. Similar shows may have been produced, as was seen in *Treasures from the Smithsonian Institution* and *Nicholas and Alexandra*, but the particular exhibitions seen in Scotland were original and ephemeral. Travelling exhibitions, alternatively, are created by a loan institution and then travel out to several different hosting museums. It is these type of exhibitions that are most common in the modern era of museology, as the costs of creating a large exhibition can be mitigated by the fees paid by each host exhibition that applies to host it. Creating a travelling exhibition can also help large national museums abide by their mission to expose the collections to wider audiences. The Smithsonian is especially fond of building travelling exhibitions, with SITES (the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service) having created over 1500 separate exhibitions in its half-century of existence, with about 50 shows out on the road in any given year.⁴⁶⁰ The ubiquity of the travelling exhibition, then, adds an extra level of importance to the rarer temporary show. As we have seen, press reports and in-house publications were keen to stress the individual nature of the temporary exhibitions held in Edinburgh, as well as the fact that they could be seen nowhere else.

Travelling exhibitions are perhaps missing that prestige of rarity. However, they bring with them their own levels of meaning for the objects that they showcase. Because they are seen over a span of time in a variety of spaces and contexts, the narratives and objects within the shows have a opportunity to change and be changed. The value and meaning of artefacts alter when they are moved. Each new space brings with it a new reading of the narrative and a alteration in

⁴⁶⁰ SITES Press Service, <<http://www.sites.si.edu/about/faqs2.htm>>

interpretation.⁴⁶¹ The Highland objects presented in *Fonn's Duthchas* were, by necessities of space and social context, read very differently in Edinburgh than in Inverness or any of the other spaces throughout Scotland to which it travelled. The constant movement to which the exhibition was subjected meant that the narratives of identity and history contained within it were continuously subjected to reinterpretation and re-evaluation. Too often the museum is seen as holder of static history. This is not true even in the so-called permanent galleries, but it is even less tenable in relation to the travelling exhibition. We have seen how objects brought into a different space for a temporary exhibition change both themselves and the space in which they are shown. When this process of alteration is repeated over and over again for a year, as it was in Highland 2007, the objects and their meanings are in constant flux as they adapt to fit each of the spaces and contexts in which they are seen.

Quite apart from any theoretical meanings and uses of the travelling exhibition, though, it had other uses in the particular context of Highland 2007. The Highland region is often seen as being geographically and culturally apart from the capital in Edinburgh. This separation was one of the reasons why there is a history of conflict over where Highland-identified objects should be displayed. Many of the objects which curators in Edinburgh list as the most interesting or aesthetically-pleasing of the Celtic cultures are displayed at local museums in the Highlands, Perthshire, and other locations, rather than at the national museum.⁴⁶² This makes no one happy, it seems, because it keeps the national museum from having a 'complete' collection, and yet the local museums still miss out on many artefacts that they feel deserve to be seen closer to their original geographic and social context. The travelling nature of *Fonn's Duthchas* allowed this to be addressed, however momentarily. By moving the objects out of Edinburgh to a variety of locations, more audiences were engaged, objects were evaluated in relation to other remnants of Gaelic culture, and the perceived or actual cultural hegemony of the capitol was

⁴⁶¹ for more on the theory of objects and global movement see Lury, *Global Culture Industry*. especially chapter 2.

⁴⁶² Mentioned in oral history interviews with David Caldwell, Hugh Cheape and George Dalgleish.

dissolved briefly. It was also an overt statement of nationness. By going almost literally from one corner of the nation to another, the boundaries of the nation, of Scottishness, were re-established, even if tacitly.

Originally *Fonn's Duthchas* was to be 'curatorially quite complex', with a central narrative about what the Highlands were and are in Scottish identity.⁴⁶³ This was downscaled to be more of a celebration of Highland culture, illustrated with the material and visual objects from the collections of the three institutions. The exhibition was meant also to 'use language, music, poetry, and art to provide a unique insight into the Highlands and the people who live there'.⁴⁶⁴ This gets at some of the ambivalence of the exhibition goals – it was to bring Highland objects back to their people, in part to acknowledge complaints about a hoarding of culture in Edinburgh,⁴⁶⁵ but it was also to attract new visitors to the Highlands, in some ways by treating the area itself as a museum piece. Gordon Rintoul, director of National Museums Scotland, said that

we will work with contributors across the Highlands and Islands to bring the richness of Highland culture to the widest possible audiences. We strongly believe that the exhibition will promote international tourism, inspiring visitors to explore the Highlands of Scotland.⁴⁶⁶

It was also a way to 'showcase Highland culture past, present, and future, giving people across Scotland the opportunity to join in the Highland 2007 celebrations.'⁴⁶⁷ These multiple audiences – international and British tourists, and Scots both local and diasporic - as well as the many narratives that can be construed out of a group of supposedly Highland objects, gave *Fonn's Duthchas* its power.

Many of the differences between *Fonn's Duthchas* and previous exhibitions are related to the different structure of the experience, not to the content. Temporary

⁴⁶³ Interview with Hugh Cheape, 9 February 2006.

⁴⁶⁴ Scottish Executive, "Highland 2007 on the Horizon," 4 August 2005.
<<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/news/releases/2005/08/04115913>>

⁴⁶⁵ see later discussion of the Lewis Chessmen and arguments over where they belong.

⁴⁶⁶ Gordon Rintoul in Scottish Executive, "Highland 2007 on the Horizon."

⁴⁶⁷ Alison Magee, Chair of Highland 2007 and Convener of Highland Council, in *Ibid.*

exhibitions, such as the Smithsonian and Hermitage case studies from previous chapters, come from the collections of a loan institution, are assembled in a space at the host institution, and then stay there for a pre-arranged amount of time before being packed up and sent back to from whence it came. The objects are stripped of their normal context, but they are settled into a new context with other artefacts from their same home museums. In contrast, *Fonn's Duthchas* was a travelling exhibition, and more than that, was an amalgamating one. By moving to four different locations throughout its yearlong display – Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (Inverness), Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (Glasgow), the National Museum of Scotland (Edinburgh), and Museum Nan Eilean (Stornoway, Isle of Lewis)⁴⁶⁸ – the objects were subject to a constant alteration of context. Each museum had a slightly different way of putting on the show, and surrounded it with a different permanent collection. This, of course, changed the way in which the objects were seen. The Inverness and Stornoway museums are overtly ‘Highland and Islands’ focussed, with Inverness asking visitors to ‘pop in and discover the real story of the Highlands’ and Museum Nan Eilean ‘holds collections of objects, photographs, prints and paintings and archives illustrating the archaeology, social, domestic and economic history of the islands.’⁴⁶⁹ In contrast, the National Museum of Scotland devotes itself to telling the material culture history of all of Scotland, and Kelvingrove is a collection of both objects and art, with no overriding narrative thread winding through the collections.

In these four very different situations, it seems clear that the material would mean different things. Curators are very familiar with the impact of moving objects to new spaces.

...the actual placing of a thing is absolutely vital, its context. So if you take things from the one building and move them into another people don't recognise them, they don't perhaps link them with their original placing...people feel they've never seen the objects before. Which is actually quite encouraging. Take a thing out of its normal place and redisplay it in a new

⁴⁶⁸ The touring schedule went thusly: Inverness, 13 January – 17 March 2007; Glasgow, 6 April – 10 June 2007; Edinburgh, 29 June – 2 September 2007; Stornoway, 21 September – 1 December 2007.

⁴⁶⁹ Website of the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (emphasis theirs), <<http://www.invernessmuseum.com/index.htm>>, and website of Museum Nan Eilean, <<http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/museum/musabout.htm>>

building and people will be pleasantly surprised.⁴⁷⁰

The removal and recreation of narrative context is something that has been addressed, but it is worth a second look now, given the repeated nature of the movement around *Fonn's Duthchas*. Everything that has been said before about the design and implementation of temporary exhibitions is heightened if the objects are moving more than just from home to away.

The meaning and context of *Fonn's Duthchas* was impacted by the nature of its formation as well as the pattern of its movement. The exhibition contents were made up of objects that normally do not speak to each other – and are not even expected to share a common language. There is a large divide in the theoretical literature between objects of ‘art’, objects of ‘history’ and objects of ‘archives’. The institutions involved in *Fonn's Duthchas* all embody their separate sphere, while also crossing the boundaries.

The National Library of Scotland is a copyright library, and as such receives, or can request, a copy of each book published in Britain and also holds a large proportion of any global literature about Scotland.⁴⁷¹ It is used by academics, students, and the general public as a traditional research library space. However, it also has collections of historically important documentary sources that it presents in temporary exhibitions in a space separate from the research rooms. Many of the objects in the collections of the National Library could, in a different context, be seen as historical artefacts. This elision of boundaries and categories is typical, but is not as often acknowledged in the theory of museology. The National Gallery, also, holds objects that could be seen either as art or history, depending on context. Opened in 1850, the Gallery was charged with protecting the artistic heritage of Scotland.⁴⁷² It has displayed its pictures in styles that echo the changing trends in art

⁴⁷⁰ Interview with Hugh Cheape

⁴⁷¹ It is designated as a Legal Deposit library, which give it these rights under the Legal Deposit Libraries Act of 2003,

<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2003/ukpga_20030028_en_1>

⁴⁷² National Galleries of Scotland – Introduction.

<<http://www.nationalgalleries.org/aboutus/page/1:165/>>

display.⁴⁷³ However, some of its collections are displayed in the Museum of Scotland as historic artefacts, as objects from the time in which they were made.

These definitions, as well as the breaking of them, are not unique to the Scottish institutions. Rather, it is common to archives, libraries, and museums throughout the world. Each of these three categories of cultural institution has its own way of displaying, using, and understanding objects of all types, and the public expects different things from each. The dual naming of both Inverness and Kelvingrove – both ‘Art Gallery and Museum’ - demonstrates the degree to which each identity has to be signalled separately, even when contained within the same collection space. Also, while both art and history are deemed things to be on public display, archive objects are usually removed from this – witness the naming of Museum Nan Eilean, though its collections are mostly what would be deemed archival. The art object is elite, the history object is populist, and the archive object is hidden.

How, then, can an exhibition function when it is made up of all three of these disparate elements? Eliminating the original plan for an overarching narrative helped somewhat, as it allowed the exhibition to become

a sort of celebration and a serendipitous taking of items that were significant from the respective displays of the National Library, ourselves [the National Museum], and the National Galleries and putting them together with lots of graphics and so on.⁴⁷⁴

If each object is just presented on its own merits, without the net of narrative, it becomes at once more and less significant. Context and the issues of changing meaning retract, as it is not meant to have any meaning, but it must be a stronger piece individually. The political imperatives of the exhibition also helped to gloss over what might have normally been major stumbling blocks to creating a coherent exhibition under the constraints of different context and different collections. The exhibition was orchestrated to support and encourage the wider Year of Highland Culture, Highland 2007. Because of this, it had to be in line with the political

⁴⁷³ for more on this see Prior, *Museums and Modernity*.

⁴⁷⁴ Cheape interview 2005.

message of the project, best elucidated by the then-First Minister of Scotland, Jack McConnell, just as the celebrations began. He said

History has not been kind to the Highlands. The Clearances of the eighteenth century led to a decline and stagnation that threatened the region's language and its distinctive view of the world. Highland culture was in danger of disappearing. But all that has changed. The Highlands has experienced a revival which few believed possible. No one who visits from now on can deny this is a region firmly on the way up. Population decline has been reversed and the economy is going from strength to strength. And the renaissance in Highland culture has been dramatic... The next twelve months will be a tremendous showcase for all that makes the culture of this area inspiring ... But the Year of Culture will be good for the whole of Scotland too. We can all learn from the region's cultural renaissance and how we can celebrate our identity by combining our rich heritage with all that is good about modern Scotland.⁴⁷⁵

Here again is the historical dichotomy discussed above where the Highlands are both not Scotland and all Scotland. For a devolved Scottish Government only a decade old and still establishing itself, the Highlands were an important image to include in governmental policies, while the government itself was ensconced in Edinburgh.

With all these political concerns, it is not surprising that curators felt the exhibition to be more about politics than about any museum or curatorial strategies.⁴⁷⁶ Beyond the aspects of celebration and national collaboration, the aims for the exhibition as designed by the government harkened back to historical ideas of the museum display, and focussed on ideals of 'treasure' and 'multitude'. The *Fonn's Duthchas* travelling exhibition was to show the treasures of the three national collections which had connections to the Highlands, and it was to show as many of them as possible.⁴⁷⁷ This led to a muting of individual objects, except when they were especially powerful, either in visual scope, such as the iconic large-scale paintings contributed by the National Galleries, or in historic resonance. Curators and visitors may have felt that there was no interesting narrative, but certain patterns

⁴⁷⁵ Jack McConnell in Scottish Executive Press Release, 12 January 2007.
<<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/news/releases/2007/01/12113611>>

⁴⁷⁶ Cheape interview 2005.

⁴⁷⁷ Hugh Cheape interview

can be traced now by looking at specific objects, how they were made part of the exhibition, and what they have to say about the Highlands and Scottish identity.

Some very small objects have large voices, and are known in spirit even if they have never been seen in person. These are truly icons, of the type described both by Walter Benjamin and by Dean MacCannell.⁴⁷⁸ The *Fonn's Duthchas* exhibition made use of these type of iconic objects because of the political pressures, the lack of contexts and narratives, and the audiences expected. Well-known icons can retain largely the same power regardless in shifts to their message, and so are particularly well suited to travelling exhibitions. All the objects included in *Fonn's Duthchas* can be considered the icons of their various collections, because of the missions of the exhibition – to showcase the best of Highland objects, whether they were documentary, art, or historic. The Archives contributed objects such as a copy of Walter Scott's *Waverley*⁴⁷⁹ and a copy of the book *The Lyon in Mourning*, a ten-volume history of the Jacobite cause that also had pasted-in mementos, such as a fragment from the dress of Flora MacDonald.⁴⁸⁰ These are typical objects for a library, but they also had material that is a bit more ambiguous, such as a portrait of prize Highland cattle.⁴⁸¹ Iconic images such as Antonio David's portrait of Charles Edward Stewart⁴⁸² were furnished by the National Galleries, as well as perhaps lesser-known pieces such as a modern artistic installation by Will Maclean.⁴⁸³ The National Museum also mixed relatively unknown objects with its more famous artefacts.

The Lewis Chessmen

The National Museum of Scotland is full of iconic objects of all shapes, sizes, and meanings. However, out of all of those, the Lewis Chessmen are the key artefacts in the National Museum of Scotland – at least from a public recognition and

⁴⁷⁸ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." MacCannell, *The Tourist*.

⁴⁷⁹ James Hunter, *Fonn's Duthchas: Land and Legacy, The Scottish Highlands: A Contested Country, Gaidhealtachd Alba: Tir fo Dheasbad* (Edinburgh, 2006). 41.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 70.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.* 109.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.* 30.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.* 113.

marketing standpoint – and their history makes them integral to the Highland culture in the museum [image 5.30]. But before looking at what happened when the Chessmen went back to Lewis we should investigate how they got to be icons in the first place. These clever carved ivory chessmen with intertwining Celtic motifs are one of the most lauded and marketed objects in the National Museum of Scotland today. They were originally found in a cave in on the Isle of Lewis in 1831, though the details of exactly where and how they were discovered are a bit disputed. It may have been a ‘peasant of the area’⁴⁸⁴ who saw them in a sandbank. Perhaps they were uncovered by the erosion of a beach, and the gradual exposure of an underground cavern.⁴⁸⁵ There is even mention of them being seen in something closer to a house-structure.⁴⁸⁶ However they were exactly discovered, it is clear that this was sometime prior to 11 April 1831.

This was the date on which the collection or hoard of chessmen were exhibited to a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. They were brought to Edinburgh by ‘Mr. Roderick Ririe, a merchant in Stornoway’⁴⁸⁷ and the antiquaries were suitably impressed with the 93 chessmen, with their elaborately carved expressions and decorations. The Proceedings records that ‘the natural result of this would have been the acquisition of the entire hoard by the Society’⁴⁸⁸ but for some unspecified problems - mostly probably lack of funds - the Society missed out.

The chessmen toured the country several times before being split up and distributed among several collectors and several institutions in the United Kingdom. A Mr. Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe selected ten pieces, and the rest of the collection was offered to the British Museum. Kirkpatrick Sharpe was a noted Scottish antiquary and artist, and he later managed to acquire a single lone chessman from the Isle of Lewis. Not much is recorded about this, but after Kirkpatrick Sharpe died in

⁴⁸⁴ Fredric Madden, "Historical Remarks of the introduction of the game of Chess into Europe, and on the ancient Chessmen discovered in the Isle of Lewis," *Archaeologica* XXIV (1832). 212.

⁴⁸⁵ Daniel Wilson, *The Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1851). 567.

⁴⁸⁶ "Donations to and Purchases for the Museum," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1888-1889). 9.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 10.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

1851 his collections were sold in Edinburgh. The eleven chessmen were purchased by Alfred Denison, first Baron Londesborough. Lord Londesborough was an avid collector in the 1850s, especially focussing on classical, medieval, and Renaissance decorative pieces. Other objects from his collection are currently in the British Museum.

The Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland reports in its 1888 and 1889 volume that the collections of Lord Londesborough were ‘recently exposed to sale in London’, and that the eleven chessmen were purchased by the Society of Antiquaries for the National Museum.⁴⁸⁹ They were immediately displayed in the museum, and have been popular ever since. They are currently displayed in the Kingdom of the Scots section of the museum, in the side meant to display Scottish links with the Norse and Viking cultures. They are also held to say something about the role of sophistication and fun in medieval Scotland, counteracting commonly held assumptions about the backwardness and warlike character of Scottish society at this time.⁴⁹⁰ They are items that visitors constantly seek out, and are drawn to. They have been chosen to represent the collections on publications created in the National Museums of Scotland, from maps of the exhibits to postcards and replicas in the shop. They are the faces of the Museum of Scotland, and as such of Scottish history as a whole.

However, there has been controversy around them as well. How Scottish is something found in the Hebrides, probably made in Scandinavia, and exhibited across the United Kingdom? Communities on Lewis and Uig have agitated for the chessmen’s return to the Hebrides. Curators at the museum reject that call, instead saying that if they were to be returned to a ‘homeland’ they should most likely be given to museums in Norway or Iceland. The British Museum has laid claim to its group of the chessmen as symbols of their collection as well. In London, just as in Scotland, you can go home with your very own chessman, or a poster proclaiming that you have stood in their presence. Many visitors to the British Museum do not even realise that a much smaller number of the figures reside in Scotland. However, at the end of 2007 Alex Salmond, the newly-elected Scottish First Minister and head

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid. 11.

⁴⁹⁰ Interview with Hugh Cheape, 2005.

of the Scottish National Party, promised publicly to bring the British Museum chessmen back to Scotland,⁴⁹¹ a call that was equally celebrated and mocked and that re-inflamed older arguments about the ownership of Celtic cultural patrimony in the UK.⁴⁹² These issues are still ongoing, with a compromise being brokered in late 2009 which will see 24 of the British Museum's chess pieces joining 6 from the collections in Edinburgh embark on a travelling exhibition of their own to Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Shetland, and Stornoway.⁴⁹³

Given all this controversy and contested identity it is both easy to see why they would be included in a Highland Culture exhibition and also why they might be confusing to the messages of the exhibition. In the exhibition catalogue, the chessmen are the figureheads of the last section, titled 'C   leis an fearann?: Who owns this land?'. A king from the set of chessmen sits impassively looking at the reader, as the page goes on to ask

Can any single group or person lay absolute claim to this landscape? People past and present have shaped the land. They laid down successive cultural layers that have enriched the landscape, the language, and the traditions of the region. This is the legacy of the Highlands, enhanced by the new Highlanders...we believe there is a sense in which the land belongs to everyone.⁴⁹⁴

By placing the chessmen at this closing point in the narrative, a case is being made for the universality of the Highland experience and culture. In some ways the chessmen are the most 'Highland' of the objects in the *Fonn's Duthchas* exhibition.

⁴⁹¹ Arifa Akbar, 'Salmond Makes First Move in Battle to Win Back Lewis Chessmen,' *The Independent* 26 December 2007.

⁴⁹² Paul Kelbie, 'Salmond Gambit for Return of Chessmen: First Minister Supports Celtic League's Call for the Restitution of Treasures,' *The Observer* 6 January 2008. See also Margaret Hodge, 'Lewis Chessmen are Pawns in Salmond's Political Game,' *Scotsman Online* 27 January 2008.

⁴⁹³ The tour will start at the National Museum of Scotland from 21 May – 19 September 2010, then go to Aberdeen Art Gallery (7 October 2010 -8 January 2011), Shetland Museum and Archives (29 January – 27 March 2011) and Museum nan Eilean (15 April – 12 September 2011). See 'New Tour for Lewis Chessmen,' *NMS Press Release* 1 October 2009.

⁴⁹⁴ Hunter, *Fonn's Duthchas*. 118.

They meet both of the criteria that the National Museum used to designate objects as Highland – they were found in the Highlands, and also demonstrate the design patterns that have come to be associated with Celtic or Highland goods.⁴⁹⁵ There is also no ambiguity about if they are geographically Highland, because if they are accepted as Scottish rather than Norse, the Isle of Lewis is definitively covered under the ‘Highlands and Islands’ designator. However, they are speaking for more than the Highlands exactly because of their aforementioned iconic value. Even if Lewis wants them for the Museum Nan Eilean, they are seen to be more powerful than any other type of local archaeological artefacts. They have acquired iconic resonance because of their unique form, imbued as many of them are with a rare and wry humour, and also because of their presence in the collections of major institutions. Whether the Museum Nan Eilean would be so keen to have them if they had not already become immersed in this web of iconic meaning in London and Edinburgh is questionable.

So, the Lewis Chessmen were one of the exhibits in the touring exhibition *Fonn’s Duthchas* that was put on as part of the Highland 2007 celebrations. They were included because of both their Highland-specific story and their wider iconic recognition. They also managed to embody part of the story that Highland 2007 wanted to tell – one of a region with a long and glorious history of innovation that led to influences which spread beyond the area to gain worldwide acclaim. The chessmen are considered to be ‘Highland’ because of their narrative of discovery and their material form, even if they are sometimes used by the museum to enhance other sorts of stories as well [image 5.31]. Not all the objects in the exhibition, however, met these criteria, and thus some had to be framed as ‘Highland’ in a different manner.

The Union Brooch

The narrative arc in the catalogue for *Fonn’s Duthchas* is very much about the ‘placeness’ of the Highlands – the land, and the people who belong to the land, and who have been shaped inextricably by the land. One of the large sections of the

⁴⁹⁵ These criteria come from the interview with Hugh Cheape.

exhibition brings this to the forefront by exploring the space that has been occupied by the Scottish Highland landscape over time.

The Highlands and Islands are one of the most beautiful regions in the world, but prior to the nineteenth century they were generally seen as cold, sinister places. A different view of the Highlands grew as steamships and railway networks made them more accessible to the new breed of tourist who delighted in this scenery of vast rugged mountains. Although mapped on the very edge of Europe, the Highlands and Islands are at the forefront of global environmental and political issues. The subjects of ownership, land-use and conservation generate huge debate.⁴⁹⁶

This introductory paragraph to the ‘Mapping the Landscape’ section of the exhibition gives way to subsections about maps, geologists, and Highland wildlife. The last subsection is titled ‘Industry and Infrastructure’, and the largest caption is given to object number H.1991.54.1 from the collections of the National Museum of Scotland.

This object is a gold brooch set with ‘scotch pebbles’, and was made in Edinburgh in 1893 by Peter MacGregor Westren [image 5.32]. It is in the form of ‘a garter set with two shields surmounted by a crown’ and was made to commemorate the Act of Union of 1707 and also the marriage of the Duchess of York on 6 July 1893.⁴⁹⁷ In its everyday home in what was the Museum of Scotland, this object is displayed in the ‘Victorians and Edwardians’ section, next to other similar brooches [image 5.33]. It is neither the most ostentatious nor biggest of the brooches on display, and if it were not for the advertising card displayed with it, this particular object would be hard to differentiate from those around it. The advertising card identifies the stones used and labels the object as an ‘authentic’ souvenir of the events mentioned above [image 5.34].

The ‘Scotch Pebble’ form of jewellery, though begun in the 1820s, developed as a fashion in the 1860s, at first mostly among the English landed classes. This was when Queen Victoria began summering at Balmoral in Scotland, setting off a rage for all things tartan or otherwise distinctively Scottish. ‘Scotch pebbling’ was so

⁴⁹⁶ Hunter, *Fonn's Duthchas*. 72.

⁴⁹⁷ Accession record, object number H. 1991. 54. 1

named because it called for the substitution of polished stones from the beaches and Highlands of Scotland for the more normally used precious and semi-precious stones in ladies jewellery. Most commonly these ‘pebbles’ were types of agates, but malachites and jaspers were also used, especially those found around the Cairngorm Mountains. However, before we get more into the ‘what?’ of the brooch’s manufacture, it is worth knowing a little bit more about the ‘why?’ of its story.

As was mentioned above, this particular object is known as the ‘Union Brooch’, and was made to commemorate two distinctive historical events – the political Union of the Parliaments which took place in 1707, and the also political marriage union of the Duchess of York in 1893. The Duchess, or Princess Victoria Mary Augusta Louis Olga Pauline Claudine Agnes of Teck, as she was known before her marriage, though commonly called May, was a distant relation to the Habsburg court as well as a cousin to the future Kings of the United Kingdom. She was first engaged in 1891 to Prince Albert Victor, the heir to the throne, but he tragically died of influenza six weeks after the engagement was announced. Queen Victoria was very fond of May, though, and encouraged her new heir to propose to her in his brother’s stead.⁴⁹⁸ May then married Prince George, Duke of York, in a lavish ceremony in the Chapel Royal of Saint James’ Palace on 6 July 1893.

Even with this background and its overtones of Unionism and Victoria, the dual commemorative mission of this gem still comes across as contrived. The royal marriage is an obvious choice for the making of celebratory objects at the time. However, including the Union of 1707 seems like it may have been more of a handy political statement than an actual clear link. This confusion might be why neither of the ways in which this object has been displayed has put much weight on the stated commemorative value of the object. In the Museum of Scotland, the story the brooch tells is one about the style and craftsmanship of Victorian and Edwardian accessory-makers. However, in the *Fonn’s Duthchas* exhibition, the emphasis is definitely directed elsewhere, to the land and placeness of the object.

⁴⁹⁸ It is worth noting here the connections with Nicholas II and Alexandra of Russia, who were a large part of Chapter 5. George was a first cousin of Nicholas II and May was also related to the pair. Queen Victoria was close to all of the four, and had a hand in orchestrating both marriages.

As mentioned above, the advertising card that accompanies the brooch devotes some space to telling the buyer about the two events the brooch commemorates, and also that it is an entirely authentic souvenir of these events. However, most space on the card is taken up with explaining which stones are used in the decoration. It tells the reader what type of stone they are, from where in Scotland they were taken, and also has a (usually aristocratic) name after each [image 5.34]. It is likely that these names are the people who own the land that each pebble was taken from. Even the gold of the brooch has a Scottish connection, as it was found, we are told, in the Kildonan gold rush of 1869 and 1870.⁴⁹⁹ There is even an outline map of Scotland, which is marked with each location from which pebbles now in the brooch were harvested. It is clear that the placeness of the selected pebbles was as important as the events that the brooch was made to celebrate. It emphasised a Scottish connection to the piece of jewellery by making evident the places that contributed to the making of it. This is why the object finds itself in the 'Landscape' section of *Fonn's Duthchas*, under a level of scrutiny not normally awarded to it. In its form, the Scotch Pebble brooch embodies a connection between land and Victorian sentimentality for Scotland, and the presence of an advertising card attesting to this gives the object more aura, more iconic value, than it would have otherwise.

The brooch is 'Highland', then, not because it was made there, or because it says anything about Highland history or culture. It is Highland because it literally encompasses stony fragments of the Highlands. It is made up of bits of the land, each personally labelled and located on the map, and given further weight by the acquiescence of the landlords mentioned on the card. In medieval Scotland reliquaries, such as the Monymusk reliquary, were used to carry the body of the saint to far-flung parishioners so that they might stand in the presence of glory. In the nineteenth century new, modern, types of reliquaries were created. Some of those were the small 'celebrity wood' souvenirs, like Mauchlinware, which gave the buyer a bit of the aura of a famous personage when they purchased an item made of wood

⁴⁹⁹ Hunter, *Fonn's Duthchas*. 78.

from their homes.⁵⁰⁰ However, I would argue that items such as this brooch did the same thing – except that in this case it was the aura of a place, and all its associated ideas of romanticism and wildness, that you were getting, rather than that of a famous person. It was this sort of iconic connection to the lands of the Highlands that made the Union Brooch an important object in the context of *Fonn's Duthchas*, where it is not so important in the context of the Edinburgh-situated National Museum of Scotland narrative. The process of framing an object for presentation in a new exhibition context also works the other way around. As the next iconic object shows, an artefact that is important in Edinburgh can be reframed to be relevant to the Highlands in order to conform to expectations.

The Cadboll Cup

In creating the Highland 2007 exhibition, the institutions involved were given two mandates from the Scottish Executive. One was to show the best of their collections of Highland objects, and the other was to show as many of them as possible. The point of the exhibition from the political point of view was to expose as many people as possible to the ‘treasures’ of the Highlands held in the collections of the national institutions.⁵⁰¹ Given those imperatives, the focus had to be on powerful objects that were visually arresting and did not need much explanatory context to be understood. The Lewis Chessmen, though small in stature, were the sort of visually impressive objects organisers thought audiences would want to see. The National Galleries of Scotland had the large and impressive paintings with iconic Highland scenes. In order to provide a material counterweight to this, the National Museum of Scotland staff was under some pressure to provide ‘treasures’, and this led to Highland connections being overstated or created where academically they might be in doubt.

The Cadboll Cup is a silver mazer from the late sixteenth or mid-seventeenth centuries, and was acquired for the museum in 1970 at a cost of £33,000, with help from the National Art-Collections Fund and a special Treasury Grant [image

⁵⁰⁰ David Trachtenberg, and Thomas Keith, *The Collector's Guide to Mauchlinware* (London, 1999).

⁵⁰¹ Hugh Cheape interview

5.35].⁵⁰² It was sold by the Macleod family, in whose care it had been for centuries.⁵⁰³ The cup had been on long-term loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, and had been displayed 'in facsimile' in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.⁵⁰⁴ The issues of authenticity that this brings up are intriguing. The museum already had a version of the object that the casual observer would not have noticed was anything other than authentic – the act of placing an object on display in museum space to some degree makes it authentic. However, this was not enough. 'Real authenticity 'triumphs over 'authenticity by association of space', and thus the museum was exalted to actually own the object.

It is highly decorated with a combination of Renaissance and Celtic iconography chased over both the cup and standing base in a 'West Highland character'.⁵⁰⁵ Little appears to be known about the cup's actual provenance, except that it belonged to the Macleods of Lewis, and was rescued from the fire of Invergordon Castle in 1801.⁵⁰⁶ There was some argument about whether some of the intricate Celtic decoration was much more modern than the object itself. The catalogue for the most recent temporary exhibition in which the Cadboll Cup was featured says that it is 'one of the most important cups [though]...nevertheless an enigmatic piece.'⁵⁰⁷ It is unmarked, but has stylistic similarities to communion cups and another famous brooch.⁵⁰⁸ The decorative scheme and unfamiliar shapes used in its construction led to thoughts that it may have been assembled from a variety of different parts, including a French wine goblet stem. Sheriff Norman Macpherson, who first presented information about the Cadboll Cup to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1888, discounted this. He said

No doubt any time since the commencement of the Celtic
furore, half a century ago, one familiar with Celtic ornament

⁵⁰² Fotheringham, *Silver: Made in Scotland*. 39.

⁵⁰³ "Donations to and Purchases for the Museum," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 103 (1970-1971). 244.

⁵⁰⁴ Robert B. K. Stevenson, "The Cadboll Cup," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 104 (1972). 306.

⁵⁰⁵ Fotheringham, *Silver: Made in Scotland*. 39.

⁵⁰⁶ Norman Macpherson, "Notice of a finely ornamented chalice of silver.," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 22 (1888).

⁵⁰⁷ Fotheringham, *Silver: Made in Scotland*.

⁵⁰⁸ The Lussit/Ugadale Brooch, National Museums of Scotland.

in its various stages prior to the Reformation might have devised similar patterns, but as far as we have been able to judge, no one has.⁵⁰⁹

Though he did not expand greatly on why he believed the decoration to be contemporary with the rest of the cup, Macpherson's assertions were later found to be at least somewhat true when a chemical analysis was done on the cup in 1970 and all the silver was found to be the same composition and age.⁵¹⁰ More recent analysis also found that all the silver in all parts of the cup 'had a consistently high silver composition' which seems to the analysts to re-suggest that the cup was made by both French and Scottish craftspeople, working together in either country.⁵¹¹ Much of the decoration on the cup is similar to that on other objects from the West Highlands, though it combines these ribbon and interlace designs with the common Renaissance motifs of foliage and 'strapwork with arabesque of leaves'.⁵¹² Stevenson is in no doubt that these decorations denote a 'Scottish and probably West Highland origin for it [the cup]'.⁵¹³ Modern curators, as well, see it as Highland, albeit an object that also embodies the 'auld alliance' between Scotland and France.⁵¹⁴

Under this criteria, the Cadboll Cup is a Highland object, and was worthy of being included in the caravan of treasures making its way through the country as the Highland 2007 travelling exhibition. However, Hugh Cheape, who was responsible for creating and curating the medieval galleries at the Museum of Scotland, and under whose remit the cup fell, believed that it is disingenuous to speak of there being any particularly 'Highland' objects at the time that the cup was made.⁵¹⁵ The land now designated and recognised as the Scottish Highlands were not considered separate from the rest of Scotland until much later. In the Museum of Scotland the Cadboll cup is displayed in the Renaissance section, and it is, like many of the objects in that area, meant to demonstrate the links that existed at the time between

⁵⁰⁹ Macpherson, "Notice of a finely ornamented chalice of silver."

