
Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum

#British Museum

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Author: #British Museum

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SYNOPSIS

OF

THE CONTENTS

OF THE

BRITISH MUSEUM.

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SYNOPSIS

OF THE

CONTENTS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

THE FOUNDATION of the BRITISH MUSEUM originated with the will of Sir HANS SLOANE, who, during a long period of practice as a physician, had accumulated, in addition to a considerable Library of Books and Manuscripts, the largest collection of objects of Natural History and Works of Art of his time. These he directed should be offered after his death, which took place in 1753, to Parliament. The offer was accepted; and the Act of 26 Geo. II., which directed the purchase, also directed the purchase of the Harleian Library of Manuscripts; and enacted that the Cottonian Library, which had been given to the Government for public use in the reign of Will. III., should, with these, form one General Collection.

In the spring of 1754 the mansion in Great Russell Street, then known as Montagu House, was bought as a repository for the whole. Between 1755 and 1759 the different Collections were removed into it, and it was determined that the new Institution should bear the name of the BRITISH MUSEUM.

Till the arrival of the Egyptian Antiquities from Alexandria, in 1801, Montagu House was competent to the reception of all its acquisitions. The Egyptian Monuments, most of them of too massive a character for the floors of a private dwelling, first suggested the necessity of an additional building, rendered still more indispensable by the purchase of the Townley Marbles in 1805. A Gallery adequate to the reception of both was completed in 1807; after which, although the Trustees meditated, and had plans

drawn for new buildings, none were undertaken till 1823, when, upon the donation from his Majesty King George IV. of the Library collected by King George III., the Government ordered drawings to be prepared for the erection of an entirely new Museum, a portion of one wing of which was to be occupied by the recently-acquired Library.

This wing, on the Eastern side of the Museum Garden, was finished in 1828; the Northern, Southern, and Western sides of the Quadrangle have since been progressively added. The last remain of the original building was removed in 1845; and the Gallery, built in 1807, as already stated, for the Towaley and Egyptian antiquities, was removed during the winter of 1846, to admit of the completion of the Western side.

The order of architecture adopted throughout the exterior of the Building is the Grecian Ionic. The Southern Façade consists of the great entrance portico, eight columns in width, and two intercolumniations in projection. On either side is an advancing wing, giving to the entire front an extent of three hundred and seventy feet; the whole surrounded by a colonnade, of forty-four columns, raised upon a stylobate five feet and a half high. The columns are five feet at their lower diameter, and forty-five feet high; the height from the pavement of the front courtyard to the top of the entablature of the colonnade, sixty-six feet and a half.

The level of the principal floor of the building is reached by a flight of twelve stone steps at the foot of the Portico one hundred and twenty-five feet in width, terminating on either side with pedestals intended to receive colossal groups of sculpture.

The Tympanum of the Portico has recently been enriched with allegorical sculpture, by Sir Richard Westmacott, descriptive of "The Progress of Civilization."*

* The following is Sir Richard Westmacott's explanation of the Allegory:—"Commencing at the Western end or angle of the Pediment, Man is represented emerging from a rude savage state through the influence of

The Principal Entrance to the Museum under this Portico is by a carved oak door, hung to a door-frame of stone, nine feet six inches wide, and twenty-four feet high. The Entrance Hall is sixty-two feet by fifty-one feet, and thirty feet high.

The Order here is Grecian Doric. The ceiling, *trabeated* and deeply coffered, is enriched with Greek frets and other ornaments in various colours, painted in encaustic. On the East side are the apartments devoted to the MS. department. On the West the Principal Staircase, and a Gallery which forms the approach to the Collection of Antiquities. The centre flight of stairs is seventeen feet wide, flanked by two pedestals of grey Aberdeen granite, intended to receive sculpture. The walls on either side of this centre flight are cased with red Aberdeen granite. On the first landing are pedestals and carved vases of Huddleston stone. The balustrades are of the same. The ceiling and walls are painted partly in oil and partly in encaustic colours, the former being *trabeated* and coffered to correspond with the Entrance Hall, and similarly decorated.

At the top of this Staircase commences the suite of rooms appropriated to Natural History, which occupy, on the upper floor, the Eastern portion of the South front, and the whole of the Eastern and Northern sides of the Quadrangle. The remainder of the Upper Floor of the Museum is devoted to the smaller Egyptian Antiquities, to the Greek

Religion. He is next personified as a Hunter and a Tiller of the Earth, and labouring for his subsistence. Patriarchal simplicity then becomes invaded, and the worship of the true God defiled. Paganism prevails, and becomes diffused by means of the Arts.

"The worship of the heavenly bodies and their supposed influence led the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and other nations to study Astronomy, typified by the centre statues: the key-stone to the composition.

"Civilization is now presumed to have made considerable progress. Descending towards the Eastern angle of the Pediment is Mathematics; in allusion to Science being now pursued on known sound principles. The Drama, Poetry, and Music balance the group of the Fine Arts on the Western side, the whole composition terminating with Natural History, in which such objects or specimens only are represented as could be made most effective in Sculpture."