

**A CATALOGUE OF THE  
ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM:  
DESCRIPTIVE OF THE ZOOLOGICAL  
SPECIMENS, ANTIQUITIES, COINS,  
AND MISCELLANEOUS CURIOSITIES**

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A Catalogue of the Ashmolean Museum: Descriptive of the Zoological Specimens, Antiquities, Coins, and Miscellaneous Curiosities by Philip Bury Duncan

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**PHILIP BURY DUNCAN**

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# HISTORY OF MUSEUMS.

FROM AN ESSAY READ TO THE ASHMOLEAN SOCIETY.

THE term Museum, which literally signifies a place dedicated to the Muses, that is, to study, is said to have been applied originally to that part of the royal palace of Alexandria appropriated for the use of learned men, and the reception of the literary works then extant. According to ancient writers, it was formed into classes or colleges, each of which had a competent sum assigned for their support; and we are further informed, that the establishment was founded by Ptolemy Philadelphus, who added a most extensive library<sup>a</sup>.

The history of Museums is involved in much obscurity. The most celebrated of modern date, if the term be applied to repositories of ancient art, are those of the Vatican in Rome, of Florence, and of Paris. The first is distinguished as exhibiting by far the most extensive and valuable specimens of ancient art, but does not contain any zoological specimens. The Gallery of Florence, which contains also many valuable works of ancient art, is a detached building, distinct from the *Muséo Fisico*, dedicated to anatomical preparations and models, &c. We talk of the Leverian, of the Hunterian, and of Brooks's, and the Anatomical Museum, but not of the Museum of paintings in the Bodleian or Somerset House. The French, however, applied this term to the collection in the Louvre gallery, calling it the *Musée Napoleon*, at least in the splendid work of engravings from this collection: though they would now probably confine that term to their zoological collection in the *Jardin des Plantes*. They use the word *école*, as applied to their collection of minerals, *Ecole des Mines*. The word Cabinet is applied to one of medals. One cannot doubt about the propriety of the word Museum when applied to an assemblage of the varieties of nature and art<sup>b</sup>.

It is agreed on by all our antiquarians, that the Tradescant collection, which was the foundation of the Ashmolean Museum, was the earliest exhibited in Great Britain.

<sup>a</sup> The word Museum is now generally used to convey the idea of a mixed repository for works of nature and of ancient art; or for the former only, as the word Gallery is always used for the place in which specimens of sculpture or painting are exhibited. We say a Museum of birds, beasts, and fossils; but not a Museum of sculpture or of paintings.

<sup>b</sup> All the capitals on the continent of Europe, and I believe most of the larger towns, can boast of Museums of greater or less value and interest.



The next was one made by Mr. Thoresby of York, which consisted of coins, medals, manuscripts, autographs, and some specimens of natural history, one of the most valued of which was the leaf of a pineapple.

Much about the same time Dr. Grew's collection was formed, which was left to Gresham college. A catalogue of it is published, by which one can judge of the progress that was made in the accumulation of objects of natural history.

The next of any note that is mentioned is that of Mr. Courtin, or Charleton, (for he took the latter name,) near London, I believe at Chelsea.

The most extensive that had ever been made in Great Britain was that of Sir Hans Sloane, at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This, it is well known, was the foundation of the present British Museum, and was the first purchased for the use of the public by Government.

The project of a public establishment of this nature was first suggested by the Will of Sir Hans Sloane, who, during a long period of eminent practice in physic, had accumulated a very large collection of natural and artificial curiosities, together with a numerous library of printed books as well as manuscripts, and who, being well aware how much science is benefited by the opportunity which large aggregates of objects presented for comparing them together, and marking their less obvious differences, was very solicitous that his sumptuous Museum, which he declared in his last Will had cost him upwards of fifty thousand pounds, should, if possible, be preserved entire, and permanently dedicated to public utility.

With this view he directed that the whole of his Museum should be offered to the British Parliament for the moderate sum of twenty thousand pounds.

Sir Hans Sloane having died in the beginning of the year 1753, the offer in his Will was immediately made to Parliament, and was accepted without hesitation.