⁵¹⁰ Hugh McKerrell, "Chemical Analysis of the Cadboll Cup and the Watson Mazer," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 104 (1970-1971).

⁵¹¹ Fotheringham, *Silver: Made in Scotland*. 40.

⁵¹² Stevenson, "The Cadboll Cup." 307.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ George Dalglish interview.

⁵¹⁵ Hugh Cheape interview

Scotland and the rest of Europe [image 5.36]. It is a central icon of the narrative constructed by curators to highlight the ‘Scotland as European’ element of the pre-Union Scottish Kingdom. Nothing is said about its Highland connections, and its French decorative styles are highlighted, and used in relation to the other objects displayed in that area to create a cohesive idea of Scotland as part of European network of trade and culture. The Cadboll Cup when seen there stood as a symbol of national connections which, as seen in the earlier discussion of the debate around the provenance of the Prince Charlie canteen set, were not recognised even 25 years ago. However, no matter how strong this version of the story told by the cup is in the permanent galleries, when it was displayed in the context of Highland 2007, it almost entirely lost the European Renaissance narrative it once had. Instead, another version of its story – one that is not necessarily any less correct – was highlighted in order to fit the desired narrative.

Land as Multivocalic Object

The cup, and all the objects investigated here, has these multiple narratives and multiple meanings because of the multivocalic nature of material goods. Depending on how they are framed by factors such as accompanying text panels, the neighbouring cases, the type of display, and the larger context of exhibitions in which they are presented, artefacts can be moulded to fit a wide number of needs. This narrative flexibility, as well as the fact that most people do not recognise their polysemic nature, makes objects perfect for the manipulation of identity and history that goes with the formation of a national identity. National identity needs constant reaffirmation. It cannot just be developed in the mid-nineteenth century and then passively accepted. Rather, it is the continuous attention of the government and cultural institutions that has caused national identity to become so constant and consistent that people cease to notice. Events such as Highland 2007 are a key way of refreshing people’s memories about who and what is included in the nation, along with how they, the members of the nation, are and always have been, separate from and superior to the rest of the world.

Part of creating or supporting an identity – national or otherwise – is identifying who belongs and who does not. The amorphous nature of the relationship

between the Highlands and the ‘rest’ of Scotland means that the identity needs to be continuously re-examined. The Highland 2007 exhibition *Fonn’s Duthchas* was a way to do that without having to really engage with any of the deep questions about how or who the Highlands are or were. Just as the objects in the exhibition could have told a variety of stories depending on which narrative was foregrounded by the context and labelling practices of the exhibition, so too can the Highlands as an object tell many stories. Depending on the time and the context, the Highlands either tell the story of savage nature, romantic defeat, de-politicised culture, emigrant diaspora, or new modern modes of life, among many other possibilities.

When particular nations go on display in exhibitions meant to highlight their culture and identities they always become an object in the exhibition themselves. This can be seen when looking both at the American Smithsonian exhibition and the Russian Hermitage exhibitions, as well as the constructed Scottishness of *The Wealth of a Nation*. However, it was in *Fonn’s Duthchas* that the pattern is clearest. This was perhaps because of the historical ambiguity of the Highlands, which left its identities more open to reinterpretation. However, it could also have been because of the time in which the exhibition was staged. By 2007 the political motives behind exhibitions and their styles were very different than they had been two decades previously. In 1989, at *The Wealth of a Nation*, there was little mention of any objects having particularly ‘Highland’ origins or identities. Much the same type of narrative was seen in the 1998 opening of the Museum of Scotland. At those two moments in time the overarching Scottish identity had not yet been solidified or politically realised. Because of this, the Highlandness of material culture had to be subsumed into the larger narrative – ‘Scotland’ was on show, and even if much of the symbolic value of that Scottishness was actually based on Highland motifs the fact was not acknowledged. However, in 2007 ‘Scotland’ was a recognised cultural and political identity, so marginal culture could begin to be reinstated. It is only when the cultural boundaries of the majority nation are congruent with the political boundaries of a state that that nation can allow other narratives to challenge its hegemony.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁶ This is quite a Gellnerian idea, though I may be taking it too far.

Highland 2007 and the travelling exhibition *Fonn's Duthchas: Land and Legacy* attempted to tackle the questions of who and what the 'Highlands' have been, and are today. Instead it led to a series of questions of who and what was Scotland, what role the Highlands had within it, and what stories objects can tell - and be made to tell. It was a very different exhibition than the others I have investigated in this work. The motives, the structure, the implementation, and the narrative all differ from more than they echo other exhibitions. While other exhibitions such as *The Wealth of a Nation* had a political edge, and other, such as *Beyond the Palace Walls*, addressed issues of identity within under-recognised sub-communities. However, *Fonn's Duthchas* did all this, along with a continuous programme of movement, within a Scottish context that was almost more politicized than the pre-devolution 1980s of the *Wealth of a Nation*. The Scottish National Party won a majority in Scottish Parliament after elections in May 2007, the first time since devolution that there was a non-Labour First Minister. Obviously this was well after the start of Highland 2007, and the project was planned several years before anyone would have predicted a nationalist government. However, the presence of the SNP fighting for, and settling into the seat of power did change the context for the Year of Highland Culture. The SNP are unabashed advocates for Scottish independence from the rest of Britain. Celebrating the historic and present identity of the Highlands – the area of Scotland that has always been most different from England – became, in the hands of an SNP government, an act of political propaganda greater than anyone involved in the original City of Culture bid would have expected.

However, notwithstanding these many and diverse differences, issues of space and context, aura and authenticity, still wound through *Fonn's Duthchas*, as through all the rest of the exhibitions. It is hard to tell now what the long-term effects of Highland 2007 and its exhibition will be, especially given its current sister-event, Homecoming 2009⁵¹⁷ but the questions raised in this first look are intriguing

⁵¹⁷ Homecoming Scotland 2009 is a year-long programme of events, similar in structure to Highland 2007, organised primarily by VisitScotland and the Scottish Government and focussed on attracting diaspora audiences. The national institutions are not officially involved in the programme, though several temporary display cases

glimpses on how modernity and politics uses museum artefacts to fulfil certain non-curatorial mandates. However, politics is not the only exterior force encountered by museums that exerts pressure to change their narratives. The age of modernity or post-modernity has also brought with it a compulsion to market the museum experience in the same ways as any other consumer good. These marketing mandates can do just as much, if not more, to alter existing curatorial and museological narratives than political ones. This is what will be explored in the next and final chapter, as we return to the permanent galleries of the Museum of Scotland, nearly a decade after opening.

have been mounted to honour Robert Burns and the Homecoming year at the entrance to the National Museum of Scotland. Though focussed on the whole nation rather than a specific region, the similarities in rhetoric between Highland 2007 and Homecoming 2009 are striking. According to official advertising, tourists should 'join us to celebrate the 250th anniversary of **Robert Burns**' birth, Scottish contributions to **golf and whisky**, plus our **great minds and innovations** and **rich culture and heritage**. (emphasis original). Homecoming Scotland 2009, <<http://www.homecomingscotland.com/default.html>>.

2006 and 2008

A New Image of the Nation:
Re-branding the Museum

Museums are not merely blank boxes which are then filled with iconic objects and narratives. As institutions they have aura, power, and impact, quite apart from the artefacts they house. Museums and buildings are objects themselves, and as such have iconic resonance. Museum architecture, as was seen in the process of finding a shape for the Museum of Scotland, can be critical to how the internal storylines are framed, and also how the institution itself is read. In the modern era especially it has become not enough to have a museum with beautiful contents. The shell that encompasses these contents has to be a statement as well.⁵¹⁸ However, it is not just the exterior that makes a museum iconic. The museum's status as a national institution provides aura – the museum can be representative of the whole nation, just as its objects can be representative of historical narrative. However, in order to take on this iconic role for the nation, the institution must be correctly framed and manipulated to fit the contexts and times in which it is seen, just as the meaning of artefacts are altered to echo specific exhibitionary goals. This framing of the museum within the nation is done by marketers. How the museum is marketed reflects the place that it and its narratives are seen to have within the contemporary nation.

⁵¹⁸ See Michaela Giebelhausen, "Museum Architecture: A Brief History," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (Oxford, 2006). 223-244. Also Michaela Giebelhausen, ed., *The Architecture of the Museum: Symbolic Structures, Urban Contexts* (Manchester, 2003). Also, Laura Anne Hourston. 'Romantic nationalism and modernity as competing narratives of identity in the Museum of Scotland, with reference to the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa'. PhD Thesis: University of Edinburgh, 2002.

The year 1998, when this work last encountered the permanent galleries of the Museum of Scotland, was an important moment for ideas of identity and nation in Scotland, but nothing stays unchanged forever. Scottish history a decade later, in 2008, was presented much differently, and that decade of alteration reflects wider changes in the museum's context socially and politically, much as the role of an iconic object can change from era to era. In order to look at the changes critically, it will help to begin by establishing how relations were between the museum and the nation in Scotland, both before and after the seminal moment of 1998.

National museums in Scotland were legally born on 30 September 1985, when the National Heritage (Scotland) Act came into effect. This gathered the Royal Museum of Scotland and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland under one umbrella organisation with other institutions to become the National Museums of Scotland.⁵¹⁹ Astute readers will notice that in fact the 'national' sobriquet was in use before that date in the title of the National Museum of Antiquities, whose collections were fated to make up the majority of the exhibits in the yet to be built Museum of Scotland. However, the changes brought forward in the National Heritage (Scotland) Act altered the relationship between nation and museum by creating a national museums service. The difference may seem small, but it was a step towards seeing Scotland as not merely a historic nation, but a vibrant and viable one. The Smithsonian Institution, the American national museums service, encompasses 19 museums and galleries, showing everything from spacecraft to fine art, some of which has only miniscule actual connection to America. This was one of the institutional models that the new National Museums of Scotland organisation was following. Expanding and redefining the idea of what things could fit under the umbrella of the 'nation' is a theme that will flow through this chapter, as we trace the recent re-branding of museums in Edinburgh.

After the inception of the National Museums Scotland, the staff and directorate of the Royal Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities was amalgamated. Thus, the scope of objects under the auspices of 'national' was widened. Historically the Royal Museum – first founded under the name Industrial

⁵¹⁹ Harvey, ed., *Royal Scottish Museum Final Report 1983-84-85*. Also see National Heritage (Scotland) Act, (1985)

Museum of Scotland in 1854 – was a receptacle for a wide variety of objects.⁵²⁰

It had been the museum of the Royal Society of Edinburgh at first, and changed into an Industrial Museum after the success of the London Great Exhibition in 1851.

However, even though the name was given for the Industrial Museum, it did not move into any sort of permanent public home until 1864-1865, when it also experienced another change in name, this time to the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art.⁵²¹ The Royal Society of Edinburgh described the state of the Museum in a 1869 letter to Prime Minister Gladstone.

The museum, in itself, combines the features of several museums formerly detached. It possesses large collections of natural history and geology, formerly the property of the University of Edinburgh, and associates these scientific collections with their applications to industry. In consequence of the interesting connection between science and Industrial Art, the Museum is frequented by crowds of persons at all periods of the year, and especially of the Artisan class.⁵²²

Eventually the museum was finished, and it became a centre of interest and intellect in Edinburgh as it went through a variety of name changes, finally arriving at the simple ‘Royal Museum’ with amalgamation in 1985. It continued in its space on Chambers Street as a collection of everything worth displaying from animals to art to machines, with very little attention paid to the Scottishness within its narratives – until the Museum of Scotland came along and shifted the context of its storylines and objects.

A New Vision of, and for, the Nation

There had been much discussion of where the new Museum of Scotland was going to be located prior to its development. In the end, to the consternation of a fair number of campaigners, it was decided to build the new national museum of the history of Scotland attached to the Royal Museum on Chambers Street, in the centre of Edinburgh. Supporters of this plan felt it would start the creation of a cultural zone in the city, with the Royal Mile just down the street, and also that it would situate

⁵²⁰ Waterston, *Collections in Context*.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.* 127.

⁵²² *Ibid.* 128.

Scottish history in an historically important area. Detractors felt that the Scottish history displayed in the new museum would be overshadowed by having the Royal Museum collection connected to it, and believed that it was just another way to show the lack of respect given to Scottish history by the bodies creating the new Museum.⁵²³ However, the decision was taken, and the sceptics were slightly placated by the addition of an independent entry to the Museum/ Earlier plans would have only allowed entry to the new institution through the Royal Museum.⁵²⁴

Other than location, the other major point of controversy in the process of planning the realities of the first systematically created museum of Scottish history ever built was the issue of naming. The predecessor to the new institution was the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, more commonly known as the Antiquities Museum. The committee appointed to look into the state of Scotland's museums – and to lobby for the creation of a new museum – in 1981 felt strongly about the need for a new name to go along with a major shift in how Scotland's material culture was presented to the public. They felt that the name 'Antiquities Museum' did not embrace a wide scope of objects, or excite public interest. The new museum, they felt, should be called the Museum of Scotland, and that

In choosing this name we wish to emphasise that the museum we have in mind will be the prime repository for artefacts reflecting the cultural heritage of Scotland. In our view this name should have an immediate appeal to Scots and foreign visitors alike. It is not necessary to include the adjective 'national' in the title (many great national museums...omit it) and indeed to do so would give the wrong impression of the range of the museum's collections.⁵²⁵

In 1981, this chosen name – the Museum of Scotland – could be all things to all people, while simultaneously positioning the new institution in the same league as 'many great national museums'. This is indicative of the power that is given to names, and this will continue throughout the life of the institution that we are cataloguing here.

⁵²³ See Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland."

⁵²⁴ Benson, "The Architect's Vision: Designing for Content and Context."

⁵²⁵ Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland."13.

So it was that on Saint Andrew's Day, 30 November 1998, the Museum of Scotland opened its doors – both at its separate entry and at its multiple connection points with the Royal Museum. At the connection point on the ground floor, a circular tile was inlaid at the spot where one museum became another. This bore the legend that was to symbolise the relationship between the two institutions. If read when walking in the direction of the Museum of Scotland, the engraving read 'Scotland to the world' and, seen in the opposite direction, 'the world to Scotland' [image 6.37]. Thus it was that the slightly forced association between the two institutions was boiled down to a convenient sound bite, one that was meant to be embedded in public consciousness as firmly as it was in the fabric of the building.

It is questionable whether this slogan ever took root in the mind of visitors. It seems that from the very beginning the fears of the Williams Committee were realised, at least to some extent. They had advocated against placing the new museum on Chambers Street, predicting that it would be seen as merely an addition to the existing Royal Museum. While the objects, missions, and narratives of the two spaces were obviously distinct after the opening of the Museum of Scotland, public opinion had difficulty distinguishing them, or indeed, seeing why they should. There has never been much overt Scottishness in the narratives of the Royal Museum. Instead, the galleries there have focused on the world outside Scotland, with displays of British and foreign animals, Asian art, continental silver, Egyptian artefacts, and so on – a selection of the normal contents of a museum of everything. For nearly a decade this collection was coexisting with the much more modern and organised Museum of Scotland next door. Though both the museums were under the umbrella of the National Museums of Scotland organisation (along with the Shambellie House Museum of Costume, the Museum of Flight, the Museum of Country Life, and the War Museum) they each, like all of the other museums in the group, had their own visual logo and separate identity [images 6.38 and 6.39].

However, the corporate team of the National Museums of Scotland was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the elision and confusion between missions and institutions. In 2005 they embarked on a study of social attitudes, discovering that to many people

it was a little bit confusing which museums in Scotland

were in our group and which weren't and how they all relate to each other and how they communicated to the outside world...[these things were] perhaps not very clear and very emotionally engaging with the types of audiences we want to attract and feature.⁵²⁶

Given the differences in public perception, as well as the changing heritage context of Scotland, the corporate team and trustees decided that it was time to re-brand and re-envision the role of the umbrella organisation and of each museum within it. Over the course of a year they 'did some consultation with stakeholders internally and with people externally – either who visit regularly, occasionally visit, or never visit, and just kind of explored what they understood about us and what we stood for and so on'⁵²⁷ What a target audience understands about a corporate entity and what they stand for is put across in the modern era by brands. The brand is the distilled essence of a product, be it a consumer good or a museum.

The essential purpose of a brand is to distinguish one organisation's offering from that of another organisation, using names and distinguishing features such as slogans and symbols. Brands provide customers with an efficient mechanism for identifying a particular organisation.⁵²⁸

The brand is a series of ideas about the institution, organisation, or product it represents, but it also has a tangible presence in signs, promotional literature and other advertising media. Although the National Museums of Scotland, and all its subsidiary museums had been a brand before 2005, now it was due for a change because it was no longer felt to be accurately conveying the ideas behind the institutions, and thus was not functioning as an effective brand.

Part of the failure of the brand was in not conforming to public perception. There is only so much that a brand can do to alter mass consciousness. The market research and anecdotal evidence had shown that despite efforts to the contrary, people saw the two connected museums as one entity. Therefore, it was easier to change the brand to reflect the outside hegemony than to continue with a gulf between the corporate identity and the public one.

⁵²⁶ Holden interview.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Fiona McLean, *Marketing the Museum* (London, 1997). 122.

We found here that everyone is very confused about what the museum is called. The public call it Chamber's Street Museum or the Royal Scottish Museum, or whatever. A whole variation of names, and a lot of people already called it the National Museum of Scotland...⁵²⁹

With the launch of the new brand for the National Museums of Scotland on 30 October 2006, many names were changed, including that of the complex on Chambers Street. Several things that had been feared by the Heritage Committee members in 1981 had come to pass⁵³⁰ – the collections of Scotland's past were swallowed up and amalgamated with those of the Royal Museum, and the 'national' word that they had distained was inserted.

Naming the National

The rebranding of 2006 did other things than just change the names of the museums, but since that is the most outwardly obvious effect it makes sense to start there. The organisation became National Museums Scotland, dropping an 'of' that was deemed unnecessary. The institutions on Chambers Street were unified under the new name National Museum of Scotland, and all other museums in the group became unified name-wise by having their purpose bracketed by new bookends of *national* and *Scotland*. Thus the Museum of Flight became the National Museum of Flight Scotland, Shambellie House Museum of Costume became the National Museum of Costume Scotland, and so on. Interestingly, the word Scotland, though officially in the new names, was deemed to be necessary only in certain contexts where the location might be unclear. The National Museum of Scotland would always be called such, but within Scottish contexts it would just be the National Museum of Flight, the National War Museum, and such. The location would be implied by a knowledgeable audience, and thus would not need to be obviously signposted.⁵³¹

⁵²⁹ Holden Interview.

⁵³⁰ Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland." 13.

⁵³¹ "National Museums Scotland Brand Guidelines," (Edinburgh, 2006). 13. NB: This source were unnumbered in the original, so this and any following page numbers were assigned by the author.

These changes in name could be seen as merely a way to integrate a corporate identity and bring the group of museums closer together under the aegis of the larger National Museums Scotland identity. However, the way in which the new names were selected and imposed can also tell us something about the way the nation of Scotland is perceived, and what the role of these museums – and particularly the newly-dubbed National Museum of Scotland – was to be within it. The Williams Committee had said in 1981 that there was no need for the adjective ‘national’ to be used. What then had changed between 1981 and 2006?

The most obvious answer to this is that the nation of Scotland had changed. Although there had been several near misses for political devolution in the 1970s and 1980s, nothing changed in the political arena until 1997. That fateful year a referendum went through promising Scotland a devolved national parliament that would be in control of affairs formerly under the purview of Westminster. Education, culture, health, and other issues would now be dealt with at a Scottish level. This change brought the Scottish nation closer than they had been for centuries to having a Scottish state. Ernest Gellner says that nationalism is the ‘political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.’⁵³² This had been the rallying call behind movements for devolution, if not outright independence, and in 1997 it had been met. The political state and the cultural nation of Scotland were the closest to congruent as they had been since the Union of 1707. This was a major shift for the nation, and for its identity. When the Museum of Scotland opened in 1998 the Scottish state was just finding its feet. By 2006, it was well-established as a political entity, and while a devolved Scotland may not meet all the requirements for a political state – it does not yet have Max Weber’s classic formulation of an ‘agency within society which possesses a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence’⁵³³ - it is tantalisingly close.

Having a state changes the idea of the nation. If the nation is the cultural grouping of people that feel or imagine themselves to be linked, it will react differently when it is under the rule of a state that it feels comes from outside that imagined community than it will when it is under the control of something from

⁵³² Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. 1.

⁵³³ Quoted in *Ibid.* 3.

within. The reframing of the names of these national institutions could reflect a larger reframing of the nation that can take place now that devolution has been established. Culture is one of the aspects that the Scottish Government (formerly the Scottish Executive) has full control over. The National Archives of Scotland, the National Library of Scotland and the National Galleries of Scotland all join National Museums Scotland as the National Institutions under the oversight of the Arts and Culture department of the Scottish Government. Changing the name of the museums integrates them not only into the National Museums group, but also into a nation that is increasingly asserting its control over aspects of state policy. The ‘National’ tag can be seen as a badge of honour in the newly confident Scottish national state.⁵³⁴

Identity and belonging is not just asserted at the highest levels of government however. It is also signalled in little daily ways among all the members of the nation. Michael Billig discusses the importance of these ‘banal’ signals of nationalism and identity, and he also concentrates on the implicit identifying that goes on of the ‘deixis’, or a ‘continual pointing to the national homeland’.⁵³⁵ The Museum of Scotland may have implied that national connection, but it did not draw the audience into the nation explicitly. This becomes even more important if we return to the original pithy message of the Museum of Scotland. It was to show Scotland to the world. ‘The world’ is necessarily outside the nation of Scotland. Thus, while members of the Scottish nation may implicitly know that a Museum of Scotland is a museum of the nation, outsiders may not. The change in name flags this more clearly as somewhere that the outsider or tourist may go to explore things that are not of their national experience. By reiterating the ‘national’ label over and over, it asserts continually to both outsiders and insiders that here is a nation that can be made explicit, rather than continuing to be tacit and under the control of others.

There is also a strong value connotation to the word national. It has the weight of authority and truth behind it, as only ‘official’ things would have been

⁵³⁴ While I do believe that the Scottish devolution context is unique, there also has been a wider trend for inserting the word ‘national’ into institutions since the 1980s, such as the Public Records Office becoming the National Archives, so there is also an argument to be made for Scotland and its institutions merely conforming to a wider cultural fashion.

⁵³⁵ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*. 11.

given the honour of being deemed ‘of the nation’. Adding ‘National’ to the name of the Museum of Scotland served several purposes.

...it’s clarifying that these are the ones that have national status, and I think it is also an important quality stamp, so they are of national status and we want to recognise that in their naming, and also for people who are perhaps not frequent visitors, it says to them this is something worth seeing. It has a validity and encourages people to visit.⁵³⁶

People, because of the weight that we give to nations in modern society, recognise something national as something inherently more important, and more worth their time, as something not officially national. They also see it as something they should have seen or been involved with. As a member of the nation, you are expected to engage with the daily activities and identities of the nation, and as visitor to another nation, you are meant to gaze on them from afar. Both these things are now seen to be available at national institutions. A simple change of name can remind people of their obligation to the nation. This was easily identified right after the change in names at National Museums Scotland.

And in fact we’ve just done some research looking at awareness of the museums. And we asked people whether they’ve heard of the old names of those museums, and then we asked if they’d heard of the museums with their new names and awareness went up, even though it’s exactly the same thing. But suddenly because it’s the *National* Museum of Costume people think, yeah, I should have heard of that, I should have been there.⁵³⁷

Though in the past national identity, with its value and its weight, was able to be taken for granted, allowing the committee members of 1981 to say that many great national institutions omit ‘national’ from their name,⁵³⁸ the situation in Scotland and the world has changed to an extent where the explicit flagging for the nation at every turn is helpful in attracting visitors, funding, and quality assessments – the essential nutrients of a modern museum.

⁵³⁶ Holden interview.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Williams, "A Heritage for Scotland." 12-13.

The name change, in addition to increasing the positive attributes given to the museum, also eliminated some negative ones. While getting permission to remove the ‘Royal’ sobriquet from the Royal Museum of Scotland was time-consuming and somewhat controversial,⁵³⁹ it also removed the negative connotations that the old name might have had in a new devolved Scotland. The change emphasised that Scotland as a nation, rather than the monarchy, was in charge of official history, and also brought the contents of the institution in line with what was promised on marketing material. It also eliminated the possibly apocryphal worry that tourists encountering a ‘Royal Museum’ would expect a museum of the monarchy, rather than one of the nation.⁵⁴⁰

The Image of the Nation

The name was not the only change to occur during the rebranding. These name changes were also distilled down into a visual form – a new logo. Previously each of the museums had had its own logo, a visual symbol of its contents or purpose. The Museum of Scotland used a thistle, usually acknowledged as a symbol of Scottishness, and the Royal Museum had a lion rampant, the symbol of the Royal Family in Scotland. The other museums in the group had other visual incarnations of purpose. All of these were consigned to the dustbin, however, when the rebrand came in. In the newly integrated and newly national National Museums Scotland, all subsidiary museums shared the same logo, called the museum mark [image 6.40].

The mark represents the experience of enquiry and exploration, discovery and enjoyment. Graphically this is represented as questions and exclamation marks and suggests a cyclical process – visitors ask us for information, and we seek their views and challenge them to think in new ways as part of an ongoing dialogue.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁹ Tim Cornwell, "'Royal' museum title consigned to history," *The Scotsman* 14 October 2006. <<http://heritage.scotsman.com/heritage/Royal-museum-title-consigned-to.2818423.jp>>

⁵⁴⁰ Phil Miller, "Museum drops its royal title to avoid confusion among visitors; Queen gives her seal of approval to changing name of building after 102 years," *The Herald* 14 October 2006.

⁵⁴¹ *National Museums Scotland Brand Guidelines*. 12.

The mark made up of two question marks and two exclamation marks meeting in the middle to form a saltire cross, also mirrors the shape of the St. Andrew's Cross flag of Scotland. This logo is on everything from the signs at the entry of the building to official maps, from bags at the museums shops to staff nametags. The idea is that every time the mark is seen it will conjure up a set of very specific ideas having to do with the whole spread of national museums in Scotland.

In that way a logo functions in much the same way as any other museum icon. It is one small form that is meant to stand in for and represent many larger ideas. The Museum of Scotland, was, as we have seen in earlier sections of this work, intended to be heavily based on iconic objects from the very beginning. Now, with the rebranding, this was actually only intensified as the museum itself was iconised. It was meant to bring forward ideas of a newly strong and political Scottish nation, about exploration and discovery, and to do all that from just one small visual source – the logo as icon.

Icons Inside

It could be argued that the rebranding changes discussed so far are purely cosmetic and that regardless of new name or new logo, little had actually been altered. However, things changed on the inside – or at least the way the inside was presented – as well. With the amalgamation of the Royal Museum and the Museum of Scotland, the scope of objects on display shifted considerably. The Royal Museum, because of its industrial and scientific background, displayed a wide range of objects, generally arranged into a series of thematic galleries. Thus ‘Art and Industry since 1850’ shared the ground floor with ‘British Animals’ and ‘World in Our Hands’, about the science of ecological change, while upstairs the East Asian Art Gallery connected to ‘Modern Jewellery’ and then left you in ‘Ancient Egypt’. With the rebranding, all of this was now part of the National Museum of Scotland. Where before only the objects relevant to the history of Scotland had been labelled as being in any way national, now everything was.

In this way the new National Museum of Scotland mirrors other institutions considered to be national, but that yet say very little about the history of the nation. The British Museum is intended to be, and widely perceived to be, a national

museum. So is the Louvre in France. However, these are both closer to what Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach term a ‘Universal Survey Museum’, where the wealth and strength of the nation is shown not by its own objects but by how much of a complete set of things they have from other places.⁵⁴² While Duncan and Wallach focussed primarily on art museums and their aims to collect all the right internationally important artists, the same argument can be held for the internationally important national museum of objects. The British Museum and others like it say little or nothing about the nation in which it is situated, other than drawing a picture of past empire and glory through the sheer value and breadth of their collections. With the addition of the Royal Museum collections, the National Museum of Scotland became an intriguing hybrid of a small-scale universal survey museum and a self-consciously national history museum.

The corporate leaders of the museum realised that something more must be done to unify the collections than merely gluing a new logo on things, and so they envisioned a completely new and all-encompassing role for objects within the newly named space. When doing the research leading to the rebranding, the marketers noticed that the museum had

really diverse audiences, really diverse objects, so we said ‘What unites everything that we do?’ And we really came to the idea that it is the things, that we have the real things, and particularly in a virtual world that is increasingly a valuable commodity. We have the real things and the revealing stories behind them.⁵⁴³

This idea of ‘real things...revealing stories’ thus became the major theme of the rebrand, and it served to further highlight how iconic objects are created and manipulated to serve the museum. Unlike with the initial development of the Museum of Scotland, where the objects were meant to tell the story on their own, during the rebrand much more emphasis was put on drawing the story out of the object and making it explicit.

‘...For some people who are perhaps not regular visitors the objects might be interesting, but it is the stories behind them that were even more interesting...which meant that

⁵⁴² See Duncan and Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum."

⁵⁴³ Holden interview.

in our literature and other things we started to focus on the objects and the stories behind them.⁵⁴⁴

Here again we return to the idea of enquiry and exploration first hinted at in the logo. The corporate marketers wanted to make people aware of the stories behind the objects, but given the recent trend for increasing interactivity in museums, the other buzzword was engagement of the audience. So, ‘as well as objects we usually try and put a question, you know, something that catches attention and tries to involve someone in the objects.’⁵⁴⁵ The objects were still there as icons – meant to represent ideas larger than themselves – but they were also being used as hooks to engage an audience in their story, or whatever version of their story the museum wanted to tell.

New Museum, New Icons?

One of the main public complaints when the Museum of Scotland first opened was that the space was confusing, and there were not enough signs telling visitors where they were, or how to move around. This had been an aesthetic and architectural decision, and was modified only slightly since opening. However, the rebranding readdressed these issues and made some major changes. Literally overnight there appeared in all the galleries of what used to be the Museum of Scotland large freestanding signs. These signs laid out the themes that would be encountered in the gallery to follow, and they focussed on one particular object that was located within it. These objects were a mix of recognised icons, such as the Lewis chessmen, and new objects elevated to icon status. This combination was explained thusly:

There are some things that we think are iconic, and particularly people that don’t visit that much, they can be more motivated by a sort of celebrity object, something that is immediately recognisable, like Jackie Stewart’s Formula One helmet or the Lewis chessmen... So we wanted to really capitalise on those things, which are really strong assets of ours, but also for the people who perhaps feel they’ve been there, and done that, seen the Lewis Chessmen, we needed to intrigue them a little bit, in some of the more

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

unexpected objects in the museum.⁵⁴⁶

The objects were acting as guides in the narrative of the galleries, and also as literal signposts along the journey.

Our research has shown in the Royal Museum part of the building that they tend to stay on the ground floor, in the main hall and the immediate galleries. Very few people, like 10 percent of people, actually go upstairs, so to some extent we picked things that try to encourage people to go and explore, find other things that they perhaps weren't expecting.⁵⁴⁷

The objects, newly given icon status, were engaging people and luring them deeper into both the story and the space of the rebranded nation.

Mary's Jewels

It is clear from earlier examinations of the blockbuster exhibition phenomenon that certain categories of objects naturally attract the most attention from audiences. Among those, themes of opulence or tragedy are foremost. These blockbuster-marketing techniques were also applied to the selection of icons for the new signs and narratives that went along with the rebranding. Previously overlooked objects that held those storylines were given prominence, and tracing what they were made to say can tell us a lot about how new narratives were constructed to make some sort of sense out of a suddenly expanded collection and remit. Objects to highlight were selected on the basis of four criteria. Each object had to be visually striking, have an interesting story, represent the collections, and speak to different audiences.⁵⁴⁸ The choice was made by the marketing team, in consultation with curatorial, education, and design departments, and once objects were selected they were used by the rebranding effort in a variety of different ways. Perhaps most obvious was outside the building on a series of large banners advertising the museum. Each one featured a different object and a question relating to it, and an exhortation to the audience to 'come inside to find out' the answer to the question.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ criteria list from interview with Catherine Holden

The same group of objects and questions also appeared throughout new museum publications, such as maps and calendars of events. This meant that even as the museum as an institution was being rebranded, so too were the objects it housed.

In the Museum of Scotland half of the museum, one of the most obviously rebranded objects is a set of jewellery associated with Mary Queen of Scots. It was featured on one of the aforementioned new signs, which was placed right at the entry to the Kingdom of the Scots gallery. This space had been home to only two objects – one of which is the Monymusk Reliquary. The reliquary had been placed there, at the entry to the gallery and all alone in a white space, in order to highlight its role as an icon of the narrative to come. Leaving the space around it unadorned except for a small Pictish cross and a quote from the Declaration of Arbroath enhanced its aura and strengthened its iconic value. However, now that space is dominated by a freestanding sign touting the narrative explicitly, rather than letting the object draw people in quietly.

The main image on this sign is that of a heart-shaped gold and enamel pendent set with rubies, diamonds, and a cameo of Mary, Queen of Scots [image 6.41]. The same picture of the pendent is also used on an exterior banner, where it is found with the words ‘Who treasured me? Come inside to find out’.⁵⁴⁹ With the visitor’s interest piqued by this repetition, the sign has the effect of speeding people past the actual objects in the room in favour of finding this new, rebranded, icon. It can be found in a case of jewellery next to the ‘authentic replica’ of Mary, Queen of Scots’ coffin.⁵⁵⁰ In the case is the pendent and several other pieces of jewellery – a necklace of gold filigree beads, some painted miniatures, and a gold enamelled locket. The whole case is labelled as containing the ‘Penicuik Jewels’. However, while the Penicuik jewels are important and interesting, the cameo in question does not belong with them. Indeed, the Penicuik Jewels perhaps have more authenticity as relics of Mary, but are not chosen as icons of her.