Before the expiration of that year an act was passed which ordered the payment of the stipulated sum to his executors, and vested the property of the Museum in trustees for the use of the public. As it may afford some gratification of curiosity to know the contents, I subjoin the following list:

	Number.
Books, prints, and drawings .....	50,000
Antique idols and utensils .....	1,125
Coins and medals .....	23,000
Cameos, intaglios, seals .....	1,500
Vessels and utensils .....	542

Anatomical preparations .....	706
Quadrupeds and their parts .....	8,186
Birds, eggs, and nests .....	1,172
Fishes .....	1,555
Amphibia .....	521
Crustacea .....	1,436
Shells, echini .....	5,845
Corals, sponges, &c. ....	1,421
Stones, ores, bitumens, &c. ....	9,942
Dried plants .....	334
Mathematical instruments .....	55
Miscellanea .....	2,098
	<hr/>
	109,388

Many valuable additions have been added to Sir Hans Sloane's collection from year to year; and if the Government will continue its support in the same liberal way it has done lately, the British Museum will be the most valuable collection of specimens of ancient art and of natural objects, in the most splendid apartments, under the management of some of the most scientific persons in Great Britain.

The largest private collections in Museums, which have been made and exhibited to the public of late days, have been those of Sir Ashton Lever, (the delight of my younger years,) which displayed a larger assemblage of the works of nature than had ever been before seen in England, and more extensive probably than any previous to that in the Museum of the Zoological Society. William Hunter's, which is now at Glasgow, was formed between 1770 and 1800, and the not less celebrated Museum of John Hunter now at the College of Surgeons, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Donovan exhibited in his Museum, about thirty years ago, a very interesting collection of specimens of British zoology; Sowerby of minerals and insects; Brookes of the skeletons of animals; and Bullock of the most brilliant specimens of birds, shells, and animals of South America. The Linnæan Society Museum now boasts of a very choice collection of the stuffed animals of New Holland. The India House, of those found in our dominions in the East Indies; and, lastly, the Zoological Society Museum promises fair to eclipse them all by more copious funds, and a combination of active zeal, talent, and industry for the accumulation and arrangement of zoological specimens from every quarter of the globe.

What we possess in this Museum will serve to inspire a taste and lay a foundation for more extensive knowledge, which may be gained in the metropolis. I will now proceed to give you the history of the origin and progress of the Ashmolean Museum.

## HISTORY AND ARRANGEMENT

OF THE

## ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM.

IT is well known that the first collection of the curiosities, natural and artificial, which now form but a small part of the contents of the Ashmolean Museum, was made by John Tradescant, by birth a Dutchman, who is supposed to have come to England about the end of queen Elizabeth's, or the beginning of James the First's reign.

He was a considerable time in the service of lord treasurer Salisbury and lord Wootton. He travelled in various parts of Europe as far as Russia; was in a fleet sent against the Algerines, and collected plants in Barbary and the isles of the Mediterranean. He had a garden at Lambeth, and in the reign of Charles the First, in 1629, bore the title of the king's gardener. He was a man of extraordinary curiosity, and was the first who in this country made any considerable collection of the subjects of natural history. His son, of the same name, went to Virginia, and imported many new plants from thence. His Museum, called Tradescant's Ark, attracted the curiosity of the age, and was much frequented by the great, by whose means it was also considerably enlarged, as appears by the list of his benefactors, printed at the end of his Museum Tradescantianum; amongst whom, after the names of the king and queen, are found those of many of the first nobility, the duke and duchess of Buckingham, archbishop Laud, the earls of Salisbury and Carlisle.

In what year the elder Tradescant died is uncertain, though it appears most probably to have happened in 1638<sup>c</sup>.

The son inherited his collection, and bequeathed it by a deed of gift to Elias Ashmole<sup>d</sup>, who lodged in Tradescant's house. It afterwards becoming a part of the Ashmolean Museum, the name of Tradescant was sunk. John Tradescant, the son, died in 1662; his widow erected a monument to the family in Lambeth churchyard, which having been much injured by time, was repaired by a public subscription in 1773. The quaint epitaph inscribed on it is as follows: the date is 1662.

Know, stranger, ere thou pass, beneath this stone  
Lie John Tradescant, grandaie, father, son;  
The last dy'd in his spring; the other two  
Liv'd till they had travell'd art and nature thro',

<sup>c</sup> Tradescant. MSS. Teyne. Archiv. Univ. Ox. p. 286, 287. Physic Garden. "He (Lord Danby) came to some reasonably good terms of agreement with John Tradescant of West Lambeth, designed for the gardener, viz. for a yearly stipend of fifty pounds or thereabouts; and not long after, viz. in 1638, about Easter, the said John Tradescant died."

<sup>d</sup> Ashmole was not knighted, although occasionally styled *Sir Elias Ashmole*.