⁵⁴⁹ personal observation, autumn 2007

⁵⁵⁰ This object is an authentic replica because while it is not the authentic casket, which is still located in Westminster Abbey, it is the authentic copy that was made under the orders of James IV and I to have shipped up to his mother’s subjects in Scotland.

The Penicuik Jewels – the gold filigree necklace, the miniatures and the locket [image 6.42] – were long in the possession of the Clerk family of Penicuik, who had acquired them by a member of the family marrying the great-granddaughter of Giles Mowbray, who was one of Mary's servants while she was imprisoned in England. Just before her death, Mary gave bits of jewellery to each of her servants.⁵⁵¹ The gold filigree necklace was probably made from beads of several bracelets given to Giles by Mary. The miniatures were likely not from Mary herself, but rather made to commemorate her and her son.⁵⁵² However, the necklace is the closest to an actual piece of jewellery worn by Mary that the Museum has. This relic of the Queen was donated to the museum after the efforts of two dedicated gentlemen raised enough money in public donations to buy the objects at a sale in London in 1923.⁵⁵³ The lot which contained the Penicuik Jewels also contained a fan of yellow silk and silver tissue with an ivory knob, 'a Ryal of Mary and Henry, 1565, one or two threads of Prince Charles' hair, a leather-covered casket, a small pair of scissors in silver filigree case; and a reticule and handkerchief'.⁵⁵⁴

The Penicuik Jewels have been exhibited just as many times as the cameo, and have a close personal relationship to Mary in their provenance. The cameo, on the other hand, was very likely not Mary's at all, but rather commissioned by her for distribution to her friends and supporters. It was bought by the museum in 1959, after it came up for sale in London. A special grant from the Treasury was needed, as well as money from the National Art Collections Fund and the museum itself.⁵⁵⁵ The identification of the cameo as Mary was 'confirmed by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and by their colleagues in London',⁵⁵⁶ and thus it was authenticated as of Mary in form, if not exactly in provenance. That remained a bit fuzzier, and like we

⁵⁵¹ Walter Seton of Abercorn, *The Penicuik Jewels of Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 1923).

⁵⁵² Rosalind K. Marshall, ed., *Dynasty: The Royal House of Stewart* (Edinburgh, 1990). 48.

⁵⁵³ NMS catalogue, object # H.NA 421-422, also "Donations to the Museum," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1923-1924). 17.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ Stuart Maxwell, "The Queen Mary Cameo Jewel Purchased for Museum," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1959-1960). 244.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 245.

have seen in the case of the Monymusk Reliquary, what was first unknown has become slightly more solid, just due to the passing of time.

In the first reports about the cameo it is said that

The history of the jewel is unknown. There is evidence, however, that mid-sixteenth-century monarchs were in the habit of giving mounted cameos of themselves as marks of favour; it is suggested that this elaborate jewel was probably given in return for a service of considerable importance.⁵⁵⁷

In 1986 the cameo was featured in a book on Mary, Queen of Scots, where its caption read: ‘Sixteenth century Scottish jewel made with a French cameo of Mary; probably a gift by her to one of her supporters.’⁵⁵⁸ By 1990, when the cameo was in an exhibition about the Stewart family, the caption read ‘The cameo illustrated is one of several of the Queen to have survived, and could have been commissioned by Mary from France or Italy for distribution to friends and supporters...’⁵⁵⁹ So, over the course of about fifty years, nothing new is actually learned about the cameo, but it is presented in a variety of different ways, which each remove the object a little bit from Mary herself. First she gave it away in return for a great service, then she gave it to one of her supporters, and in the end it is just one of many objects commissioned by her to be distributed on her behalf.

These subtleties are not elucidated in the rebranding of the object, however. The correct answer to the question from above about ‘Who treasured me?’ is evidently meant to be Mary, Queen of Scots. No other possible answer is provided. Mary is the icon, and an association with her is created in this object – which was probably selected over the more historically accurate relics of the Penicuik Jewels because it is more instantly recognisable. In the context of the rebranding, iconicity of form is just as important, if not more so, than iconicity of narrative. Thus, one object that is only tangentially related to a popular and tragic icon of history is made to stand in for her and her much more complicated story, just because it happens to be recognisable and saleable.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Rosalind K. Marshall, *Queen of Scots* (Edinburgh, 1986). 105.

⁵⁵⁹ Marshall, ed., *Dynasty*. 47.

Egypt in Scotland

Sometimes, however, it is not just one object that gets attention. Rather it is the sheer weight of a mass of artefacts, with one delegated to serve for the whole. In this case the one is a representative not only of a larger idea but also a larger collection. The majority of the Egyptology collection in the National Museum of Scotland was collected in the early twentieth century by the notable archaeologist, William Flinders Petrie. One of the most important archaeologists and contributors to development of thought about Ancient Egyptian society and material culture, he developed scientific methods for archaeology, and believed that knowledge could only be gained by attention to the smallest details.⁵⁶⁰ He was a member of the British School of Archaeology and was partially funded by the public and the Royal Society of Edinburgh so that they could acquire Egyptian artefacts for their museum. These objects had weight even at the beginning of their museum life. Just as Professor Petrie was to start a new excavation, James Dobbie, the then director of the Royal Scottish Museum put out a heartfelt plea. He said it ‘would be a reflection upon our national spirit as well as an irreparable loss to our museums’ if foreign governments had to fund the excavations. He went on to say that

Hitherto we in Scotland have given but meagre support to the work of exploration in Egypt, and the museum’s claims upon the results has been a proportionally restricted one. In England, on the other hand, the contributions are on a much more liberal scale and bear fruit each year in the addition of many valuable objects to the English collections. I would ask that a similar public-spirited liberality should secure for us such a share of the results of Professor Petrie’s labours as would help to place our collections on a level with those of England. I am not here referring to the great collections of the British Museum, which are on a level by themselves. But it is surely neither idle nor presumptuous to attempt to place our Egyptian collections at least on an equal footing with those of Manchester, Liverpool, Oxford, or Cambridge, to which at present they are inferior both in extent and in the variety and beauty of the

⁵⁶⁰ For more on Petrie see W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Seventy Years in Archaeology* (London, 2003 [1931]). And Margaret S. Drower, *Flinders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology* (London, 1985).

objects which they contain.⁵⁶¹

Being able to claim some of the many objects at that time flowing out of Egypt into the coffers of museums worldwide was seen as a necessary thing to retain the prestige of the collection as a whole. If Scotland missed out on these objects, the tacit understanding was, their museum would be seen as inferior not only to the British Museum, but to English local museums as well. Egyptian artefacts fell into the Universal Survey idea of ‘things you must have’ in order to be a complete collection.

Of course, they were then and have always been a big crowd-pleaser as well. The first modern ‘blockbuster’ exhibition was of objects from the tomb of King Tutankhamen, and they remain a go-to subject when visitor numbers need to be increased. Even in the early twentieth century, the public responded. Dobbie says that ‘it is unnecessary to enlarge upon the great and growing interest which the general public exhibit in the history and antiquities of Egypt, and the importance, from this point of view, of augmenting and improving our collections.’⁵⁶² And his plea for public donations to go to Professor Petrie in order to stake a claim for Scotland to the treasures uncovered there succeeded. Within three years the Egyptian collection in Edinburgh was so large that it was presented as evidence that the Royal Museum needed to expand. In 1909 the Egyptian collection was redisplayed and recased, creating an ‘open and clear’ display which attracted new visitors and made the objects seem new and exciting. The annual report for that year says that

...the effect referred to is really dependent on the provision of suitable space for the proper exhibition of the collection, and establishes a visible proof that the need for greater accommodation for the other sections of the museum is actual and urgent.⁵⁶³

The impetus for the recasing, other than to show need for new space, was the procurement of a group of new objects found by Professor Petrie, who’s connection with the Royal Scottish Museum had flourished, with him routinely travelling to give

⁵⁶¹ James J. Dobbie, "The Excavation of Memphis: Letter to the Editor," *The Scotsman* 2 November 1907. 11.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ "The Royal Scottish Museum: Need for Additional Accommodation," *The Scotsman* 17 December 1910. 10.

lectures in Scotland about his most recent finds.⁵⁶⁴ This was ‘a group of objects, one of the most important ever brought to this country from Egypt.’⁵⁶⁵ The group was a burial – the mummy of a woman, and all the objects found in the tomb with her.

Professor Petrie states confidently that no complete burial group containing such unique objects is to be found in any museum out of Cairo. The whole contents of the tomb are shown in a large case in which the objects are placed as nearly as possible in the relative positions in which they were discovered.⁵⁶⁶

Again we see that it is not the one glorious object that is important, but the mass of them, and the having of something that no one else displays. This attitude was not uncommon in the early twentieth century. Museums at that time did tend to focus more on the treasure or exotic value of their objects, and display rhetorics preferred the mass over the singular in designing exhibits. However, while the majority of other objects in the Royal Museum or the National Museum of Scotland are displayed very differently now than in the past, the Egyptian displays have come through changes - most notably in the 1970s, when they were joined by four huge murals representing aspects of life in Egypt, which remained there for more than 30 years⁵⁶⁷ - and then reverted to something very similar to their first displays in the National Museum of Antiquities.⁵⁶⁸ Unlike in many other parts of the museum, the trend for the singular and iconic has not triumphed there. The Egyptian artefacts remain displayed together, with the burial group still exhibited in a similar fashion to how it was discovered in 1909.

⁵⁶⁴ These were then reported on by the press: See for example "Recent Excavations in Egypt," *The Scotsman* 26 October 1909. Members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland also went to explore the excavations themselves and reported back in the press, such as William Bryce, "Recent Antiquarian Discoveries in Egypt," *The Scotsman* 23 February 1903.

⁵⁶⁵ "The Royal Scottish Museum: Need for Additional Accommodation."

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁷ Cyril Aldred, *Scenes from Ancient Egypt in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh* by Cyril Aldred, Formerly Keeper of the Department of Art and Archaeology (Edinburgh, 1979).

⁵⁶⁸ However, this 2003 renovation was always intended to be temporary, as the Royal Museum Project was already on the horizon at that point.

In the course of the rebranding, as we have seen, certain objects from the collections were chosen to be icons of the new museum, and to serve as signposts through the journey. One of the Egyptian artefacts is serving in this capacity, being placed on an outside advertising banner with the question ‘Where did I rule?’⁵⁶⁹ However, unlike the Mary Queen of Scots jewellery and other objects raised to the position of icon, it is not immediately evident which of the many sarcophagi or burial figurines this one is. The object is not presented in enough detail for the small differences that identify each sarcophagus to be visible, and since there is no sense of scale given, it could well be one of the many miniature figures of sarcophagi, called shabtis and meant to represent servants for the afterlife, that exist in the collection. A visitor looking at that marketing material will not necessarily be able to identify which object it is within the gallery filled with similar materials. Thus, even now it is the mass of the collection that is being highlighted, rather than the more common rare and solitary object that stands alone and different. The collection and the multitude become the object.

However, a bit more detailed searching can uncover the story of the individual object, and it is intriguing enough to wonder why the museum did not profile it publicly. Several museum marketing materials label the sarcophagus as that of Khnumhotep [image 6.43], and though his story is not elucidated in the museum, a search of Egyptology literature soon shows that Khnumhotep was a unique individual. He is at the centre of recent and ongoing debates about homosexuality in Ancient Egypt, as he and another man were discovered in a tomb together, which was decorated throughout with the sort of iconography that was normally reserved for married couples.⁵⁷⁰ In many pictures throughout the tomb, Khnumhotep is shown embracing the other man, Niankhkhnum, and touching noses with him, which was an accepted symbol for kissing and had been previously just seen between mixed-sex couples [image 6.44].

⁵⁶⁹ personal observance, autumn 2007

⁵⁷⁰ see, for example Greg Reeder, "Same-Sex Desire, Conjugal Constructs and the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep," *World Archaeology* 32(2) (2000). 193-208

Scholars are divided on the exact nature of Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum's relationship, with some saying that they could be brothers, or even conjoined twins. However, an increasingly large faction seems to be presenting them as the 'first gay couple in history'⁵⁷¹ and making cheeky reference to the jobs held by both men as the 'overseers of all the pharaohs' manicurists'.⁵⁷² Though the museum has the 'real thing', it seems that in this case they prefer to leave the 'revealing story' to the pages of archaeology journals and newspapers. The story of the real, individual, object has been swallowed by the need to emphasise the scope of the collection as a whole.

The two rebranded objects – the Mary Queen of Scots jewellery and the Egypt collection – both highlight different parts of the collections of the National Museum of Scotland and appeal to different audiences. By presenting them both in the same way through the newly rebranded marketing campaign the corporate heads of the museum were attempting to infuse continuity into what had been two very different institutions. To some extent they have succeeded. However, each of the two objects profiled here remains rooted in the separate narratives and display styles of its 'home' institution. A museum built on icons stays that way, as does a museum built on a mass of global collecting. However, that gap may be about to narrow. Another major issue for the National Museum of Scotland, other than the rebranding, is the ongoing renovation of the Royal Museum half of the institution. From April 2008 until the summer of 2011 the Royal Museum is closed to visitors while undergoing a major overhaul of both building and the artefactual narratives contained within the space. It will only be then that the National Museum of Scotland will truly come into its own as one institution.

⁵⁷¹ William Holland, "Mwah. is this the first recorded gay kiss?" *The Sunday Times* 1 January 2006. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article784046.ece>>

⁵⁷² John Noble Wilford, "A Mystery, Locked in Timeless Embrace," *New York Times* 20 December 2005. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/20/science/20egyp.html?ex=1292734800&en=8685e65a4d14445e&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>>

The Future of the Past

The National Museums of Scotland organisation was awarded thirty four million pounds of funding by a combination of the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Scottish Government, and they are adding to that with donations from charitable trusts, corporate sponsors, and individual donations. In total, they are expecting the project to cost about 46.4 million pounds. It is meant to ‘create a world-class, 21st century visitor experience for Scotland, and a showcase for international visitors.’⁵⁷³ The renovation will create a new ground level entrance to the Royal Museum building, sixteen new galleries, and is supposed to double the amount of objects on display. It will remain, however, a basically thematic and non-iconic museum. The major sections of the museum after renovation will be focussed on the natural world and world cultures – both areas that are covered in the museum already. The difference, other than an obvious update to display style, will be found as a result of the museum’s new identity as one half of the National Museum of Scotland. The Royal Museum has always been more a museum *in* Scotland than a museum *of* Scotland. Now, though, that will change.

What we want to do is make sure that threaded throughout the Royal Museum’s exhibitions are stories about... why they’re here in Scotland, what have they got to do with Scotland, and often about the people who went out and collected and found the objects or invented the objects who were Scots or traded with people internationally and so on.⁵⁷⁴

The displays of the Museum of Scotland half of the building will remain as they are, with a very few exceptions. They will persist in telling the story of Scottish history through material culture. But now they will not be doing it alone. The Royal Museum displays will, in their own way, be doing the same thing.

Thus, when the National Museum of Scotland is truly born as one cohesive whole in 2011, it will contain side-by-side narratives of national history through objects. They both present a different version of the nation however, reflecting

⁵⁷³ National Museums Scotland – Royal Museum Project
<http://www.nms.ac.uk/royal_museum_project.aspx>

⁵⁷⁴ Holden interview.

different times in society and different potential audiences. The older version, that of the Museum of Scotland, is the material manifestation of a nation unsure of itself. The weaker or less recognised a nation is, the more it must use obvious tools of nationing. When the Museum of Scotland was planned and first opened, its audience could not be expected to know or assume the history of the nation. It had to act in almost the same way as the first postcolonial museums – using the space for a constant reiteration of national history, complete with an implied oppressor and a narrative of struggle.⁵⁷⁵ To fund the new museum, the planners had to rely heavily on expatriate donors, a group whose national identity is strengthened by being physically removed from it. The projected audience for this museum was tourists, who needed to be told a history of Scotland that was more than tartan and bagpipes, and a national populace who had, by dint of British standardised curricula, been taught very little about how Scottish history differed from British. Because there was not the apparatus of a state enforcing national identity through Michael Billig's banal, everyday means, the museum had to do it much more overtly.

Now, though, the situation is quite different, and the view of the nation that will be portrayed in the updated Royal Museum will be reflective of that. Now that there has been a state, nation in the museum can be more tacitly presented. The message in many universal survey type museums is that the nation is so well recognised no direct statements need to be made about it. Visitors entering the National Museum of Scotland will know that they are stepping into national space. They will not need to be loudly told the importance of the nation. Instead, they can be left to establish links to the nation by themselves. There need not be a continuous narrative of nationness or chronology because it is assumed that that exists within each visitor, as part of their belonging to Scotland in some way. More use can be made of banal signifiers of belonging, like the setting up of a gallery of World Culture, and assuming people recognise its place as 'everything but us' – us in this case being members of the nation of Scotland, who have a rich and varied history of contact with others, and yet remain not them.

⁵⁷⁵ For more on this, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

Of course, it is hard to tell now exactly how the messages in the proposed new galleries of the Royal Museum renovation project will be read by visitors, or what changes will take place in social expectations by then. The idea is to have narratives of identity threaded through every exhibit, but who knows if they will actually be perceived by audiences. The displays of the two formerly separate museums are meant to be complementary, but it could be that the public continues to regard them as separate, or maybe they will appear too repetitive and it will be seen as only necessary to visit part of the museum. Visitors have a way of creating their own narratives, which sometimes correspond with what is expected, and sometimes go off in other directions altogether. This is a common issue when museums try to rebrand or renovate. Curatorial and public view points can be opposed, fashions can change faster than museums can adapt, and different audiences can be brought in at a cost of alienating established ones. A glance at some recent cases of rebranding can outline a few of these issues.

Rebranding and Reaction

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, also known as the National Museum of Design, was one of the first museums to attempt a full scale rebranding exercise with the purpose of repositioning itself as more than a musty old collection. In 1988 the advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi coined the slogan ‘An ace Caff with rather a nice museum attached’ to market the museum [image 6.45]. Many people were scandalised by this overt recognition that objects were no longer enough to draw visitors in.⁵⁷⁶ However, it was the start of a new identity for the V&A, even though the slogan itself was quickly discarded.⁵⁷⁷ This is one type of rebranding – more overt and superficial than that done at the National Museum of Scotland.

Another type of rebranding was done by the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow. It ran a three-year renovation from 29 June 2003 until 11 July

⁵⁷⁶ Sharon Macdonald and Roger Silverstone, "Rewriting the Museum's Fictions: Taxonomies, Stories, and Readers," in *Representing the Nation: A Reader - Histories, Heritage, and Museums*, ed. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London, 1999). 422.

⁵⁷⁷ David Lister, "Great Idea That Became an Ace Gaffe," *The Independent* 5 December 1989.

2006, where, similarly to the Royal Museum Project, an old building was renovated and updated to provide more display space, new narratives, and a different look while retaining an historic space. Kelvingrove differs considerably in history, content, and purpose from the Royal Museum, but the rebranding done there acted as sort of a testing ground for administrators from the Royal Museum to watch and learn from, both with good and bad results. This was less of a rebranding project than the one in Edinburgh, as the essence of the museum and its name remained the same. However, major changes to the interior narrative do give a different sense of the whole experience, and were changed with definite purposes and audiences in mind.

The original institution opened its doors on 2 May 1901, when it formed a major part of the Glasgow International Exhibition. Exhibitions loom large in the history of Kelvingrove, as it was conceived after the 1888 International Exhibition netted over £40,000 in profit, which the organisers thought should go towards a permanent museum location. The original collections came both from private collectors – most notably Archibald McLellan – and from collections of art and science that had been at the City Industrial Museum.⁵⁷⁸ Thus, it has always had a more civic identity than the Royal Museum, and has been home to a more varied amalgamation of collections that span the usual divide between fine art and artefacts. In 2001 it was decided that Kelvingrove needed an overhaul for its centenary, and plans for the renovation started. Over the course of the three-year project changes were made to the structural integrity of the building, and also to the ‘display philosophy’ within it.

The exhibits were rearranged so that the East wing of the building focused on ‘Expressions’ and the West wing on ‘Life’.⁵⁷⁹ Within each of the two sectors were a number of galleries, some history or natural-history based, and some art based. This led to a space in which you can walk from a room with a giant stuffed elephant and a Spitfire fighter plane, into ‘Glasgow Stories’, on to Ancient Egypt, and then straight into ‘Dinosaurs’, ending up in another large open gallery with a modern art

⁵⁷⁸ Glasgow Museums, "Origins of Kelvingrove."

<<http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/page.cfm?venueid=4&itemid=1>>

⁵⁷⁹ "Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery floor plan," (July 2006).

installation hanging over busts of Queen Victoria and African tribal masks.⁵⁸⁰

This almost violent collision of display techniques and object types was part of the new display philosophy that was meant to be object- and visitor-centred, based around the idea of stories.⁵⁸¹ This sounds very similar to the 'Real Things...Revealing Stories' theme of the National Museum of Scotland rebrand discussed above. However, where the NMS object stories are expected to contribute to the whole continuous narrative of Scottish identity and history throughout the museum, Kelvingrove has no narrative spine for its stories. Each small exhibit area is meant to be a self-contained narrative, as the rebranded space is 'meant for repeat visits from local people' and is not expected to be seen all at once.⁵⁸²

This new and improved Kelvingrove was met by a mixed reaction upon its rebranded reopening. Visitor numbers rose more than 500% over the last time it had been open in July,⁵⁸³ and in the first five months it surpassed the annual visitor figures for Edinburgh Castle, traditionally Scotland's biggest tourist attraction.⁵⁸⁴ However, museums professionals were not so impressed. Reviews in professional journals denigrated the level of information given as largely condescending, and said that the overwhelming focus on young audiences led to a less than optimal museum experience for those interested in more expert information. This spilt in opinion embodies the conflict in museums at the moment, between marketers and curators, between expert knowledge and pressure to continually attract an ever-wider audience. Officials and curators at the National Museum of Scotland say they are looking to the Kelvingrove project to see what works and what does not, and also say they are going to be careful to not go quite as far down a populist path as the Glasgow museum has done.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁰ Personal observation from visit in July 2006, also visible on floor plan.

⁵⁸¹ Mark O'Neill, "Museums and Identity in Glasgow," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12:1 (2006). 44.

⁵⁸² Mark O'Neill, Head of Glasgow Arts and Museums, 'The Renaissance of Museums'. The Moffat Lecture at Glasgow Caledonian University. 30 October 2006.

⁵⁸³ Paul Kane, "Kelvingrove a Huge Success in the Week After Opening," *Glasgow City Council Media Release* 18 July 2006.

⁵⁸⁴ Vivienne Nicoll, "We're Number One! Kelvingrove overtakes Edinburgh Castle as top Scots tourist attraction," *Glasgow Evening Times* 23 November 2006. 7.

⁵⁸⁵ Interviews with Hugh Cheape, David Caldwell, and Catherine Holden.

This is easily done to some extent because the rebranded National Museum of Scotland is a national institution, and has an obligation to tell just one story – the story of the nation and its people. Kelvingrove, by contrast, is a civic institution, and caters to its audience by showcasing 100 different stories inside its space.⁵⁸⁶ This also highlights the differences in the motivations for rebranding each institution. The V&A tried to rebrand itself because its old image was not attracting the attention wanted. Kelvingrove rebranded to give new focus and intensity to a culturally deprived city.⁵⁸⁷ The National Museum of Scotland, on the other hand, is rebranding because it needs to better represent a nation that has been, and still is, in a state of flux. The new vision for the museum is reflective of a new vision for the nation, and as such is tied to larger ideas than visitor numbers and public reaction – though of course those remain important. The nationness of the project, along with the completeness with which it is being implemented, is different than either of these other two examples.

The Scottish National Portrait Gallery is another national institution currently in the process of rebranding. In its long life the Portrait Gallery has mostly shared its space, primarily with the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in the Findlay Building from 1890 until 1998. Once the Museum of Scotland was built, however, it was able to occupy all of the redbrick building on Queen's Street. Now it is in the process of a major rehang and reinterpretation project which will present the collections with a clearer narrative of nationness.

Thus, the Portrait Gallery, too, is tied to the same national ideas as the National Museum of Scotland, and these two institutions, along with National Archives and National Libraries are part of a process of strengthening of the nation through cultural institutions. Nationalism theorists such as Miroslav Hroch have said that it is with the cultural elite that nationalism starts. They create the institutions and dialogues that institutionalise national identity, and then it filters down to the lower levels of society.⁵⁸⁸ In the nineteenth century, this was done in the publications of

⁵⁸⁶ Mark O'Neill, Head of Glasgow Arts and Museums, 'The Renaissance of Museums'. The Moffat Lecture at Glasgow Caledonian University. 30 October 2006.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ see Hroch, *Social Preconditions of Nationalist Revival*.

dictionaries of vernacular language and great epic poems of history. Today, it is done in actual institutions. No one doubts that a nation that has a National Museum and National Portrait Gallery actually exists. Rebranding them to make this national connection and narrative ever clearer is just modernity's version of something that has been going on for several centuries.

The Nation in a Brand

The brand guidelines established by National Museums Scotland when the new brand was launched is full of small details about the new corporate typeface and how exactly the logo should be used, but it also positioned all of these supposedly trivial details in context. 'What is a brand?' it asked. The answer was that

A brand is much more than a logo. It is an intellectually and emotionally engaging idea that helps organisations make decisions about the future. A unique brand idea provides internal focus and helps organisations stand out. When the idea is expressed properly, it creates stronger bonds with the audience.⁵⁸⁹

This is, in essence, the idea behind any brand or corporate identity. The unified design that underlies each brand can be used to convey a larger idea that might not be clear from outside.⁵⁹⁰ The brand, in this way, is as much an icon as the objects profiled. Brands are created to be iconic, in that everyone who looks at them immediately connects to a series of larger ideas. In the case of corporate brands, these might be ideas about the refreshing nature of a fizzy drink. However, although museums hold themselves apart from that sort of overtly commercialistic world, the museum experience is increasingly a commodity. Re-envisioning the set of reflections that go along with its iconic value allows the museum to control what people are consuming as surely as if they shifted the stock in the museum shop.

The rebranding of the Royal Museum and the Museum of Scotland to create the National Museum of Scotland is an exercise in critical analysis, to look at what and who the nation is today, and what the role of national history and national

⁵⁸⁹ *National Museums Scotland Brand Guidelines*. 1.

⁵⁹⁰ For more on the role of design in identity, see Forty, *Objects of Desire*. Chapter 10.

institutions is within it. It called for the creation of new icons, to support new narratives and new larger ideas. It is reflective of the changes that have gone on in Scotland over the last decade, and is part of a larger context in Edinburgh, Scotland, and beyond. In that way, it encapsulates all of the issues that we have carried through the various moments in time profiled in this thesis. The National Museum of Scotland comes out of all of them, and incorporates some of everything it has seen within its walls, over all the span of time. More than just a logo or a musty attic or a place of entertainment, the museum itself is an iconic object for Scotland.

Conclusions

Walter Benjamin said that history is not one continuous process, but rather a series of images that have to be seen as they pass.⁵⁹¹ Whether or not that is true for all of history can be debated, but it is almost certainly true of the history of the museum. Exhibitions serve as perfect windows into that history, rather than attempting to build a continuous and coherent historical narrative that obscures the details. However, by looking at the images as they pass by in the flow of history the larger ideas and trends emerge – the things which tie together each of the moments in time.

This work has attempted to look into the details of the recent life of one museum in order to uncover some of those larger truths, and also to correct some omissions and obfuscations common to the existing body of literature in these fields. Museums as they have been crystallised in scholarly work, are too often considered as behemoth institutions, permanent and immobile. This view reduces the museum to its exterior only, and ignores the heart of its function – the collection that it encloses. It also imbues the museum with a self-perpetuating power, one which takes no notice of the individuals and circumstances that surround it. All of this can give a reader the idea that the museum is something perennial, unchanging, and natural. This type of museum is framed more as a phenomenon than as a building that contains the artefacts of history.

Much the same solidifying of language had been applied to the concept ‘nation’ as to ‘museum’. Before their deconstruction by Anderson, Gellner, and others starting in the early 1980s, nations too were perennial, unchanging, and natural entities. They had always been, and would always be, regardless of the actual events and history going on around them. This rhetoric set nations up as the ‘normal state of the world, until theorists began to unpick the webs of politics and history-

⁵⁹¹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1999). 246-247.

creating that had gone into them. And it is the example of nations that helps to explain why a critical eye should be cast towards the museum as well. The subtleties that are lost when these issues of change and construction are glossed over can tell the observer much about the way society is formed, and the way it likes to portray itself. Ignoring the continuous flow of movement, and the alterations that it brings to prevailing narratives, is to ignore the evolution of societal reflexivity.

The glimpses of museum life shown here are meant to demonstrate some of the forces which act upon public historical narrative – from timing to aesthetics to marketing to politics to fashion – and the ways in which these changes and challenges are incorporated within one of the major public institutions of the nation. The stories set out in national museums, and the objects that are chosen to carry them, look both to the past and to the future. Walking through a history museum will not only show you the past but also something of how that nation wishes to be. Far from being a static morgue for dusty relics, the modern museum is one of the places where the identity of the nation is being continuously imagined and reinterpreted.

This work has analysed three intertwining layers of museological narrative. First among those was the museum, a space and institution that, though it has been examined in detail before, has never been looked at in all of its historical and social context, and in concert with its contents. The museum in previous work has either been seen as a universal and new type of institution, without many nationally-contingent specifics, or as a new type of event tied strongly to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Understanding both these kinds of museum narrative is critical, but it is not enough. Particular nations and contexts lead to the creation of particular museums. The resulting institution cannot be fully understood without looking at where it came from, and the dilemmas and controversies that it had to address in the process of formation. Also crucial and often missing is the concept of continuous change. This work has not only looked at how the National Museum of Scotland was created, but also how it has continued to change in order to better reflect the nation which it represents. Creating this ‘long history’ of the museum allows for the development of a more nuanced idea about the relationship between history and modernity, between a museum and its public, and between culture and politics.

The second level of narrative, that of the exhibition, is where the life of the museum really begins to emerge. Too often, temporary exhibitions have been considered in isolation, rather than part of a larger narrative themselves. Each exhibition is influenced not only by its time and context, but also by the shows that have gone before them and what is planned for the future. This work is unique in examining them, their storylines, and the important objects they both use and produce as windows into the soul of the museum project. Exhibition catalogues are, in the era of the modern museum, artefacts themselves, which are produced to reflect certain goals and aspirations of the exhibition and its creators. While generally considered a popular commodity, rather than a historical source, the catalogues provide an important insight into the exhibition world. I have showed that they can be an important primary source for scholars of the museum world, containing as they do the permanent textual form of something originally meant to be both temporary and artefact-based. The relationships between the museum and the exhibitions it has hosted, between past and present exhibitions, and between the museum show and its catalogue form, have all been elucidated within this work to an extent that had previously been missing from similar studies.

The most detailed level of narrative which was covered in my work was that of the artefact. This, too, is an aspect of historical and sociological study of the museum which has been lacking. Objects are, for me, the heart of the museum enterprise. They and their extraordinary capacity for multivocality are what make the constantly shifting narratives of the museum possible. From the great bulk of the Newcomen Engine to the tiniest of Lewis Chessmen, each artefact in any museum is responsible for supporting a great weight of history, and for conveying that historical story to the myriad number of visitors who pass by it each day.

Recently, much emphasis in museum studies has been on how the visitor receives and understands the narratives of the museum, and how their personal experience alters the curatorially-created narrational hegemony. This is undoubtedly important. However, it is also important, I feel, that the objects and their stories do not become entirely reliant on the impressions of the individual visitor. Each object has been selected to play a particular part in whatever narrative is momentarily given precedence, and regardless of whether this narrative is being read 'correctly' by

visitors, it was created to fulfil specific goals within its museum, gallery, or exhibitionary context. Just as each exhibition is connected to the ones before and after, in a larger historical and museological story, so too is each object. They create and recreate the 'artefactual narratives' that underlie the larger ones of exhibition and museum. Tracing a series of objects through a portion of their lives has allowed me to examine the changing ways objects are read in different times and spaces, as well as identifying the ways in which they can be made to tell a wide variety of stories which can suit a variety of needs.

As a whole, this work has endeavoured to show that national museums are not merely the holders of national history and material culture. Instead, they, through their temporary exhibitions, constant institutional changes, and ever-shifting artefactual narratives, create and reflect contemporary visions of the nation and aspirations for its future development. This new viewpoint places the museum at the centre of the modern national project, rather than treating it as a largely anomalous cultural institution. While obviously built upon foundations established in a variety of disciplines, the work takes a new perspective on the museum as part of larger cycles of politics, commodification, and historical trend.

Recent Developments in Scotland

Any point at which analysis of the museum stops must be arbitrary, as the change which is central to my work continues regardless. In the particular case of this work, that is especially true. The museum profiled here will be entirely different than the museum encountered at the gala re-opening of the whole National Museum of Scotland in 2011. But smaller changes are taking place even before that. In July 2008 a new permanent gallery covering Scottish history from World War I to the present opened in the former Museum of Scotland section. This was the first time in nearly a decade that modern history was a part of the museum. The twentieth-century gallery that was in the museum on opening day in 1998 was always meant as a temporary solution, and was closed soon afterwards. The sixth floor of the museum has remained vacant and closed to visitors since then as new gallery plans were developed. What has now been constructed, after a series of delays, are two interconnected galleries. One, the Scottish Sporting Hall of Fame, has been open

since June 2006, and runs down the centre of the gallery space. It is self-contained, but also connects to many of the display and content ideas in the larger gallery that surrounds it. The rest, which is called *Scotland – A Changing Nation*, takes five main themes from which to construct a vision of Scotland in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. War, Industry, Daily Life, Leaving Scotland, and The Voice of the People.

This new gallery differs quite considerably from the rest of the museum in that it departs from the white walls, sterile surroundings, and solitary objects philosophy found throughout the lower floors. Instead, there is a multiplicity of colours, images, sounds, and text, in which the objects sit embedded. The entry panel to the gallery lays this out as a display philosophy. ‘Through personal stories, film, music, poetry, *and objects*, we hope you will discover both well-known and less-expected aspects of Scottish life’.(emphasis mine)⁵⁹² The textual placing of objects in the end of this list of encounters for the museum visitor mirrors the fact that the object is very much the last part of the gallery that will be seen. It is not that there is a lack of objects, but rather that they are so deeply embedded in this framework of visuals, film and continuous sound that they act as interesting illustrations rather than key parts of the narrative.

This may have more to do with it being a gallery of modernity than any specific design decisions. The cultural cacophony of modernity is perhaps better represented in this way than in the measured and organised exhibitions of things that have been consigned to the past. Film and sound and photographs are objects in their own right, and can be icons of the historical narrative as much as the more traditional objects we have seen in the rest of the exhibitions. However, the inclusion of these new types of artefacts changes the type of stories that can be told in the gallery. It is partly this that has led to material being displayed largely in grouped exhibition cases that contain thematic displays of artefacts, rather than the solitary objects that are more common throughout the rest of the museum.

The only place where this is not true is also the other unique design feature of the gallery. Throughout the various sections and themes of the narrative are a series

⁵⁹² Exhibition text, *Scotland – A Changing Nation*. 16 August 2008.

of individual, personal stories by the people involved in the areas covered. These vary from noted political campaigners to pop stars and organic farmers. Each person is represented by large orange text panel holding a quote from them about their experience in Scotland, a picture, and a small display cube, holding a small number of objects that relate to their work [see image 7.46]. The objects are largely forgettable, making the display about the person, and the iconic personality presented there. The marketing tagline for the new gallery, repeated in advertisements in many different contexts in the months after it opened, was ‘Made in Scotland, from Stories’, which reflected both the rebranding phrase of ‘real things...revealing stories’ and also the culturally iconic advertising slogan from Irn-Bru which had celebrated the drink as being ‘Made in Scotland, from Girders’.⁵⁹³

The image for this campaign has been photographic collages made in the shape of portraits. Each portrait is made of hundreds of smaller photos, so that a mix of thousands of average (assumedly Scottish) people and objects is making up a larger picture [image 7.47]. In a more tangible way, the individual stories in the gallery are meant to be coalescing and making up a larger story of the nation as a whole. Whether or not this is done successfully by the gallery and its pantheon of important people is open to interpretation. Also of interest is whether this series of individuals will change over time, as ‘modern Scotland’ and the gallery that represents it, changes. This is an issue common to modern history galleries. How do you encompass modernity, when there is no chronological beginning and end point to the period? And how do you keep anything presented from becoming stale and old the moment it is designed?

These are the problems of change in the museum. I have taken pains to negate the vision of the museum as resistant to or incapable of reacting to current circumstances. However, there are constraints on the institution that render this continuous alteration difficult. Galleries are expensive to outfit, and take time to imagine, design, and set up. The space which houses them is also often fixed, not allowing a change in the narrative direction contained within it. Thus, in order to

⁵⁹³ The advertising campaign with this tagline ran from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. <http://www.agbarr.co.uk/agbarr/newsite/ces_general.nsf/wpg/history-a_national_drink_1954-1989>

change the storylines in permanent galleries, it is the objects themselves that must be altered. In large part it is the multivocality of museum objects that allows these processes to take place. Because they can be fit to many contexts, as well as stand without any, museum artefacts act as a perfect canvas for the performance of whichever identity is to star at any given time. It is for this reason that the iconic objects have become the central focus of this study. Tracing them through the various exhibitions, galleries, and narratives where they can be found serves to highlight the way in which historical truth is manipulated and constructed in the museum. It is not the one singular, authentic truth that we are encountering there, but rather the latest incarnation of an ongoing process of identity creation and its public production within the space of the museum.

New Types of Artefactual Narratives

The truths encountered by seeing artefacts and the narratives they create in the museum can now be supplemented by those that emerge when objects and their stories are brought outside traditional museum space through the use of new technologies. Many institutions, including the Smithsonian Institution, the State Hermitage Museum, and the National Museum of Scotland, have begun digitising some of their collections for display on dedicated collections websites. Because collections contain large numbers of artefacts, not everything from the displays and stores of these institutions has made it onto the new technologies. Instead, most museums present ‘highlights’ of their collections, thus designating the most iconic artefacts - the ones that hold the most quintessential sections of museum narratives within their own object stories.

The placing of these selected objects online can heighten their iconic value to the museum. On the internet, objects are assigned to stand in for the institution as a whole, much as their predecessors decorated maps, annual reviews, gift shop bags, and other official printed material. This is a fairly simple translation of the power of the artefact from the tangible to the virtual world. However, digitisation can also enhance the iconicity of the object in more complex ways. Space and its manipulation has long been important in the creation and use of iconic objects. At first glance it would seem that removing artefacts from the physical space of the

museum and causing them to be encountered in the virtual world would remove this spatial element. After all, an object online cannot be placed in the aesthetically empty museum space that Carol Duncan and other theorists have deemed critical for heightening aura. However, although space does not exist in the same way online as it does in a gallery plan, digital artefacts are usually presented to their virtual audience with very little background, historical context or sense of connection to any other online object. They are not embedded in any sort of historical narrative, and the lack of links to larger storylines can act in the same way as a spotlight and solitary case can in the actual museum. Instead of being approached through an empty gallery, the virtual object is approached through an empty narrative and is seen just as a 'treasure', rather than as a historically-connected artefact.

Artefacts in the virtual collection, then, can be presented as just as disconnected from larger narrative as their tangible incarnations in the institutions. The next question that these new technologies of object-presentation inspire is then: Are there ways in which the virtual object can degrade the iconicity of the actual artefact? The concept of aura comes from an essay where Walter Benjamin bemoaned the then-new technologies of lithography and photography because they decreased the aura of the original. He believed that 'the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition'⁵⁹⁴ and therefore reduces its authentic power as the only object that can tell its unique story. However, opinions on the effect of reproduction vary. For Dean MacCannell, it is actually the reproduction, and the ease by which that reproduction can be accessed by the public, that increases the power of the authentic iconic object. By seeing an object reproduced many times, the person comes to think of it as unique. Having seen the copies, the tourist, as MacCannell names him, needs to see the Real Thing.⁵⁹⁵ Using this argument, then, online collections might bolster not just the iconicity of the particular artefact concerned, but also people's desire to see it in real life, outside virtual space.

The next issue to consider, then, is how the object that is seen at the museum differs from its online incarnation. Is the object the same regardless of medium? The

⁵⁹⁴ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 214.

⁵⁹⁵ MacCannell, *The Tourist*. 45.

national museum is traditionally the institution that holds the legitimate story of the nation, its exploits, its arts, and its history. One of the ways in which the national museum earns that legitimacy is by possessing the authentic objects of the past. The museum has the 'real thing', which is, by definition, not found elsewhere. The presence of the object is crucial to this idea – that the museum has the truth because it is the only place to see the real thing. However, in the museum the 'real thing' is out of bounds, kept behind glass or velvet ropes. It can only be seen from the distance and angles that the curators have deemed appropriate. The visitor, then, has their experience of the real thing mediated by the hegemony of the museum professionals. Dean MacCannell argues that this distance is exactly how we know that the object is authentic.⁵⁹⁶ The technology of digitisation, though, is beginning to change this.

When an object is pulled up in a virtual collections database such as Scran - which is a unified collections database for all major Scottish national cultural institutions, and increasingly is being expanded to cover the whole of the UK - experiences with the objects are no longer framed by the constraints imposed in the museum.⁵⁹⁷ Though Scran has been mostly a professional and academic resource, the National Museum of Scotland has recently linked the online collection highlights found at the museum homepage through the database, meaning that every visitor can access selected Scran records.⁵⁹⁸ This provides not only images and information about an object which mirror its presentation in the museum, but also many other angles and close-ups of the object. Seeing the object through a computer screen rather than through a glass case allows the viewer to manipulate the object in ways that would never be possible in the museum. The virtual viewer thus gets an experience of the object that is more 'real' than it is the museum. This possibility for close examination can be argued to make the virtual object become almost

⁵⁹⁶ See his steps for creating authenticity, in *Ibid.* 44.

⁵⁹⁷ Scran is part of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), and was founded by RCAHMS, National Museums Scotland, and the Scottish Museums Council in 1996. <<http://www.scran.ac.uk>>

⁵⁹⁸ National Museums Scotland Online Collections Database, <<http://nms.scran.ac.uk>>

‘hyperreal’.⁵⁹⁹ Being given this level of access to all parts of the iconic object may render the ‘authentic’ object held in the museum disappointing. Museum artefacts will not be as big, as colourful, or as all-encompassing when seen sitting in a small case in a crowded museum as they were in the solitary contemplative space of the virtual world. In this, digitisation echoes older processes of object replication, and as such will remain a contentious issue for theorists and other observers, at it has been since Walter Benjamin was writing.

Museums, Exhibitions, and Objects in Modernity

If the virtual technology of modernity has produced new ways of viewing and interacting with museum artefacts, has the place of national museums and their objects changed in a twenty-first century world? At this point it is hard to come to incontrovertible conclusions. Both museums and nations seem to remain strong in the face of factors such as globalisation, the development of supra- and sub-national identities, and new forms of entertainment and education. New museums are still being built, both national and otherwise, and temporary exhibitions can still draw in large crowds when given the right framing and subject matter. At the same time, new kinds of ‘museums’ are being formed which do not conform to traditional boundaries of nation or history. The Museum With No Frontiers, a joint venture between museums across Europe and the Middle East to collect and digitally display objects of Islamic Art,⁶⁰⁰ exhibitions that are only available online, such as the National Museum of American History’s show *September 11: Bearing Witness*,⁶⁰¹ and the dematerialised objects of databases such as Scran all point to a new role for the narratives which have been historically contained within the physical built environment of the museum. However, while these may be new and evolving ways of reading and manipulating the stories of artefacts, they, and the flexibility and constraints that they contain, are still alive. Objects provide a view of history that is unlike anything found in a textual source, and museums have provided, with their

⁵⁹⁹ See Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*.

⁶⁰⁰ Museum With No Frontiers, < <http://www.discoverislamicart.org/home.php>>

⁶⁰¹ *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* – Museum of American History, <<http://americanhistory.si.edu/september11/>>

exhibitions, a way through which the story of objects can be read, understood, and related to larger cultural ideas. No matter what form their display takes in the years to come it seems that the role of the object as witness to the past will remain, and their narratives will be drawn out, manipulated, altered, and framed to reflect new incarnations of the nation.

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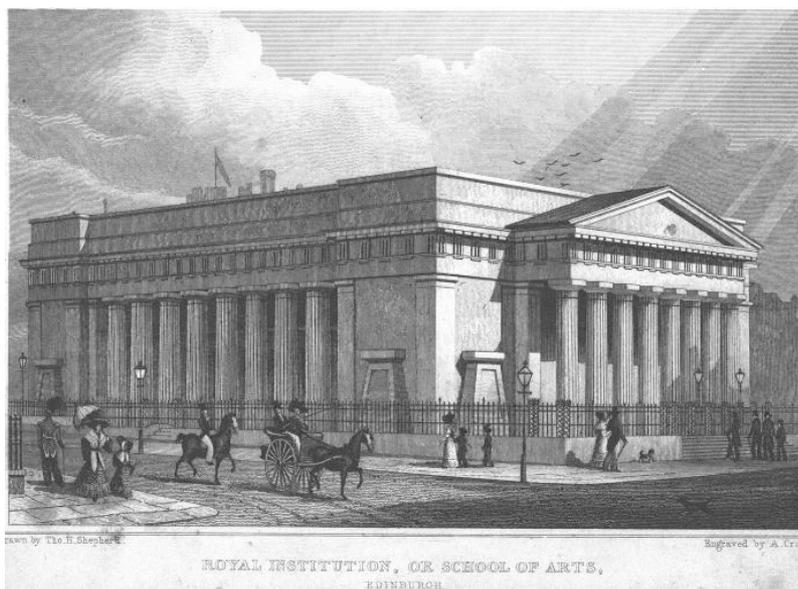
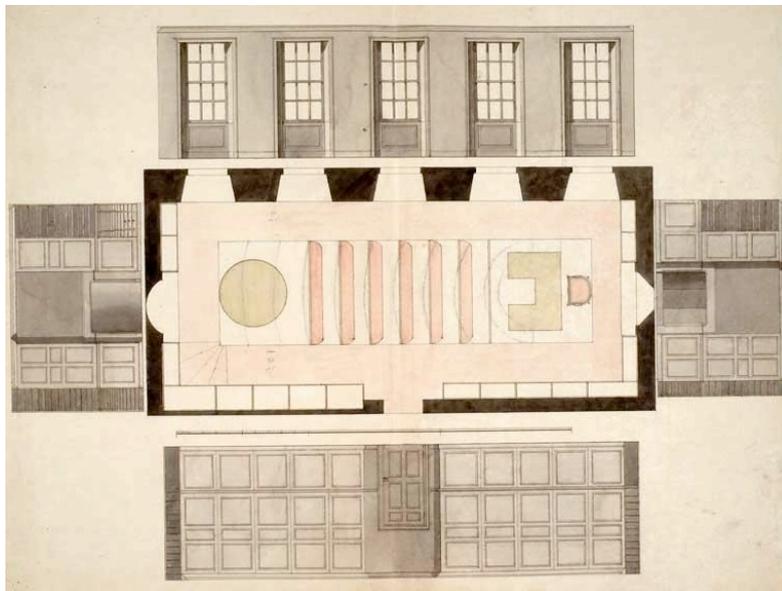
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Visual Appendix

Chapter 1:

1.1: Plans of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 8 August 1781.



1.2: The Royal Institution Building on Prince's Street, the first permanent home of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

1.3: The Findlay Building on Queen Street, Edinburgh, home of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland from 1883.



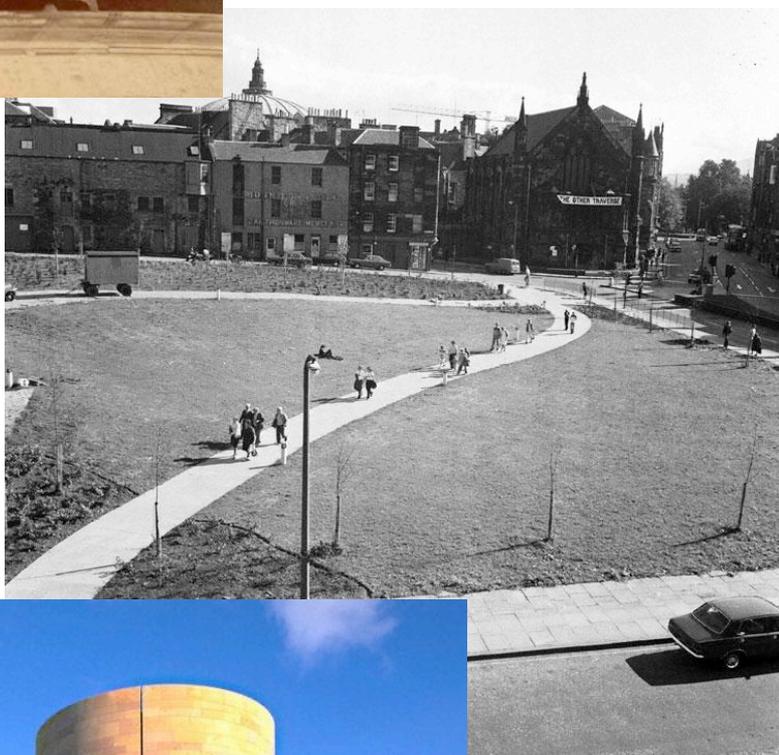
1.4 & 1.5: The Museum and its staff in 1890, showing early display techniques.





1.6: More of the museum's displays in 1890.

1.7: The green site abutting the Royal Museum that now holds the Museum of Scotland, seen in 1978.

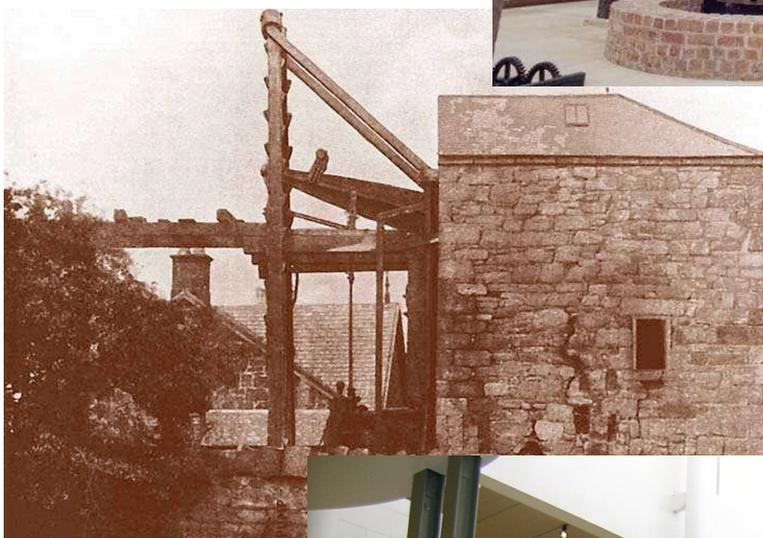


1.8: The Museum of Scotland as designed by Benson + Forsyth in 1998.

1.9: The Newcomen Engine displayed in the Museum of Scotland today.

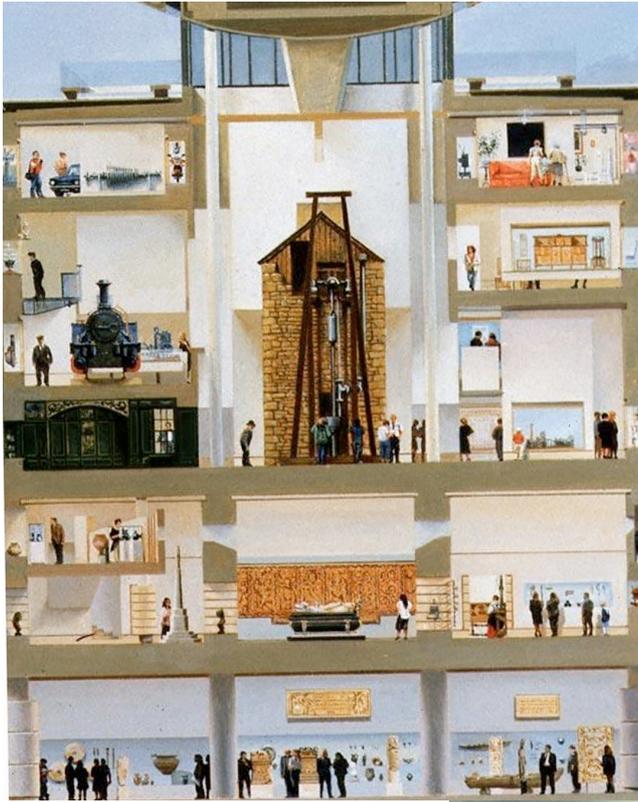


1.10: The engine at work at Caprington Colliery c.1898.



1.11: In the Museum, looming over other 'Scotland Transformed' exhibitions including textile machinery and a Scottish black house.





1.12: Artist's rendering of museum plan with Newcomen Engine in the centre, produced during the museum planning process.



1.13 & 1.14: The Engine being fitted into the Museum of Scotland building site during construction.

1.15: The Newcomen Engine as seen from level 5 - Victorians and Edwardians.



Chapter 2:



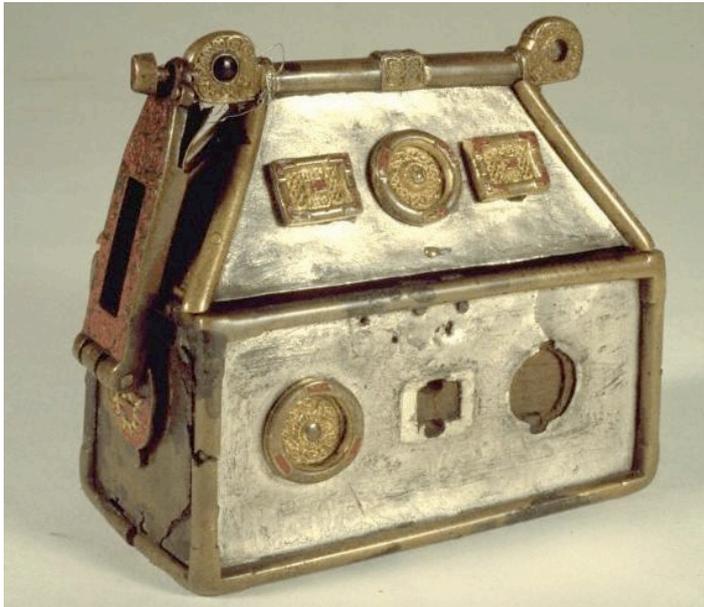
2.16 & 2.17: Dorothy's ruby slippers, and on display with a picture of Judy Garland wearing them at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.



2.18: Benjamin Franklin's walking stick, an ambiguously framed American icon.



Chapter 3:



3.19: & 3.20: The Monymusk Reliquary close-up, and how it is displayed today





3.21: The Reliquary in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, 1954.

3.22: The Monymusk Reliquary and St. Andrew statue today



3.23: The silver travelling canteen set used by Charles Edward Stuart, as displayed for an official museum photo shoot.

Chapter 4:



4.24: Nicholas and Alexandra arriving at Balmoral in 1896 to visit Victoria.



4.25: Icon of Nicholas II given to the Scots Greys.

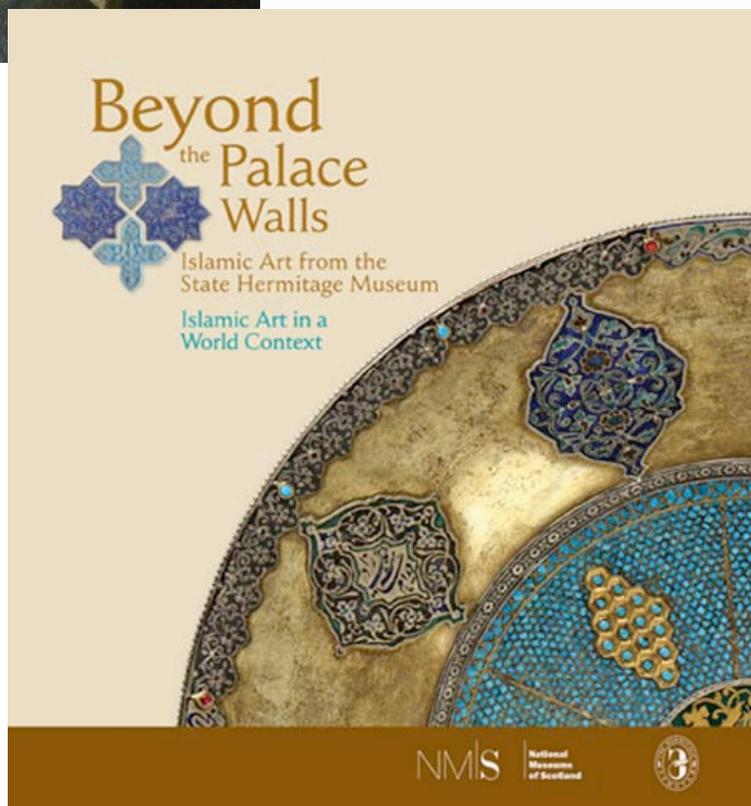
4.26: Copy of the Imperial Regalia produced by Faberge in 1899-1900.





4.27: Bloodstained shirt worn by the future Nicholas II during a failed assassination attempt early in his life.

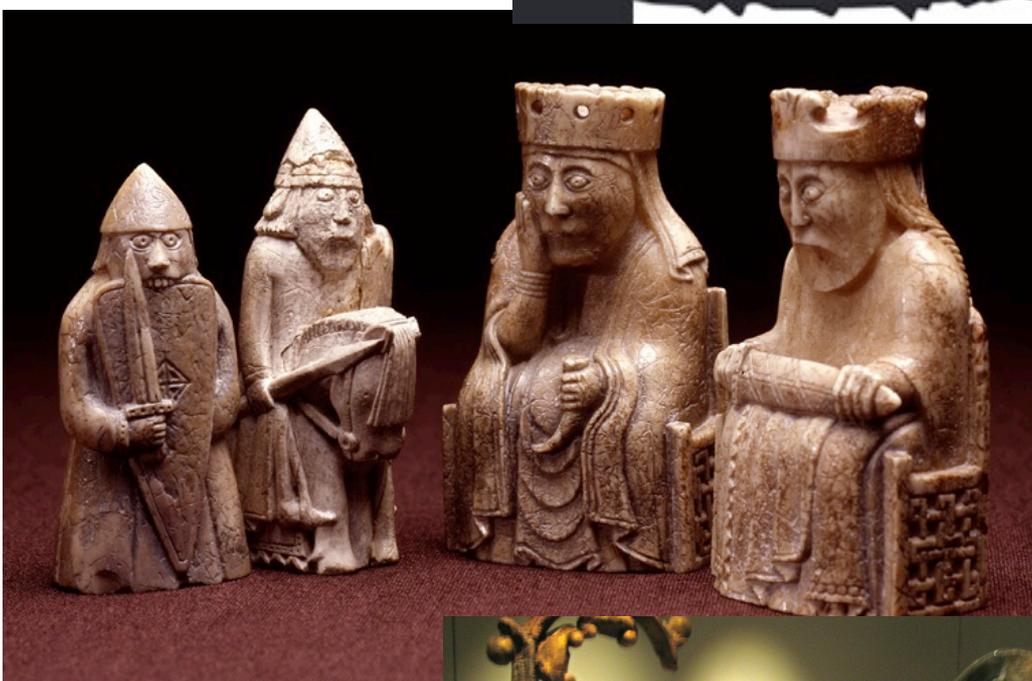
4.28: Catalogue from *Beyond the Palace Walls* exhibition, showing iconic styles of Islamic Art that were reproduced in consumer objects in the museum shop.



Chapter 5:

5.29: Highland 2007 logo representing the different 'strands' of Highland life, as well as the central focus on Gaelic language.

5.30: Several of the most iconic Lewis Chessmen, displayed for a catalogue shoot.



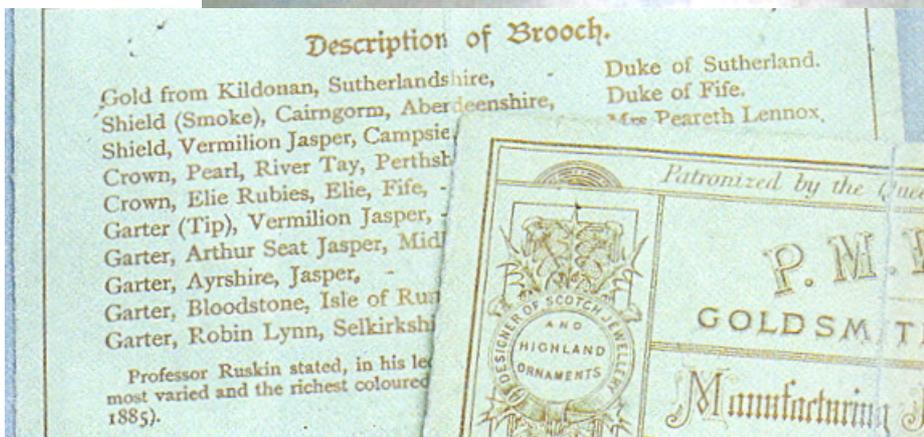
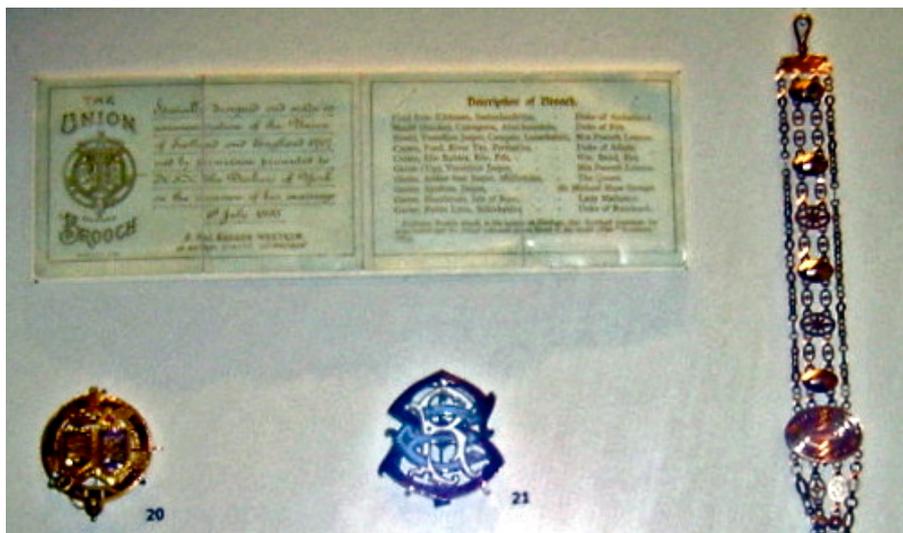
5.31: Most of the Chessmen are displayed in a group in their own case. However, a few of them are occasionally scattered around the rest of the galleries. Here, a bishop from the group is hidden in a display of artefacts from the Medieval Church.





5.32: The Union Brooch, made in 1893 to commemorate the Union of the Crowns and the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of York.

5.33: Union Brooch (at left in case) and its advertising card, in National Museum of Scotland.



5.34: Advertising card for brooch as displayed in *Fonn's Duthchas* catalogue

5.35: The Cadboll Cup, displayed for catalogue purposes.



5.36: The Cadboll Cup in its normal case, surrounded by Renaissance artefacts.

Chapter 6:



6.37: Stone inlayed between Museum of Scotland and Royal Museum galleries to symbolise their connection, with phrasing meant to be read differently depending on the direction in which it is approached.



6.38: Museum of Scotland logo 1998-2006, a stylised Scottish thistle.

6.39: Royal Museum logo used until 2006, a Lion Rampant, the royal symbol of Scotland.



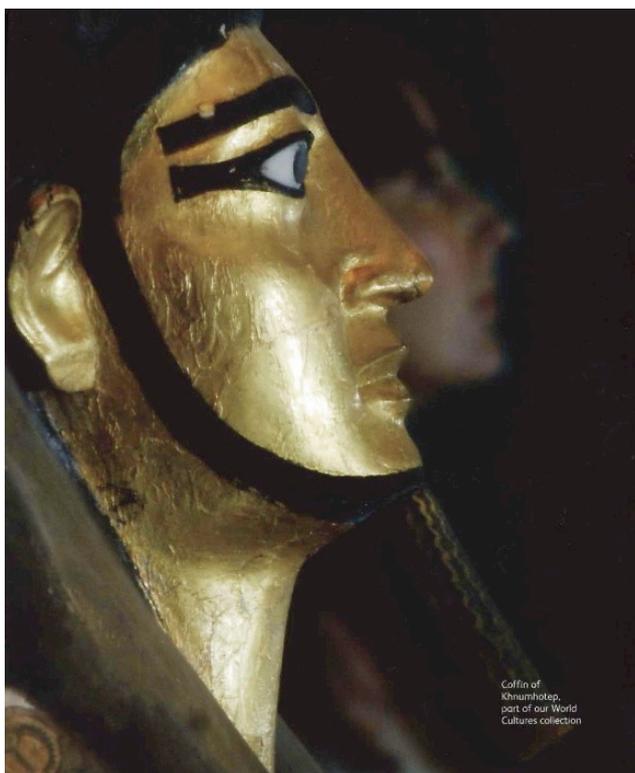
6.40: The new logo which was created for the re-branded museum.



6.41: Cameo locket relating to Mary Queen of Scots.



6.42: The rest of the Penicuik Jewels, which once belonged to Mary, displayed for catalogue.

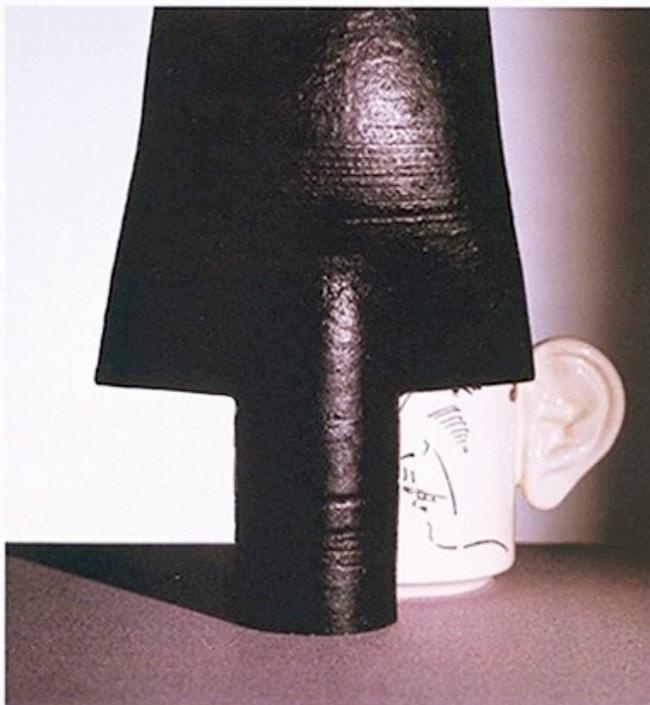


6.43: Sarcophagus of Khnumhotep in NMS marketing material

Coffin of Khnumhotep, part of our World Cultures collection



6.44: Stela in the tomb of Khnumhotep and Nianhkhnun, showing the men embracing.



V&A Shop Layers put with 1982, Mark Stevens, The Victoria & Albert Museum, The museum from North Kensington

There's nothing wrong with modern art that a good cup of tea won't cure.

V&A An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached.

6.45: Advertising poster from the re-branded V&A Museum, 1989.

Conclusions:

7.46: Displays in the new 20th century gallery showing two 'people who have made an impact in Scotland' - a young, fairly unknown singer and the chairman of an airline that went bankrupt in summer 2008. This highlights some problems with the gallery of Modern Scotland.



7.47: Advertising image for *Scotland - a Changing Nation* created out of a mosaic of many small pictures of people and objects.